NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Gaining Buy-In from Employees
to Avoid At-Risk Behaviors

Key Points

- Buy-in requires all elements of management reinforcing the presence of a strong Safety Culture.
- A major cause of non-compliance to a strong Safety Culture is complacency.
- Keeping employees interested and excited about safety results in buy-in.
- Complacency needs to be addressed at both the individual worker and organizational levels.
- Repetition can lead to complacency.
- Rewards and incentives help but won't ensure buy-in.

Introduction

This Executive Insight builds on previously published Executive Insights in the Safety Culture Series and targets "complacency" as a key component that must be addressed to ensure buy-in from employees and the avoidance of at-risk behaviors.

Rote compliance to the elements of a Safety Management System can lead to complacency. See the Executive Insight on Understanding Safety Culture for the definition of a Safety Management System (SMS).

> **Safety Management System (SMS) - An effective safety management system creates the desired safety climate, where leaders are unified in purpose, approach, and message so there is harmony in all relationships within the culture.**

One of the major problems of a SMS is to assure that compliance with the various elements does not become mechanical and repetitious to the point of being ignored by workers as a meaningless exercise in "compliance" rather than an effort to focus attention on avoiding at-risk behaviors. The goal of this Executive Insight is to explain complacency and how it comes about, and to provide guidance as to how to avoid complacency.

Complacency

Merriam Webster defines "complacency" as:

- Self-satisfaction when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.
- An instance of usually unaware or uninformed self-satisfaction.

One thing's for sure: "Complacency leads to carelessness around potential dangers." Complacency can also lead to work of inferior quality and accidents. The greater the number of repetitive activities, the greater the risk that an environment of complacency and increased safety hazards exists.

In an environment where there is an attitude of complacency, topics discussed and lessons shared at tool box meetings or other safety events, can be meaningless, because employees may not be fully engaged in the discussion. This is an indication they do not buy-in to the Safety Culture and are more apt to engage in at-risk behaviors.

The "Tool Box" Safety Meeting – An Opportunity for Gauging Complacency

Typically, the first thing the workforce does is to assemble in groups and have a "tool box" safety meeting. OSHA describes the "tool box" meeting as a "short (15 – 20 minutes), informal training session focused on practical application." Tool box meetings should happen daily at the beginning of a shift and address safety topics that are immediately relevant to the day's tasks or existing safety concerns. They are an essential part of a strong Safety Culture. They are most effective when workers are engaged and participate.

A supervisor introduces the topic for the day and covers what is contained in an "Accident and Hazards Analysis" for defined features of work. In addition, any recent, significant safety events and/or "Near-Miss" events that have been observed are also addressed. The supervisor engages participants to provide their observations. The subject matter includes topics that are relevant to the activity that the trade will be completing as well as any significant operations undertaken by surrounding trades.

A tool box meeting can be an opportunity to observe the workforce to assess whether they are focused on safety and whether or not they buy-in to a Safety Culture. If a worker begins to fidget and act as though they are uninterested, it is a sign that they are distracted and potentially not committed. Oftentimes workers are anxious to get to their tasks and start the day's work. But there are other factors that may be affecting the workers and their attention to what is being presented. Some members may have had a rough evening **drinking alcohol** with their friends and aren't feeling fully fit, others may have **personal problems** weighing on them, some may have a **medical condition** (their own or of a loved one) that is consuming their thoughts, some want to get on break and **have a cigarette** and others are troubled and concerned with progress that their work isn't meeting schedule goals, and they want to get to work because they know there will be pressure to "get it done."

Generally speaking, for craft, the work to be completed is highly repetitive in nature. Even if it doesn't start that way, it soon evolves into the same steps. One common reaction among the workforce is a feeling that "I've heard this all before, I've been doing this for five, ten, twenty years, I know what I need

to do, and I'll be safe, let's get to work." Some workers may even have the attitude, "I know how to use a shortcut to get my job done." These are all potential indicators of a feeling of complacency.

Gaining Buy-in from Employees and Avoiding Complacency

Safety Culture/Safety Program

Without a strong Safety Culture, it is impossible to combat complacency. The National Academy of Construction Safety Culture Executive Insight Series contains many insights to aid in establishing an appropriate safety climate and safety management system, and addresses the role of management in maintaining and assuring a strong Safety Culture exists. The series includes such topics as the role of all leaders at all levels in the organization in demonstrating an unfailing commitment to safety and the belief that "all accidents can be prevented", establishing a non-punitive environment where employees feel they will not be punished if they are involved in a safety incident or a near miss, assuring subcontractor involvement in Safety Culture, and many more significant insights to establishing and maintaining a strong Safety Culture.

Eliminating Complacency

Workers are attuned to behaviors by senior leaders and watch for behavior when visiting a jobsite. The following are some tangible approaches to getting employees to buy-in to a culture of safety and eliminate complacency:

- Displaying the sense that safety is the highest priority in the organization in every CEO or senior executive visit to a project site. It should be the first and last thing out of their mouth when they speak. The leader should attend and be attentive in any onsite safety meeting that occurs during the visit.
- Starting every meeting, no matter the level of the attendees, with a safety moment with a learning objective. The safety moment provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on some aspect of safety.
- Planning is necessary to make sure the safety moment or tool box talk is interesting and relevant. Care must be exercised to assure the message does not become mechanical and repetitive. It is beneficial to plan the discussion so it involves interaction with attendees to maintain interest.
- Assuring all subcontractors, suppliers and those making deliveries are buying-in to the organization's Safety Culture standards and are taking steps to combat complacency. If not, it will be difficult to convince others to adhere to these standards.
- Recognizing and rewarding performance consistent with a strong safety culture produces positive reinforcement of behavior and contributes to employee buy-in.
- Calling a "Safety Stand-Down," where the entire workforce stops working on the project and engages in an organized program focused on safety. The stand-down may be precipitated by a recent safety incident or series of incidents. At the stand-down, the program should discuss what happened and how it will be handled in the future. A safety stand-down can be an expensive proposition. The fact that the organization is willing to undertake a safety stand-down can have a powerful effect on employee buy-in to the Safety Culture.

- Posting signs, placards and video monitors prominently located in lobbies, break areas, dining facilities, other common areas emphasizing the need to combat complacency.
- Including in meetings, programs and events, how injuries impact a worker's family. Remind employees that accidents and injuries impact spouses, children, parents and other loved ones, in addition to the worker. Show workers that leaders are not only concerned with the worker and the job, but also the workers' families.
- Reminding leaders to be on the lookout for changes in individual worker behavior which could evidence a problem that could lead to complacency (such as outward evidence of sadness or depression, decreased productivity, a lack of caring about their performance or impact to others, mood swings, etc.). Encourage first line supervisors to talk with workers who may be displaying such behaviors to determine what is driving the behavior. Include referral to professional help if necessary. Show that the company cares about its workers.
- Emphasizing with workers that while production goals are important, they do not trump safety.
- Monitoring worker performance to ensure the work remains meaningful and challenging for the employee. If not, help find new opportunities for the employee. Employees who are "stuck in a rut" may not follow safe practices and may become complacent.
- Maintaining a staff of trained safety professionals who engage in regular safety audits and look for evidence of complacency.

Summary/Conclusion

Complacency is a mindset where workers become comfortable with an existing situation and stop looking for potential hazards. Complacency can result from organizational behavior but also can occur due to outside factors affecting an individual worker. Complacency can result from rote mechanical and repetitive implementation of Safety Management System requirements.

Leaders need to remain on the lookout for the warning signs of complacent behavior and eliminate the conditions for complacency to exist.

Construction is a dangerous business as evidenced by the alarming statistics that summarize lost time injuries and fatalities in the construction industry as compared to other industries. Getting buy-in from workers to believe in a Safety Culture and maintain an awareness of safety requires unequivocal commitment and demonstrated behavior from all senior leaders. The workforce is in touch with whatever senior leaders say and do, and leaders must visibly exhibit their commitment to safety culture whenever they interact with the workforce.

For Further Reading – Safety Culture Series (Executive Insights)
https://www.naocon.org/insight_category/safety-culture-series-understanding-safety-culture/

- Introduction to the Safety Culture Series
- Safety Culture – Human Performance Principles
- Safety Culture – Worker Participation in the Safety Management System (SMS)
- Safety Culture – Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support: The Leaders' Role
- Safety Culture – Drug and Alcohol Testing
- Safety Culture – Incident/Accident/Near-Miss Reporting and Investigations
- Safety Culture – Safety Training
- Safety Culture – Safe Work Practices
- Safety Culture – Management Commitment: All Safety Incidents Are Preventable
- Safety Culture – Subcontractor Involvement in the Safety Culture
- Safety Culture – Recognition and Reward
- Safety Culture – Job Safety Analysis
- Safety Culture – Leadership Involvement in Office and Site Visits
- Safety Culture — Improving Construction Profitability
- Safety Culture – Developing and Using Effective Leading Indicators
- Safety Culture – Construction Site Safety Staffing Process

About the Author

Tony Leketa was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2016. Tony had a distinguished career, overseeing and executing projects and programs from the simplest of building rehabilitations to multi-billion-dollar programs both in the U.S. and overseas. He is a retired military officer and member of the Senior Executive Service with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He finished his career with Parsons, a worldwide program management, engineering and construction firm, where he served as President of Parsons Water and Infrastructure, and retired in 2017 as the Executive Vice President for Construction Services in the Federal Company. He is a registered Professional Engineer and former President of the Society of American Military Engineers.