Safety

Worker Safety: How to Battle Complacency in Your Workplace

Roland Jones | Mar 04, 2021

Complacency is often a key topic when discussing workplace safety, but although we may acknowledge it, we often do not take steps to fully understand the consequences it can have on worker safety and company productivity, or what we need to do to overcome it.

A silent predator is lurking in American workplaces.

It lingers in manufacturing facilities and shop floors, waiting patiently for machinists and technicians to feel more comfortable in their jobs and begin taking risks.

They may skip today's safety procedures, or not bother to check their personal protective equipment (PPE) for damage before putting it on.

This silent predator is known more commonly as complacency, and it has been called one of the biggest safety threats faced by organizations.

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> National Safety Council

Why is complacency in the workplace such a concern? It's because we can get so used to doing the same tasks the same way that we no longer notice their associated hazards.

Human error in the workplace is a frequent contributor to serious accidents and injuries, which can cause employees to miss work for more than five days. The top 10 causes of workplace injuries cost U.S. businesses over $1 billion per week, and many of these causes (falls, or handling heavy objects) could likely be avoided with greater care and attention.

Jobs that require repetitive tasks can induce complacency, which is why it can be a significant problem in the manufacturing sector. How can we minimize it? There are several techniques companies can use, including the following:

No. 1: Practice Kaizen (AKA Continuous Improvement)

Kaizen is a Japanese productivity philosophy that focuses on deliberate, continuous improvement. It describes a long-term approach to work that seeks to bring about incremental changes in order to improve efficiency and product quality where all employees are actively engaged in improving the company.

How can this workplace philosophy tackle the problem of complacency?

The kaizen process relies on employees offering up easy-to-implement ideas that continually improve the workplace and job tasks. For example, a suggestion that workers take more frequent breaks to relieve monotony could be implemented quickly and without the need for approval by upper management.

The idea is that workers at all levels—employees, managers and company leaders—are empowered to try new things without fear of making a mistake, removing obstacles and maximizing the potential for innovative solutions. Workers gain confidence in knowing their opinion matters and they can create meaningful change in the workplace.

Read more about how MSC helps companies focus on continual improvement.

No. 2: Manage Repetitive Tasks

Repeated tasks can induce worker complacency, which can lead to injury.

Lifting heavy items, pulling heavy loads or working in awkward body positions puts stress on the musculoskeletal and nervous systems, with upper limbs and hands most commonly affected. These injuries—known as repetitive motion injuries (RMI)—can be very debilitating.

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are among the most frequently reported causes of lost work time, *according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)*, with cases accounting for 33 percent of all worker injury and illness cases.

The economic burden of these injuries—measured in terms of compensation costs, lost wages and lost productivity—are between $45 billion and $54 billion each year, *according to the Institute of Medicine*.

To mitigate this issue, employers can regularly rotate repetitive tasks between staff to ensure there is variety in their workers' routines and reduce the risk of complacency.

Read more: Understanding the Cost of Workplace Injuries and How to Prevent Them

No. 3: Reinforce Safety Rules or Procedures

The National Safety Council recommends addressing complacency by including workers when planning safety processes.

Employees who feel that their ideas and involvement are valued will become powerful advocates for safety initiatives and are therefore more likely to adhere to safety rules and procedures, *the NSC notes*.

One approach is to implement a safety team or committee that includes employees from all areas of your organization. The group should conduct regular safety meetings and periodically rotate employees on the safety team to allow new, fresh views. You may also consider developing "safety champions" who will "actively advocate for safe practices," recognizing individual employees for their commitment to safety and launching safety incentive programs.

The idea is to send the message that "continued diligence is absolutely critical to workplace safety" in order to "create an environment where everyone at every level in the organization will be aligned and focused on safety."

No. 4: Eliminate Bad Habits

One worker's bad habit of taking risks and working in an unsafe fashion can put another at risk of injury.
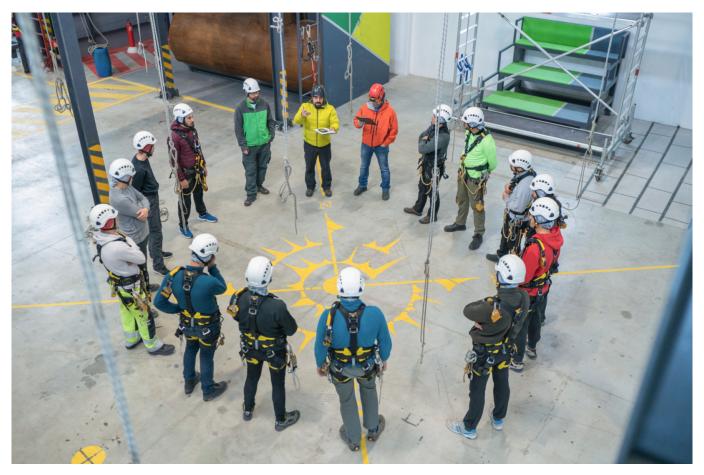
As the National Safety Education Center at Northern Illinois University *noted in a recent safety blog*, when this behavior goes ignored for an extended period of time, the risky behavior becomes normalized and may be passed from one worker to another, creating a poor safety culture in the workplace.

When managers notice bad safety habits in the workplace, the blog continues, they can take the following steps to reverse them:

- Learn about why the habit exists. Was it taught or did it develop over time?
- Discuss worst-case scenarios with the worker, who may have repeated the error many times and is unaware of the potential negative outcomes.
- Train with habits in mind. We instinctively reach out to catch falling objects, so train workers that catching a heavy or sharp object is dangerous.
- Make safety acceptable and hold everyone accountable, including upper management who should lead by example.
- Review the steps it takes to do a job and look for hazards. If processes need to change, it means experienced workers must change their habits, so involve workers in the solutions so they will adapt to the new ways of doing things.

Read more: Confined Space Safety: What's the Correct PPE, Equipment for Working in Hazardous Locations?

No. 5: Invest in Behavior-Based Safety Training

Training is a key element in ensuring safety in the workplace.

Behavior-based safety (BBS) workplace training, for example, allows employees to evaluate one another while they perform workplace tasks so that potential concerns are identified.

These programs have been shown to increase awareness of safety expectations and help eliminate bad workplace habits. They can also help workers identify areas for improvement and become more comfortable speaking up about their concerns.

The BBS approach works by tallying how many safe and unsafe conditions or actions arise in a specific work area for a set period of time—daily or weekly, for example.

Workers use corrective feedback when they see unsafe behavior, but they avoid blaming co-workers: For example, they may inform an employee about what he or she is doing incorrectly and offer suggestions for improvement.

Creating a successful safety culture can be enhanced by training employees regularly, by using safety signage, clearly communicating your company's safety policies and procedures, or by holding regular meetings to discuss safety topics.

With *more safety training now done virtually* due to the pandemic, training classes are often more accessible and affordable.

You may also use safety calculators to better understand and estimate costs of injuries in your workplace to support training investments. You can do this using *TCR and DART rate scores* to track how your company compares with others in your industry.

Read more: How to Calculate the OSHA Dart Rate

Do you have any tips for dealing with safety complacency in your workforce? Share your thoughts in the comments below.