

SAFETY TOOL KIT

ADDRESSING COMPLACENCY, SHORTCUTS, OVERCONFIDENCE, AND INEXPERIENCE ON THE JOBSITE



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Ask a safety professional for some causes of construction accidents and you are likely to hear answers like falls, struck-by, pinch points, and electrocution. While these ultimately can be the direct cause of a construction accident, the underlying, or root cause, oftentimes boils down to complacency, shortcuts, overconfidence, or inexperience.

The dictionary defines **complacency** as “self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.” People become complacent when they do something repeatedly without adverse consequences. That behavior or action then becomes normalized. Prolonged complacency can also be a contributing factor to overconfidence. More on that in a minute.

Shortcuts are intentional acts with the perceived benefit of either time or cost savings. Unfortunately, one disastrous outcome resulting from a failed shortcut can negate any potential gain. Shortcuts are common in the construction industry, especially when schedule has precedence.

Overconfidence is an excess of confidence in one’s abilities or judgement. This bias can significantly impact an individual’s behavior and their ability to accurately gauge risk. Especially dangerous is when an **inexperienced** worker is overconfident in their abilities. This results in a greater likelihood of high-risk activities without the knowledge or skills to mitigate the associated hazards.

Understanding human behavior and working proactively to modify those behaviors and external influences are key to preventing any of these factors from becoming the root cause of your next accident.

Comfortable not Complacent

To minimize safety-related complacency on the jobsite, first recognize the warning signs. Be vigilant for signs such as monotonous tasks, reduced attention to detail, increased errors, or a disregard for safety procedures. The goal is to have workers comfortable with their work, but not so complacent that they take unnecessary risks.

To prevent shortcuts, prioritize safety through training, clear procedures, and a culture that values quality over speed or schedule. Additionally, simplifying tasks can help to minimize the temptation to take shortcuts.

Because complacency and shortcuts can have as much to do with external influences as they do with internal constraints, minimizing negative external influences should be the first course of action for any company looking to reduce accidents related to either of these causes.

Confidence not Overconfidence

To ensure your workers maintain a “confident, but not overly confident” mindset, perform realistic assessments of their strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, establish clear expectations, provide regular feedback, and encourage open communication. This approach helps individuals recognize their strengths while acknowledging areas for improvement.

When it comes to inexperience, it is easy to lock in on those early in their careers, new to the job, etc. But don’t forget that even seasoned tradesmen and women can be inexperienced as well. For example, imagine a journeyman pipefitter with 10 years of experience but almost all of that time was spent in a fab shop. If they are placed on a project at a nuclear facility, for example, they are inexperienced in many of the same ways a first- or second-year apprentice may be. What’s worse, they may let their ego interfere with good judgement and then take risks and make poor decisions as a result. This combination can prove highly consequential.

Summary

Identifying root, or underlying causes, of construction accidents is often tied to a relatively small list of specific behaviors or reasons. The four presented here — complacency, shortcuts, overconfidence, and inexperience — can be systematically addressed through a careful and deliberate approach. 