



COMPLACENCY

Complacency can be defined as contentment or self-satisfaction, combined with a decreased sense of risk and less anticipation of possible problems. *What leads humans to become complacent?* It's all in our heads, our brains.

Constant vigilance is the price of safety in operations. The trouble is that people cannot be constantly vigilant. *Can you be constantly vigilant? Do you believe your coworker can be constantly vigilant?* "That will never happen to me" could be a statement of confidence in one's abilities. It could also be a step toward complacency. If something abnormal can happen in a job or task, it will eventually happen. One issue with complacency is that things happen when we least expect it.

Think about the tasks you perform day after day. *Is it possible you are now performing those tasks without much thought?* One cause of complacency is constant repetition of similar tasks without any abnormal events or bad outcomes. We seldom become complacent with tasks that are performed rarely.

Another cause of complacency is the reliability of automated systems that are used for controlling and monitoring operational tasks. As technology evolves and each step in a task is performed by software or hardware, we may not pay as much attention to the steps in the task because the equipment is highly reliable. Over time, we may be lulled into a false sense of security. When the automated system fails, the controller or operator may not be prepared to respond. The worst case scenario is that the person may not know how to respond properly.

Learn from a pipeline controller who was working on a newly installed automated system. The controllers had been admonished to "trust the system." The problem was the system still had bugs, and could not be trusted. My observations on shift led me to ask one controller how he was doing his job. His reply was an excellent way to combat complacency. He said, "I always expect it to work, but I am never surprised when it does not."

Fatigue also contributes to complacency, because fatigue leads to passiveness and a desire to ignore people and other stimuli. We don't want to be bothered. *Doesn't it seem as if fatigue has a number of negative consequences?*

What are some effects of complacency? Do any of these ever happen with you? What can you do to avoid them?

- Inattention or letting your mind wander.
- Taking shortcuts and omitting steps.
- Getting in a hurry.
- Thinking that everything will work perfectly.
- Working too long without a break.
- Thinking that safety is someone else's job.
- Performing a task without procedures or required equipment.



What happens in our brains that lead to complacency? First, we have a mental bias that allows our past experiences to guide present expectations. Therefore, we don't use our brains fully in the situation since our present circumstances **normally** match our past circumstances. We devote our brains to more interesting parts of a task, or to a more interesting task.

Do not let complacency lead to chaos or catastrophe in your job, or your life. It is difficult to overcome complacency. Use these safety valves and teach them to others.



- Always practice simple risk assessment (ask these five questions).
 1. Why am I doing this task?
 2. What could go wrong?
 3. How likely is it to happen?
 4. What effect can it have on others or me?
 5. What can I do about it?
- Use **STAR** with every task.
- Practice independent verification.
- Follow all policies and procedures.
- Train continually and review often.
- Create mental challenges for yourself.
- Sustain a questioning attitude.