



Safety Culture Threat: Complacency

This safety moment describes an important cultural threat, Complacency, and provides questions to promote team reflection and discussion.

Safety culture overview

The CER has endorsed the following safety culture definition:

Safety culture means “the attitudes, values, norms and beliefs, which a particular group of people shares with respect to risk and safety.”¹

Safety culture is an intangible construct with a powerful impact on organizational safety outcomes. Because of its unobservable nature, it is useful to represent safety culture through a framework. A framework helps illustrate what safety culture looks like within an organization, and subsequently, can help organizations detect what areas of their organizational functioning are supporting vs detracting from a positive safety culture.

The CER’s safety culture framework acts as an example for industry of safety culture in a high-risk organization. The CER’s framework depicts eight cultural dimensions (i.e., eight elements of organizational functioning) that support vs. detract from a positive safety culture. There are four negative dimensions identified that act as threats to existing organizational safety defences: production pressure, complacency, normalization of deviance, and tolerance of inadequate systems and resources. On the other hand, there are four positive dimensions identified that act as cultural defences against these threats: committed safety leadership, vigilance, empowerment and accountability, and resiliency.

These dimensions are shown in the table below:

Negative dimensions (Cultural threats)	Positive dimensions (Cultural defences)
Production pressure	Committed safety leadership
Complacency	Vigilance
Normalization of deviance	Empowerment and accountability
Tolerance of inadequate systems and resources	Resiliency

¹ Mearns, K., Flin, R., Gordon, R. & Fleming, M. (1998). Measuring safety culture in the offshore oil industry. *Work and Stress*, 12(3), 238-254. “Safety” includes safety of workers and the public, process safety, operational safety, facility integrity, security and environmental protection.

Cultural Threat No. 2: Complacency

Complacency occurs when there is a widely held belief that all possible hazards are controlled and the organization has forgotten to be afraid resulting in reduced attention to risk. The organization views itself as being uniquely better (safer) than others and as a result, does not need to conform to industry standards or best practices. This can be the result of an overreliance on occupational injury data that leads them to erroneously believe that they are not at risk for a major accident. The absence of a safety failure over a period of time results in a reduction of organizational vigilance.

Key characteristics of complacency (Attributes)

- Overconfidence in the safety system and its performance
- The organization's inattention to critical safety data
- The organization failing to learn from past events

Examples of complacency (Descriptors)

1. Safety data gathering is inadequate and may focus on the wrong indicators or a limited set of indicators.
2. Performance management, incentives and rewards are related to a limited set of safety indicators (e.g., occupational injury rates) or not present at all.
3. Control of risks is weak and/or reactive.
4. There is a sense of invulnerability at various levels of the organization.
5. Supervisors do not perform frequent checks to confirm that workers (including contractors) are obeying safety rules.
6. The organization only seeks information to confirm its superiority.
7. The organization believes that it is safe because it complies with regulations and standards.
8. The organization discounts information that identifies a need to improve.
9. There is no interest in learning from other organizations or industries.
10. Those who raise concerns are viewed negatively.
11. Response to safety concerns focuses on explaining away the concern rather than understanding it.
12. Investigation of incidents is superficial with a focus on the actions of individuals.
13. Failures are viewed as being caused by bad people rather than system inadequacy.

Questions for team discussion

1. How does our organization combat complacency?
2. What can we do to enhance our sensitivity to the development of complacency?

For more information and useful tools related to safety culture, visit the CER's Safety Culture Learning Portal at www.cer-rec.gc.ca.