

Distractive environments: Mitigating complacency

*Editor's note: The following is part of a series about human error and its role in medical error. This month, **Robert J. Latino**, executive vice president of the Reliability Center, Inc., in Hopewell, VA, discusses the internal and external factors affecting complacency in the workplace and its effect on human error.*

During our employment, when do we become comfortable to the point at which our complacency becomes dangerous? Complacency, as defined by Merriam-Webster's Online, is "self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies." Let's explore the various stages of complacency, and perhaps we can conduct a self-evaluation to see where on the spectrum we are.

Five stages of complacency

The five stages of complacency are:

1. Good operating
2. Self-satisfaction
3. Blindness
4. Denial
5. Collapse

Research indicates that this cycle occurs every two to four years for each of us. At any moment, the typical bell curve distribution will apply and we will find that 10% of our current work force is weak, meaning employees are new and adjusting to working within the system, 80% are adequate, meaning employees are working at the expected level, and 10% are strong, meaning they are fulfilling their required duties but also going above and beyond to mentor others.

The good operating stage is when employees are initially trained about how to perform a task properly when they have no history or background in performing that task. Without such a history, employees come into the work environment with a clean slate and can see things that those who have been around a while don't see anymore. At this

stage, employees ask questions out of naiveté. They try to get others to explain why things are the way they are, and the human error rate is relatively low, as employees are more aware of what can go wrong.

The self-satisfaction stage begins when employees have demonstrated to themselves and others that they are confident in their ability to do their job well.

The blindness stage sets in when employees start to feel like they could do their tasks with their eyes closed. The daily routine tasks become second nature to them.

The denial stage sets in when employees refuse to accept a new way of doing something or a different pattern. Employees at this stage are often used to doing something a certain way and think that is the way it should be, even if that way is wrong.

The collapse stage occurs when employees refuse to accept outside information that conflicts with the way a task is completed. They become set in their ways despite the changing environment around them, which is a dangerous habit. Because of this fixed mind-set, they will start to make decisions that trigger undesirable events.

The phrase "normalization of deviance" was coined by Diana Vaughn of Boston University. Vaughn participated in the 1986 Challenger investigation. The cycles described in complacency mitigation are indicative of the concept of normalization of deviance. This describes a slow degradation of standards over time. As this slow progression occurs, there are no negative consequences. In other words, employees deviate from their fundamental standards and nothing happens. If that continually occurs with no negative consequences, the degradation becomes the new standard.

Eventually, there will be a catastrophe that resets our standards, as was the case with the Challenger and Columbia disasters.

External factors inducing complacency

The following are some external factors that encourage complacency in the workplace.

- **Better-than-expected performance.** When times are good, employees tend not to question the status quo.
- **Lack of oversight.** When there is inadequate oversight of work, the risk of human error increases.
- **The absence of technology and a knowledge-based root cause analysis (RCA) program.** Deeper systemic issues (e.g., policies, procedures, training, and practices) tend not to be uncovered when using shallow cause analysis tools in situations in which RCA is warranted. This can give the impression that current practices are fine because they have not been identified as a deficiency.
- **Lack of performance review policy.** If the gap between what is desired and what is obtained is not measured, there will be an issue. By not identifying such a gap, problems will not be identified.

Internal factors inducing complacency

The following are some ways that complacency may be encouraged internally:

- **Overconfidence.** When employees have been doing the same task repetitively without incident, they tend to become overconfident. Although seasoned pilots have flown their aircraft for years, they still perform their quality control checks via a checklist.
- **Stagnant responsibilities.** When one has been doing a job for a long time, his or her skills should be assessed on a predetermined basis.
- **Unchallenging work.** When work is not challenging, it can become mind-numbing, and employees begin to do their work almost mechanically. This is workplace item that should be assessed.
- **Tunnel vision.** This occurs when employees see situations narrowly and do not consider other possibilities. Asking why an event occurred implies that an opinion will suffice. Instead, ask how an event occurred to broaden the set of possible answers.
- **Group think.** This occurs when a group of people share a common paradigm and, thus, rationalize

information that may contradict with that shared paradigm.

Actions to correct complacency

All managers will have to handle staff complacency on occasion. A good manager will be aware of methods to confront and handle complacency to get employees back on track and working at maximum capacity. Having a strong organizational accountability policy is important, as holding people accountable to a specific measure of performance is one of the strongest countermeasures to the development of complacency. This policy should assess staff performance against a stated goal and be enforced to ensure accountability.

One possible solution is to rotate job responsibilities or reorganize staff members as needed. Moving people around will prevent complacency because it prevents work from becoming mundane. By challenging people to learn more creative tasks, they will be forced to learn new skill sets. This provides them the capacity to be more creative and also builds a work force that is more flexible to meet new changes.

Assess employee skills and knowledge on an annual basis, perhaps during a job performance review. Determining the gaps in knowledge and skill of your work force is imperative to lowering the risk of human error.

Spending time and resources on training now will reap future dividends. However, there is no expectation or measure of a bottom line resulting from the training. Knowledge is acquired in the classroom as a result of lectures. Skill is acquired in the field as a result of applying the new knowledge. Expectations and measures should be set for both.

Employees who are deemed complacent should be considered for positions as trainers. They know the job well and have years of experience.

Before they move into the collapse phase, they should be considered for transferring their knowledge and skill to new candidates for the job. This will provide them more challenging work and a chance to see the pitfalls of others. ■