

Complacency – A Brief Look

By Ken Greenhill, CSP

Complacency describes the state of mind most of us have with regard to safety. We go about our lives giving very little thought to our personal safety, or for that matter, the safety of anyone else. Everyone has had authority figures such as parents, teachers, and supervisors telling us that safety is important, but for most of us, it is blown off because of an overconfident or smug attitude of “It isn’t going to happen to me,” or “It is always the other guy.” Well for me, every one of you is that “other guy!”

If every time you went 56 MPH in a 55 MPH zone you got a ticket, then you probably would never speed. The same kind of theory applies to injuries. If you got injured every time a safety “shortcut” was taken, you would want to follow the safety rules. For example, if each time you used a power tool without wearing safety glasses (when needed) you got something in your eye, you would probably want to always wear your safety glasses. Many of us have used a chair when a ladder was needed, or maybe stood too high up on a ladder, or taken any of a million safety shortcuts because “it isn’t going to happen to me.”

Think about the first time you drove a car. Are your fingerprints still embedded in the steering wheel because you were gripping it so tightly? Now you speed down the freeway, 10 to 15 miles per hour over the limit, talking on your cell phone, drinking your beverage of choice, and tailgating (less than three seconds between you and the vehicle in front of you). No big deal, right? After all, you have been driving like this for years and haven’t had a single accident—well, at least not yet.

The first time you work on the perimeter of a building or bridge several stories up, or the first time you descend into a 30-foot deep trench, your body tightens up quite a bit; it is trying to tell you something. It is a natural reaction with which we are all born. As we grow up we teach ourselves to ignore those reactions in situations we have previously experienced. The more you work around a hazard without getting hurt, the more complacent you tend to become.

Humans have a tendency towards hedonism or the easier route. It is just human nature to want to take the path of least resistance, the shortest or quickest route, a shortcut if we know or think we can create one. We are in a hurry and only scrape a small section of the frost from the windshield before we start driving...after all, it’s cold out there, and the defroster will have the windshield cleared before we get to the main streets. We are in such a hurry to get somewhere or get something done that we take safety shortcuts without thinking about the consequences. And every time a safety shortcut is taken and no one gets hurt, it reinforces our unsafe behavior, which encourages us to continue using that shortcut and to create others.

Most injuries and fatalities, well over 90 percent by most statistics, are not caused by unsafe conditions, but by unsafe acts. We choose to take a chance, take a shortcut, continue to use hazardous work habits, or maybe we simply were not trained how to perform the task safely. But for whatever reason, we fail to eliminate unsafe behaviors until we get hurt. The more unsafe behaviors we use without injuries, the more complacent we become.

No one gets up in the morning and says “Don’t worry about dinner for me tonight, I think I’m going to get injured at work today!” We are overconfident in our belief that “it can never happen to me,” and fail to take the time to actively participate in our own safety. But in 2005 there were 22,114 Oregon workers that were either temporarily or permanently disabled by an on-the-job injury. The 31 Oregon workers that died in work-related incidents in 2005 will never be returning home to their families. By the way, 31 fatalities is a record low for the number of work-related deaths for the state. And these are *just* the work-related injuries. What about the motor vehicle accidents or injuries in the home, on vacation, playing sports, and the myriad of other activities that are a part of our everyday lives? If we look at motor vehicle accidents, there are on average more than 6,000,000 motor vehicle accidents in the U.S. each year. In 2004 alone, there were 42,636 people killed in U.S. motor vehicle accidents. (*Oregon was ranked 24th out of the 50 states for motor vehicle deaths in 2004, a significant improvement from 9th out of 50 in 2003.*)

Not taking time to think about safety is like driving with your eyes closed...you greatly increase the probability of being injured or killed. Not thinking about safety or simply continuing to use hazardous behaviors even though you haven’t been hurt thus far greatly increases the probability of you or a co-worker being seriously injured or killed. Maybe it is time we take ourselves off autopilot and consider “What could happen to me?” and “What am I going to do about it?” instead.