



Complacency: The Erosion of Safety

New Brunswick Construction Safety Association

Professional Development Day, Fredericton

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Complacency - defined

- *“A feeling of quiet pleasure or security, often while unaware of some potential danger, defect, or the like; self-satisfaction or smug satisfaction with an existing situation, condition, etc.”*
- “Complacency is a state of decreased external awareness and reduced sensitivity to hazards”



Erosion - defined

- *“The gradual decline or disintegration of something”*
- “There is no need to change!”







**For every degree you fly off course, you will miss your target
by 92 feet for every mile that you fly**



What Does It Look Like?

- Falls into a spectrum of categories
 1. *Errors*
 2. *Violations*
 3. *Erosion of standards*



Error vs. Violation

ERROR

- Honest mistake
- Did not have knowledge/skill
- Not trained
- No guidance

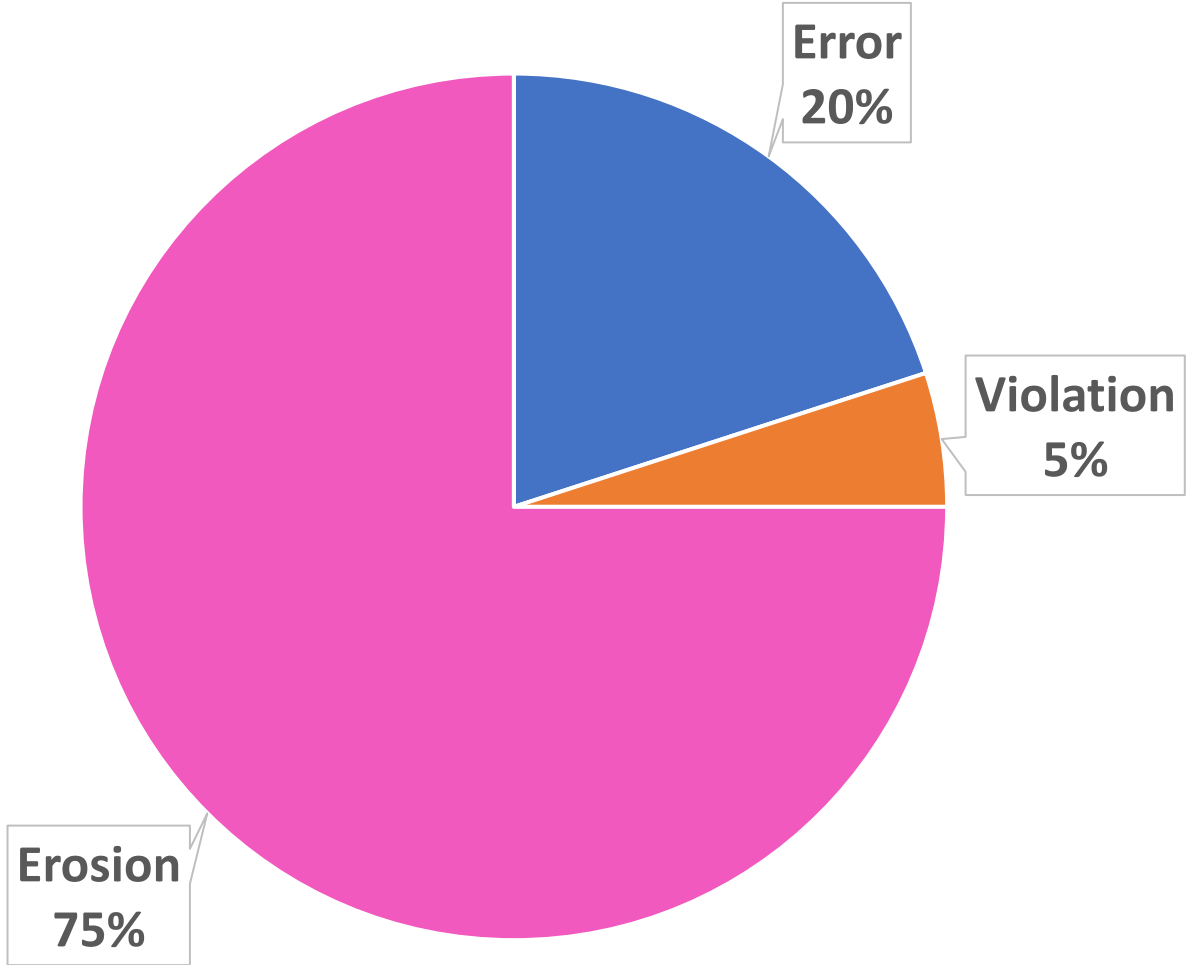


VIOLATION

- Deliberate/wanton unsafe acts
- Has & understands knowledge, but chooses not to work safe



At Risk Behaviours



How Can It Happen?

- Over time, three factors might contribute to complacency:
- **Repetition** – “I’ve done this same task a thousand times.”
- **Confidence** – “I am really great at my job and always perform well.”
- **Experience** – “I’ve been doing this job many years. I’m an expert.”



EROSION OF SAFETY – *How does it happen?*

- A standard exists & employees are aware of it, but it is not always followed
- Sometimes it is never followed
- Difficult to enforce consistently



EROSION OF SAFETY – *What are the reasons?*

- Not always possible to follow
- Cannot be executed as written
- Workplace norm is to NOT follow the standard
- Standard not viewed as being relevant or important
- Supervisory person has witnessed unsafe behaviour and not addressed it



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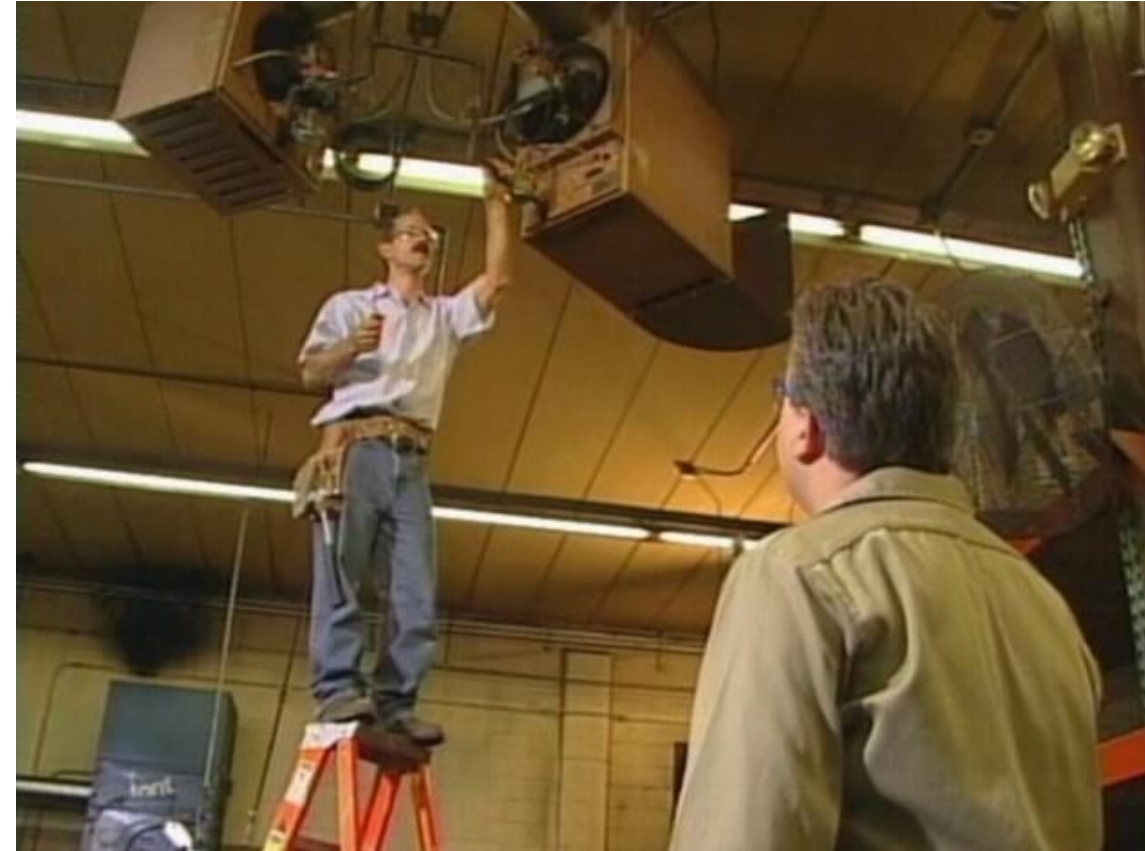
Erosion of Safety – *What are the results?*

- At first there is a little variation from the standard
- Over time that little variation becomes wider and more frequent
- Continues until the entire standard is not being followed at all



Effects of Complacency

- Letting your mind wander and thinking about other things (auto-pilot)
- Taking shortcuts and omitting steps; rushing through the task
- Taking risks/underestimating risks
- Thinking that everything will work perfectly every time



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Effects of Complacency

- Performing a task without using the procedures or recommended personal protective equipment
- Not verifying your work
- Working exclusively from memory, as opposed to actively paying attention
- Assuming others are concerned with the safety aspects of the tasks they are performing



Contributing **External** Factors

- **Good system safety performance:** Thinking that accidents just don't happen and the machines seem to take care of themselves
- **Lack of oversight:** Management seems not to care, and shows little or no proactive leadership resulting in a lack of intervention to consequences of complacency



Contributing **External** Factors

- Unchallenging work where job tasks are mundane and repetitive
- The lack of incident identification, analysis and reporting to workers
- Intermittent rather than on-going safety training and safety emphasis



Contributing **Internal** Factors

- **Risk perception errors** – making assumptions about the inherent safety of job performance
- **A lack of consequence thinking** – not thinking about “What could go wrong?”



Contributing **Internal** Factors

- **Failing to see big picture** - not taking time to assess a job situation
- **Tunnel vision** – occurs when employees see situations narrowly, without considering risks outside the tasks at hand



What Do We Do?

- How do you respond?



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- Provide coaching?



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- Initiate discipline?



What Do We Do?

- How do you respond?
- Provide coaching?
- Initiate discipline?
- Anything?



An aerial photograph of a massive concrete dam situated in a deep, arid canyon. The reservoir behind the dam is a deep blue color, contrasting with the brown, eroded rock walls. The canyon walls show significant erosion, with layered rock formations and steep, rugged slopes. A winding road is visible on the right side of the canyon, and various structures, including a tall tower and smaller buildings, are located near the dam. The overall scene highlights the scale of the engineering project in a challenging natural environment.

Stopping the Erosion!!

Erosion of safety – *How to stop it!*

- Training?
- Discipline?



Erosion of safety – *How to stop it!*

- **Training:** employees are already likely trained
- Discipline?



Erosion of safety – *How to stop it!*

- Training: employees are already likely trained
- **Discipline:** how do you discipline one employee when everyone else doesn't follow the standard?



Combatting Complacency

Risk Assessment

- Before starting a task, ask yourself:
- *Why is this task being performed?*
- *What could go wrong?*
- *What are the odds of something going wrong?*
- *What would be the effects in this area if something went wrong?*
- *What can be done to prevent something from going wrong?*



Combatting Complacency

Policies & Procedures

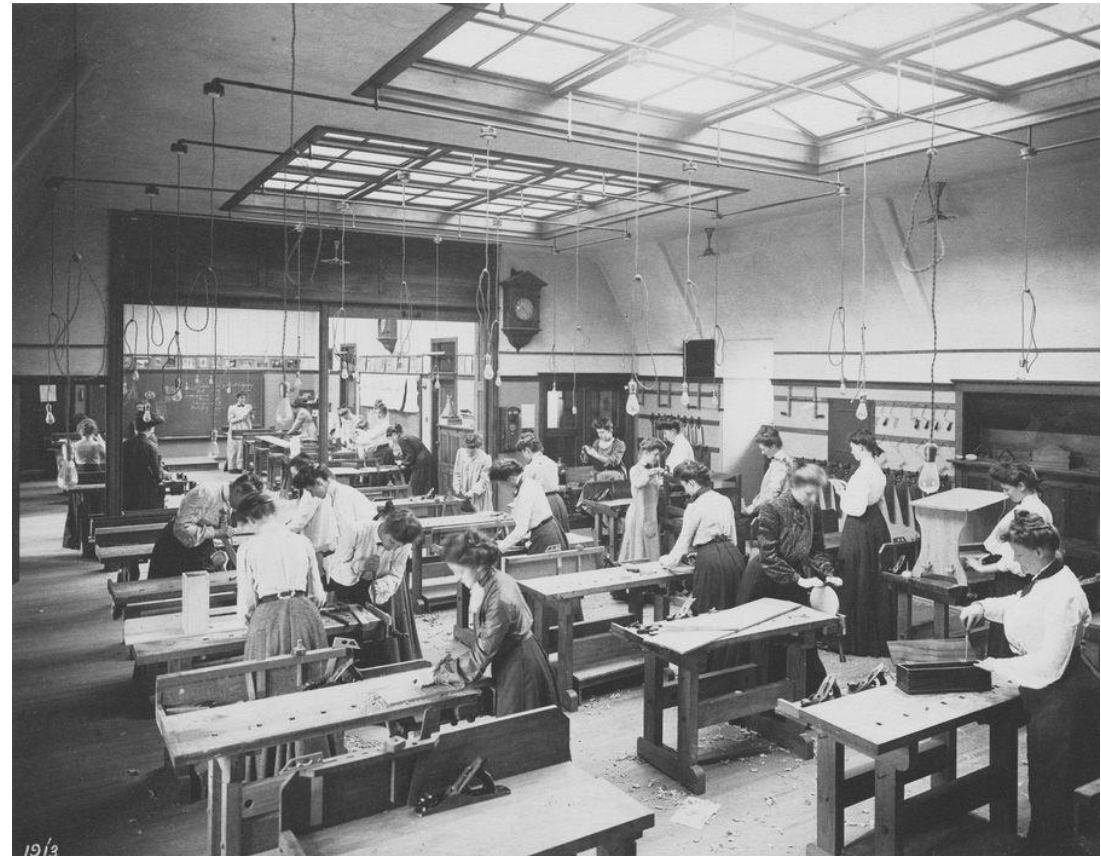
- Actually follow your policies and procedures!
- Do they still make sense?
- Do they need to be updated? Revised?
- Has your process changed, making the procedure or policy irrelevant?



Combatting Complacency

Training

- Train, train, train
- Review the task often
- Ensure anyone who is to perform the task knows exactly what to do!
- Do not be content with your knowledge; continually train and review lessons from errors and near misses



Combatting Complacency

Psychological

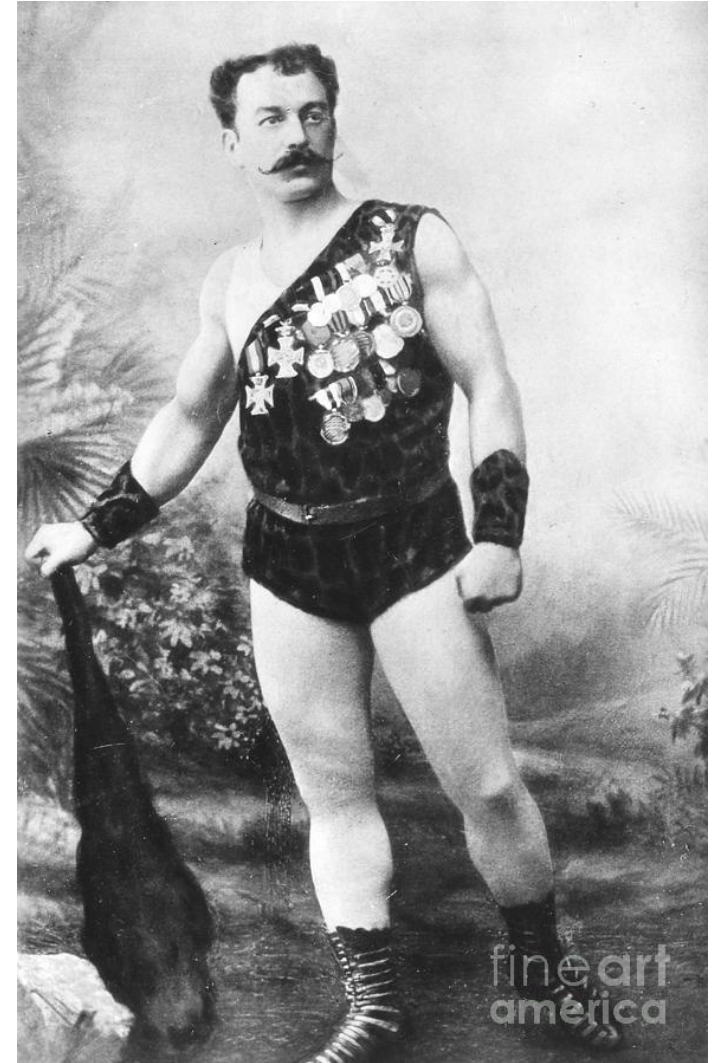
- Create mental challenges to help remain attentive to the task
- Practice “what if” thinking
- Maintain a questioning attitude
- Always be aware of your surroundings at all times



Combatting Complacency

Psychological

- Avoid making assumptions about the status of the task or your processes
- Avoid feeling that your years of experience mean that you can perform the task without errors
- Have a healthy self-confidence, but do not get the big head
- Recognize that “It can’t happen to me” is a wrong belief



Combatting Complacency

Psychological

- Recognize and dismiss distractions when they come up
- Look for improvements in your routine or the way you approach your tasks
- If possible, consider changing some elements of your schedule for the day; the change could help you focus and keep you from falling into “auto-pilot” mode





The Many Faces of Complacency

The Many Faces of Complacency

APATHY

- *Lack of interest or care*
- “I don’t care!”
- **Solution:**
 - Develop a culture to encourage communication & empowerment
 - Provide a workplace that is free from hazards



ASSUMPTIONS

- *Information that is taken for granted*
- “I thought that was what you said”
- **Solution:**
 - Do not be afraid to ask for clarification/understanding
 - Do not act on little/conflicting information



The Many Faces of Complacency

BOREDOM

- *The state of being weary and restless through lack of interest*
- “What can I do to pass away the time?”
- Solution:
 - Redistribute work more evenly
 - Encourage team work/interaction



DUMBING DOWN

- *Simplifying to the point or meaningless*
- “If you treat me like an idiot, I’ll behave like an idiot”
- Solution:
 - Understand the capabilities/motivation of your staff
 - Collect feedback, especially after introducing something new/different



The Many Faces of Complacency

FAMILIARITY

- *Too close an acquaintance with a procedure*
- “I know it all”
- Solution:
 - Regularly review and test procedures
 - Conduct refresher training regularly
 - Make it OK to observe the performance of staff



IGNORANCE

- *Lack of knowledge, education or awareness*
- “I don’t know”
- Solution:
 - Be consistent in training and expectations
 - Ensure clear written/verbal instructions are available
 - Make it OK to observe the performance of staff
 - Make it OK to ask for a critique



The Many Faces of Complacency

IMPULSIVENESS

- *Inclined to act on impulse rather than thought*
- “I know what I am doing”
- **Solution:**
 - Assess risks before doing anything new or following an unexpected occurrence
 - Conduct close call reporting/analysis
 - Discard the “macho” attitude to history



RISK-TAKING

- *Taking an action where the outcome is uncertain, often in breach of regulations/procedures*
- “I’ll take a chance”
- **Solution:**
 - Ensure compliance with regs
 - Follow proper procedures
 - Learn from mistakes
 - Conduct table top exercises on lessons learned



The Many Faces of Complacency

INVULNERABILITY

- *Impervious to danger or risk*
- “It won’t happen to me”
- Solution:
 - DO NOT reward this type of “hero”
 - Conduct appropriate discipline
 - Monitor young/bold staff
 - Conduct table top exercises on lessons learned



ROUTINE - IZATION

- *The effects of habitual or mechanical performance of an established procedure*
- “I’ve done this so many times before”
- Solution:
 - Regularly review and test procedures
 - Conduct consistent refresher training



Where Do We Go from Here?

Status quo?



**Continual
Improvement?**

