



Complacency

I think that no matter what profession you are in at some point you feel like you are good enough and when that happens it is the beginning of you not being good at all. It leads to complacency.

This is a good article I found on complacency in the fire service. Complacency starts at the personal level and just goes up from there. I hope this article will open your eyes a little and maybe change the way you do some things.

“Remember how hard you worked when you first started out in the fire service, eager to learn your new trade? We all start off just trying to learn the ropes, but eventually, we gain some experience—and make plenty of mistakes—and we start figuring things out. We transition from competent to pretty damn good.

At this point in our career, everything seems to be firing on all cylinders. We generally have a good balance between finely tuned technical skills and the knowledge of how and when to utilize those skills.

This natural progression in learning follows a curve that starts at the bottom, climbs quickly, because we’re young and motivated to learn, and continues to climb steadily for a few years. But after several years, this learning curve begins to plateau for a few reasons, the first being that we become complacent.

Cruise Control

We all reach a certain level of comfort and success when we’ve been at the same job for some time. We also become content to keep doing things the same way we’ve always done them in the hope that our experience, knowledge and training will carry us through as we sit back on “cruise control.” And once in a while, our arrogance peeks its ugly head out and lulls us into a false sense of being almost bulletproof.

Whenever I find myself thinking, “Self, you are really bitchin’ at what you do, so you can probably afford to be a little lazy” (a truly Brainiac thought), I’m almost always given a wicked dose of reality in return, or something happens that causes me to fall flat on my face after I’ve made a complete ass of myself.

This complacent thought process is cyclical for most of us. Unfortunately, we usually don’t catch ourselves being lazy before lazy catches us.

An Acceptable Practice

How do we allow ourselves to become complacent in a job that could kill us on the very next call? This question is always fascinating to think about because we’re all guilty of some degree of complacency in our jobs. How do we fall into this trap? Why do we let our skills dissolve? Why do we fail to check out our equipment properly? Why do we watch someone else fail to check *their* equipment and not say a word or pretend it never happened?

We do it because it's become an acceptable practice in the fire service. If it wasn't acceptable, it wouldn't happen. We accept our own complacency and the complacency of others every day, and unfortunately, we've lost some brother and sister firefighters to it.

Steps toward Change

So if we're all complacent from time to time, and complacency is a part of our culture, chances are our skill sets have suffered, and things like training have been put on the back burner. Company officers aren't usually responsible for departmental training, but they are responsible for their company's training. Below, I've outlined a few steps that have helped me get going again after I found myself becoming complacent—or got caught being complacent.

- Do a little self-examination. The first step toward controlling complacency is to be honest about where your skill level is compared to where it should be. At the end of the day, you know what you know, and you know what you don't know. Self-examination helps uncover our weaknesses and our strengths. Our weaknesses tell us what we need to work on, and our strengths tell us what we can help others with.
- If you haven't trained in a while, go back to the basics. Company training should always start at the weakest point, which may be frustrating for some, but it's extremely important to bring everyone back to the same level before moving on. Tip: To get some of the more advanced members on board with this type of training, ask them to conduct the exercises. There's no shame in admitting that we've been out of the game for a while and need a refresher.
- Keep training fresh and interesting by changing locations, drills and scenarios. One way to do this is to have each member put on a drill. Another way is to challenge the crew to train on something they aren't comfortable with. Most of us are comfortable teaching the things we know really well. If you want to challenge yourself, take the time to teach a class based on one of your weaknesses. It's almost impossible to be complacent about something you aren't comfortable with—and you might even learn something.

The hardest part about this process is actually getting off our asses and doing it. It's like working out: The first few times may be hard and slightly painful, but once you and your crew get into a groove, it becomes part of your day.

Conclusion

If you think about it, complacency is one of our worst enemies. Too much of it could get us, or someone else, killed.

Chase Sargent used to say, "Don't forget the business of our business." We're in a dangerous job, so our biggest concern of the day shouldn't be "What are we having for dinner?" or "What are we watching on the idiot box tonight?" Our biggest concern should be "Did I do something today to make me a better firefighter, company or chief officer?"

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