COMPLACENCY: SAFETY’S WORST ENEMY

The definition of complacency: Self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual danger or deficiencies.

Complacency happens naturally. Our brains are wired to function this way. Repetitive tasks become automatic to free up our attention to other things that are new, novel or threatening. Otherwise, the simplest tasks would overwhelm us. But a construction job site is not the place for our minds to be on automatic pilot.

THE COMPLACENCY STRUGGLE

We often criticize workers for having a complacent attitude, as though this automatic action is deliberate. But complacency is usually not the result of apathy, carelessness or a personality flaw.

While an estimated 90 percent of our behavior is automatic, we are also wired for survival. The brain constantly scans the environment for signs of danger. We notice and respond to what is unique, unusual or threatening to us. Repeated exposure to situations, even those that are potentially dangerous, dulls our defense mechanism and our awareness.

Telltale signs of complacency include overlooking small details and taking shortcuts to complete routine tasks. On a work site, we put our personal safety and the safety of others in jeopardy when we do not have our eyes and mind on task. We become even more complacent when we receive positive reinforcement for a negative act, such as:

- Not getting stopped for speeding when we were driving over the speed limit;
- Not falling when we stood on a chair to change a light bulb;
- Not falling when we didn’t use proper fall protection on the work site; or
- Not being injured or killed when we didn’t follow the confined space entry procedures.

We become more lax each time we escape the consequences of exhibiting a negative behavior. On the work site, this can mean an accident resulting in serious injury or even death.

So what should you do on the work site?

- Follow established protocols and procedures.
- Attend safety meetings to discuss potential hazards.
- Wear the appropriate PPE.
- Stop and think about safety before you begin your task.
- Practice good housekeeping.
- Report any and all perceived or potential hazards.
- Watch out for each other throughout the day.