

# Safety Newsletter



September 2019



## Complacency: Safety's Worst Enemy

Water flows downhill. Electricity takes the path of least resistance to ground. Everything in our physical world is seeking that place of equilibrium where everything is balanced and comfortable. We are similar as people in that we all want to achieve a level of comfort in our lives that is free of pressure and stress. You've probably used heard phrases like "Take it easy" or "Don't rock the boat." These are just a couple of the phrases people use to express that desire for comfort.

One method we use to help reach this comfort level is setting up routines for the tasks we have to accomplish. We have a routine for what time we eat. We have one for what time we go to sleep. We even have a routines in place for the way we do our jobs. These routines allow us to perform our tasks the same way, every time. They becomes our comfort zone.

If we continue doing the same routine long enough it becomes a habit. Habits tend to become the "normal" way we do things. Over time our habits can become so comfortable we can almost do our routine tasks without thinking about them. If we continue practicing our habits long enough we can become so expert at these routine tasks that we can do them without thinking about them at all. In fact, we may actually be able to perform our routine tasks while thinking about something else. You've may have heard of this. It's called muscle memory

A musician is a good example of someone who uses muscle memory. A great musician has practiced for so long that he doesn't have to think about how to play particular notes. When his eyes see a piece of music his hands just go to the right position. It happens without him thinking about it.

Great athletes also use muscle memory in much the same way. A golfer, for example, doesn't have to think about all the steps involved in his swing for striking the golf ball correctly. He has practiced hitting the golf ball thousands of times. The process of striking the ball has become automatic. And while he does have to think about what club to use and his target, the swing and striking the ball is all muscle memory.

Muscle memory is a good thing for musicians and athletes. However, it's not a good thing for us to have in our jobs. For one thing, it can make it appear that we do not care about our job and that we're just "going through the motions. This is not true, of course. We absolutely do care about how we do our jobs. We know our tasks have to be performed safely and correctly. The problem we face is that we may have done the same task a thousand times before. We already know what is going to happen because the routine we use always produces the same result. We have seen the same result over, and over, and over again.

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## Accident Trends

Safety and Risk Management professionals group accidents together in order to look for trends. For example: do specific types of accidents occur over and over; do they occur at certain times of day; do they happen to employees at a certain experience level? Identifying these trends makes it easier to focus prevention efforts where they are needed most.

Here at Berkley Industrial Comp we also analyze accident trends for the companies we insure. What we found is that the underlying, or root cause of the majority of accidents reported fall into one of three categories. Beginning this month we will spotlight one of these root causes for accident causes each month in order to raise awareness and focus prevention efforts in each of these specific areas.

As always, our goal is to assist you in your efforts to provide the safest possible workplace for employees.



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## Why It's Important

- There were 2.8 million nonfatal injuries and illnesses reported in private industry in 2017 (the most recent year for which statistics are available).
- Approximately 900,000 of those cases involved days away from work, job transfer, or restricted duty.
- In the same year, 5,147 American workers were killed in job accidents.
- A 2016 study revealed that 42% of workplace injuries occurred to workers with less than 5 years of experience. 58% of injuries occurred to workers with more than 5 years experience.

**SURE, SAFETY CAN BE  
REDUNDANT...**



**BUT IT IS OFTEN THE SAME  
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That is the very definition of being complacent. Complacency is the state of being overly content in a given situation. The literal meaning of the word's Latin root is "very pleased." It's just the way things work. It's "normal" for things to work that way.

Complacency is, arguably, the worst thing that can be present on a job site because there is no such thing as "normal." It's when we treat the job as "normal" and become complacent that bad things tend to happen. We have a near miss, a close call, or worse, an accident and these jolt us back to reality and refocuses our attention to the fact that there are hazards present on our jobsite. The question for us is how do we force ourselves out of our "normal" routine, our comfort zone, and regain the focus we need to have on our jobsite BEFORE something bad happens? Let's look at the aviation industry and see how they have dealt with the issue of complacency.

Airline pilots in the US may be the most highly trained employees in any industry. A pilot who flies for a major airline likely has thousands of hours of flight time. Many of them have a military background which has allowed them to acquire even more flight hours, sometimes under extreme or hazardous conditions. Airline pilots will also have spent tens, if not hundreds, of hours in a flight simulator practicing how to handle emergency situations in the particular aircraft they will be flying. Finally, most pilots don't fly just one route per day. They fly a route, land and refuel, then fly another route. This process may be repeated several times during the day, with the pilot flying the same aircraft on each flight.

Having such highly experienced and well trained pilots is beneficial to the airline industry. It means the people in charge of the flying the planes are experts at what they do. However, it also creates a problem. Pilots are so good at what they do it is possible for them to become complacent in the way they do their job. This obviously can't be allowed to happen because there is nothing routine about flying a plane. Every decision a pilot makes is critical to achieving the goal of safely completing the flight. A single mistake can result in a crash.

To combat and help prevent complacency, the airline industry instituted the requirement completing a mandatory pre-flight checklist before every flight. The checklist covers critical items that must be addressed before the aircraft even pushes back from the gate and starts the engines. It doesn't matter that the pilot has years of experience and is an expert in flying a plane. It doesn't matter that the pilot is very well trained and could cover these from memory without the checklist. It also doesn't matter that the pilot may have landed the plane just moments ago and already knows the aircraft is in working order. The written pre-flight checklist must be completed before every flight. It must happen every time. There are no exceptions.

Why is the airline industry so strict about a simple checklist? Three reasons: 1) It forces the pilot out of any comfort zone of having a "normal" flight routine; 2) It refocuses the pilot's attention onto issues that are critical to the safety of the flight; and 3) It forces the pilot to address any issues that could compromise the safety of the flight and to do so before the flight even begins.

We need to have very similar goals on our job sites. It doesn't mean we have to use a safety checklist like pilots do. What is important is to: 1) Get out of the "normal" routines of our jobs that can become so comfortable; 2) Refocus our attention throughout the day on the issues that are critical to completing the job safely; and 3) Address any issues we find before they lead to an accident. Making these three steps part of our work process every day is not an easy task, but if we can accomplish it, we will take a huge step toward eliminating complacency from our jobsites.

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