



# The Thin Line Between Safety Routine and Complacency



*After Three Mile Island, but before Chernobyl, the head of the Soviet Academy of Sciences said, "Soviet reactors will soon be so safe that they could be installed in Red Square." When the Bhopal plant works manager was informed of the accident, he actually said in disbelief, "The gas leak just can't be from my plant. The plant is shut down. Our technology just can't go wrong. We just can't have leaks."*

## A Safety Supervisor's Experience

Safety professionals like to talk about establishing safety "routines." I'm not so sure that this is exactly the right approach. The dictionary definition of "routine" is an "unvarying or habitual method of procedure." But "unvarying" and "habitual" are qualities that hamstring the display of an equally important aspect of safety: the ability to think and react. As a safety supervisor, I have come to understand that there's a fine line between routine and complacency. Let me share the experience that led me to realize this.

## A Routine Project

I usually go to a new job every couple of years. The location changes, as does the type of construction. But no matter what's being built, there is a system or routine that I always follow. At the pre-construction stage, I ensure that all the details are covered. Because everything is new, this routine is exciting. I'm looking at a new site, meeting new people, arranging pre-construction meetings with the subcontractors, ensuring they have all the required paperwork, acquiring records of training, doing orientations and so on. The work begins and this entails excavation, demolition, or both, depending on the project. Then there's the initial concrete. It's still exciting, but I know that cuts and bruises usually accompany formwork, especially in the initial stages. So I prepare for this. I make sure my first aid kit is fully stocked and ready to go. Now let's fast-forward seven months. The building has taken shape. I'm performing daily inspections, haven't had any major injuries to speak of, paperwork is all accounted for and things are going smoothly. Every morning, I approach the jobsite from the same direction to get to my office. I go through the building the same way every day.



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I'm observing the same things - the same ladders all tied off, the same floor openings covered, and the same faces greeting me. I notice that the guardrails are in place, no worker is doing anything really bizarre, and the housekeeping is in good shape. Sure, there are little things here and there, but that's to be expected.

## A Break in the Routine

One morning, I'm at my desk and I'm feeling good. E-mails are all answered, owner is pleased, another morning of things running relatively smoothly, with no major hiccups, until my radio goes off.

"Corey, can you come down to the pipe gallery right away?" I can tell by my general foreman's voice that something serious is happening. I hear on another radio someone call for a stretcher. Uh-oh. As I walk toward the scene, I'm not sure what to expect. I don't know who is hurt or how bad. I'm thinking that for the first time in four years, I may have to call an ambulance to my jobsite. Last week, I had the Deputy Fire Chief through the site, discussing where we would need the fire department's help to perform a rescue. But this one is ours to do and it's happening right now. I try to prepare myself for something I've never done before - taking control of an accident scene. I have trained for this, but without practice, training gets rusty. I stay calm as I approach the accident scene and prepare to delegate tasks. My general foreman has the situation under control, which lets me focus on communicating with the injured worker. He's hurt his leg. We air lift him to level ground with our tower crane, and wait for the ambulance. It turns out that the worker simply miscalculated his step as he walked down a ladder. His foot slipped through, got stuck in a wall form, and he suffered some minor muscle damage to his lower leg. Judging from the pain he's in, it's a safe guess that his leg is badly sprained or broken. However, he's on light duties the very next day, and back to regular duties the following Monday.

*What will you do to avoid being caught in the complacency trap?*

## Why Wasn't I Prepared As Well As I Could Have Been?

Human nature is funny. When things are going well it's easy to get lost in life. Most of us go about our daily "routines" and really don't challenge or train ourselves very well for the "what ifs." We tend to live life based on what history teaches us. For example, despite the threats, the 9/11 attack wasn't taken seriously; a category 5 hurricane was supposed to hit New Orleans a couple of times before, but didn't.

## Just one day of not being prepared changes everything

I wasn't consciously telling myself that I won't have a serious injury on my site, but history had taught me that it was something that I didn't need to really worry about. After all, technically, I am prepared. I've trained for this. But it's nothing like the real thing, and my training is due to be updated soon.

Ref: <http://www.safetyxchange.org/training-and-leadership/the-fine-line-between-safety-routine-complacency>

