Overcoming 'Soft' Complacency

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- By **Robert Pater**
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The best leadership works both ways. It's "and" rather than "either-or"; "all," not "just you" (as in, "We're *all* responsible for safety performance.") However, when dealing with complacency, the tone often set by frustrated managers can label workers as "stupid," "don't care," or who are just lazy, self-absorbed, or shortcut-oriented.

Yet leaders predominantly set an organization's cultural tone, both for worse *and* better. Managerial mindset ripples throughout a company, like that from a rock dropped into the middle of a lake. When it comes to complacency, wise leaders should heed the saying, "When similar events continue to occur, it's time to put away your flashlight and bring out a mirror."

Of course, like weeds in a well-watered garden, complacency emerges all too quickly. Especially when a company has surpassed once-out-of-reach goals, whether from turning around weak performance, overcoming a hurdle such as a shock to its market, surviving a merger, or seeing negative trailing indicators transformed into satisfying ones.

It's certainly natural and helpful to note accomplishments, reflect on lessons learned, or gratefully take a victory lap. But it's also important to bear in mind these are but trailing celebrators; they don't predict the future, merely indicate the past. Complacency signals "We're good enough," "we've arrived," "problem solved," "nothing more needs to be done." The seductive danger? Resting too long on one's laurels prevents focusing on moving to the next step. For example, have you heard of teams that elatedly partied too soon in the semi-finals, so they had difficulty focusing on the championship? Or companies that were once very good coasting on their old reputation? I've seen many companies accomplish a lot and then get stuck in place patting themselves on their own backs.

But complacency doesn't grow only from getting lulled when things go well. Nothing stays the same; even once-perfect fruit goes bad. Many leaders' typical, almost panicky, response to faltering performance is to turn up the heat. Drag out the old, horrendous worst-case scenarios. ("Look closely at what can gruesomely happen if you don't wear eye protection," etc.) Or, when they don't get desired results, managers threaten repercussions for failure to comply.

These reflexive leadership actions actually perpetuate complacency. It's often the same-old leadership default reactions communicated in the same-old way. While this might initially result in workers tightening up their actions, people's tendency is to fall back into their own defaults ("It's no big deal"/"won't happen to me") when horrendous accidents don't immediately follow a "transgression." Like a third Law of Emotion (for every emotional action, there's a similar or equal reaction), same-old leadership actions foster complacency in

return.

Leaders may unknowingly feed complacency through the tradition of holding once-a-year focus meetings to wake and shake workers to "act safe." But I question how a Safety or Wellness Fair in September or a Safety Dinner in February will affect what employees do in July. Experience is, workers see this as the same-old organizational actions replayed, likely generating same-old lack of results. Another case of complacent, inattentional leadership creating an employee mirror image?

When circling round and round the complacency groove, it's easy to give up, assume "we've tried everything" (an impossibility), assume these problems will always be a high cost of doing business (not necessarily so), and compound and cement negative perceptions of workers (which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Complacency may occur on many levels, both organizationally and in individual injury prevention, especially with soft-tissue safety. There are reasons strains and sprains -- to the back, upper limbs, neck, knees, and ankles -- are complacency-driven. First, they're all too common, even in companies that have seemingly overcome many other safety problems. Second, most companies have tried a slew of measures to "fix" these injuries (including impossibly seeking to engineer out all forces that have injury potential in uncontrollable environments). Third, they are statistically even more pronounced with aging workforces, a current condition in numerous companies. Fourth, they're easy to miss, tending to be cumulative in nature; force buildup from tiny, unseen cumulative traumas from everyday actions is often underestimated or disregarded, yet can silently mount as the "straws that break a camel's back."

I'm reminded of the large utility that had more disabling back injuries from their office staff getting into and out of chairs than they did from linemen climbing poles. Less attention even with less risk potential still resulted in more injuries.

Just as very good can get in the way of great, self-satisfaction is the bane of sustaining highest-level results. While over-focusing on the past may birth complacency, it's fed by under-focusing on doing those needed little right things. As Robert Collier wrote, "Success is the sum of small efforts, repeated day in and day out." And vice versa.

So the key to overcoming soft-tissue complacency is to draw people toward taking positive, *small*, easily done and continuous decisions and actions. Those that they *want* to take (rather than "should"/"have to.") That they believe will positively *benefit* them rather than just prevent something bad from happening that they doubt will actually occur.

Most experts contend soft-tissue injuries tend to be more cumulative in nature than one-shot/acute. Given that, how to prevent soft-tissue injuries buildup? Mindfully watch for those actions that can cumulatively build into potential problems and replace these with positive actions. For example, while it may not seem like a big thing to stretch out to operate a light switch, complacently dismissing the forces that build up this can lead to soft-tissue problems. Or holding your breath when tying shoes. Or just bending over empty-handed, forgetting that in doing so you're always lifting the weight of your upper body. Or sitting too long without supporting your lower back. Or "falling" rather than lowering yourself smoothly into a chair. Or trying to hold any one position for protracted periods, no matter how "ergonomic" that position may be. Leaders can help by first rethinking their own approach to such daily actions and then help others do the same. This isn't pie in the sky; we've seen companies make significant improvements in soft-tissue safety by confronting cultural complacency.

Complacency is a mindset whose tone is set by leaders. I get why complacency occurs; it can be exhausting at the beginning to continue to work and live in a state of alertness (until it becomes part of each person's autopilot system.) And there's always the pull of wanting to believe "problem solved!" to move on to another

pressing one.

Best leaders are strategic thinkers; they understand that even small, easily ignored forces are ever-present and continually changing; that by acknowledging and dealing with these small forces, they can redirect complacency into a mindset of ongoing improvement, both organization-wide and for personal injury prevention.

About the Author

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