

# KILLING COMPLACENCY

By Casey McClain

**How often have you found yourself arriving at work with almost no recollection of the drive? Or realized that it is a Friday and that you do not recall what you accomplished during the work week? Have you ever been getting ready for bed and realized you do not even know what happened to the evening?**

**Often, we want to blame** complacency on lack of familiarity with risk. However, half of car crashes occur within 5 minutes of home and more than three-quarters are within 15 miles of our own driveway (Autoweek, 2002). We spend nearly all our time traveling within 25 miles of our own homes and are completely familiar with these daily routes, yet these very roads are the highest risk (Gross, 2015). The lack of acting in the present and instead allowing our actions to become routine leads to a much higher likelihood of an accident behind the wheel.

Complacency is something humans deal with every day when we stop paying attention to the present; in the workplace, this can cause significant safety concerns. When a task becomes routine or can be completed by rote muscle memory, distractions are often a welcome escape from the monotony.

Think about how you may be tempted to check your text messages or email while driving to work. “It will only take a second or two,” you think. “The road is straight and there aren’t any intersections.” Before you realize it, you have traveled more than a half mile at 60 miles per hour without seeing what might be in front of your car. The risks are there: wildlife, pedestrians, obstacles and debris in the road, and the possibility of drifting out of your lane. Distracted drivers do not see these risks because they are not acting in the present and paying attention to the task at hand. By welcoming these distractions, we allow complacency to become a killer.

Complacency or distractions are often cited as causes of workplace incidents, but what if they are one and the same? Is a worker likely to be distracted while operating a machine they are uncomfortable with? Will a driver be as likely to check that text when driving down an unfamiliar back road? Much like we can get to and from work without much thought, which carries a significant amount of risk, we expect workers to complete tasks that have become routine, yet tell them to stay focused and safe.

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be distracted doing work that is routine and repetitive to them, we must understand how. Fortunately, this can be accomplished in myriad ways, many at little or no cost compared to the benefits.

Worker engagement is key to creating a safe workplace. In a 2020 Gallup survey, only 36% of workers considered themselves engaged in their work and 15% considered themselves “actively disengaged” (Harter, 2021). From a leadership perspective, it can be easy to forget that a workforce is primarily engaged by a paycheck and not passion. However, there are opportunities to help reengage your team.

## Goal Setting

Every organization has goals, but often these goals are not translated to the workforce. A 10% decrease in quality problems and safety incidents may be great goals to strive for as an organization, but how do workers impact these goals, and how is success beneficial to them? Frontline leaders should learn how to create goals for

individual workers to give them a focus and something to strive for, and individualize their contribution to the organizational goals by developing a plan for them to participate. Hazard recognition activities, job safety analysis reviews, and participation in management of change teams or safety committees are all easily measurable metrics that help the overall goals of the organization. Work with employees to create an action plan for them and goals and metrics that can be measured and communicated regularly so they can see how they impact change and the organizational goals through their actions. Once these goals have been set, look for ways to incentivize participation.

## Incentivize Participation

Creating goals and giving employees targets and routes of participation are all well and good, but if the benefit to them is perceived as simply more work, then you can be sure that further disengagement will quickly follow. While it is widely recognized that monetary rewards are the primary motivating factor for most people, group and individual recognition can have a substantial impact on engagement. Whether the reward is an employee-of-the-month program, a parking spot, a thank you or a pizza party to mark milestones, when employees can see the results of their success, they will reach for more. Another great incentive can be tied to financial gain as well, as today’s strong performers should be viewed as tomorrow’s leaders.

## Create Opportunity

Completing the same tasks day after day will lead to routine and eventually complacency. There are opportunities to help improve the work environment, streamline processes and participate in management-of-change activities. Including employees in these essential systems encourages buy-in and provides them a sense of ownership. Top performers can be tapped to act as coaches for new employees, allowing them to further develop their skills by learning through teaching. This has an added benefit of creating a pool of employees who can be much more

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easily promoted into frontline leadership and management roles down the road. Promotion from within the organization is highly beneficial, as these employees already have a rapport with colleagues and are intimately familiar with the work being completed to help develop the employees under their leadership, creating a continuous circle of opportunity.

## Diversifying Work Tasks

The absence of one highly experienced worker can drastically impact workflow and quality. Some employees may be top performers because they have become so familiar with a task that they do not have to think to successfully complete it; this is textbook complacency. Developing a cross-training program allows for greater team flexibility and increased engagement. This also creates opportunities by allowing those top performers to become coaches and helps them hone their own skills through teaching. Many organizations are moving toward pay-for-skills compensation, where employees can earn more by learning more positions on the

floor. This encourages employees to pursue more knowledge.

## Conclusion

Think about that drive to work. Set the goal of arriving safely each day and, for each week you make it without incidents or close calls, reward yourself with your favorite breakfast sandwich or coffee on Friday. When a new neighbor moves into the neighborhood, offer to show them around town and point out the bad intersections, where drivers like to speed and where crashes occur regularly. This resets your brain to think about these spots as well. Finally, map out a few different routes to change things up from day to day. A simple task becomes more engaging and helps keep you on your toes, reminds you to live in the moment and helps to reduce the risk of being in a crash. Your family will be grateful that

they are not worried about you each day, the same way employees will be grateful that you have provided them with a new outlook on the same old day-to-day routine. Killing complacency starts with leaders and ends with better, safer and more engaged employees. **PSJ**

## References

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