From Complacency to a Continuous Improvement Safety Culture

Vanessa Moran, Dr Darren Wishart & Daniell Barrett
Griffith University, Work and Organisational Resilience Centre

The Question

How do we overcome complacency about driving safety to ensure a continuous improvement approach?

This Q&A explores how complacency negatively impacts work-related driving safety, how to identify complacency and suggests ways to replace complacency with a culture of continuous improvement.

Scope of the problem

Driving for work is one of the most dangerous work-related activities[1,2,3]. Individuals who drive for work are twice as likely to be involved in a motor vehicle crash than personal car drivers, accounting for more than one-third of all road fatalities each year[4].

Complacency in driving safety can result in unsafe driving due to contributing factors associated with the driver and passenger, vehicle, road environment, organisation and legislation and policy (Reference: Stuckey et al, 2007). For example, factors associated with poorly maintained vehicles, untrained drivers, unreasonable shift work or time pressure, and policies and procedures that are poorly communicated or ignored. Complacency is influenced by the values held by an organisation, its management and employees regarding driving safety. How these values are expressed through motivations, attitudes and behaviours is an organisation's 'safety culture'.

A continuous improvement safety culture can be achieved by regularly evaluating driving safety initiatives, engaging with employees to gain feedback and new ideas, and allocating the required resources. Continuous improvement safety culture can positively influence worker attitudes and behaviour, improving driving safety and resulting in safer driving behaviour and outcomes. Organisations who use the road network can mitigate the risk of worker exposure to motor vehicle crashes by taking a continuous improvement approach to their safety culture.

This Q&A was developed to help workers and organisations who use the road network to understand how complacency impacts driving safety and to provide strategies that encourage a continuous improvement approach to driving safety.

PART I: Complacency Culture

What does complacent driver safety look like?

Complacent driver safety occurs at all levels of an organisation: worker, manager, team, and organisation. Complacent driver safety may not always appear unsafe. Instead, it may create the conditions that enable unsafe driver behaviour and increase the risk of motor vehicle incidents. Examples of complacent driver safety include:

- Poor servicing of vehicles or a lack of pre-start safety checks
- Purchasing of vehicles with low ANCAP safety ratings
- No or poor fatigue management for drivers
- No or poor training and education for workers about the dangers of driving for work
- Driving safety policies and procedures that are unclear or poorly communicated, and
- Unsafe and illegal driving behaviours, such as texting while driving.

Elements of complacency may exist in an organisation if organisational data is collected but is not informative for or used in the improvement of driver safety. For example, a debrief is conducted by the manager as a formality and all information gathered is immediately filed away.

Other signs of complacency include if organisational data that may be useful for an investigation is not reviewed, or data that is reviewed does not align with the investigation's outcomes or recommendations. For example an investigation found fatigue was a significant contributing factor due to a need for regular long-distance driving but rather than review rostering and scheduling processes, it was recommended the individual involved undertake an independent medical exam.

Another way of identifying whether an organisation is complacent about driver safety is to examine the investigation of the most recent motor vehicle incident[5]. A heavily embedded culture of complacency may exist in an organisation if:

- there was no investigation
- there was an investigation but it identified the driver as the single cause of the incident
- minimum driving safety standards were enforced, such as use of mobile phone via Bluetooth while driving
- there was a rush to get more personal protective equipment, like polarised sunglasses or seatbelt covers, following the incident
- the investigation and resolution embraced the 'KISS: Keep It Simple Stupid' methodology. Workplace incidents are rarely simple.

7 signs of driver safety complacency

Poor vehicle servicing

Lack of pre-start safety checks

Vehicles with low ANCAP safety ratings

Poor management of driver fatigue

No training on risks of driving for work

Unclear driving safety policies

Unsafe or illegal driving behaviours

Characteristics of complacency

Characteristic[7,8]	Brief Description
Low performance standards	When the expectation is low performance, the result will also be low performance
Comfortable and traditional methods	When individuals fall into a routine, it is far easier to follow than break that routine, even if that would be beneficial.
Rigid thinking	When managers and employees fail to recognise the complexity of safety being more than just good and bad behaviour.
Finding the 'no'	New methods are often rejected only because of disruption they cause or norms they violate.
Rejecting feedback	Safety feedback or new standards are rejected or ignored, often to not disturb the status quo.

Low performance standards

Perhaps the most impactful element of a culture of complacency is organisational leadership that creates an expectation of mediocrity. Where a 'don't rock the boat' mentality exists, low performance standards create an environment where the other elements of complacency can fester and grow. When organisations do not inspire their workers to embrace an ethos of continuous improvement, workers align their safety values and practices with the status quo.

Example: *There are no visible messages from the organisation, leadership or middle management, for example at the start of meetings or shifts, on the company intranet or in the company newsletter, that encourage driver safety or suggestions that may improve driver safety. Management need to 'walk the talk' and lead by example in their own driving behaviours, attitudes and motivations.*

Comfortable and traditional methods

Phrases like 'This is how we have always done it' and 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it' reflect this element of complacency culture. People naturally default to familiar safety processes and procedures because of the comfort and ease that comes with them.

Example: *Motor vehicle incidents are attributed to the driver being at fault without further investigation into the broader contributing factors aligned with a systems approach or opportunity for responsive action.*

Rigid thinking

Naively looking at information, ideas and opportunities to improve safety as 'good' or 'bad' ignores the complexity of most road safety situations. Rigidly looking at extremes is a common symptom of a culture of complacency.

Example: *Celebrating a reduction in reported safety incidents when in reality this means people are disincentivised or punished for reporting incidents or have no means to report incidents.*

Finding the 'no'

Rejecting new opportunities or ideas to improve organisational safety is one of the most prominent elements of a culture of complacency. When something outside the norm or people's comfort zone is brought up, there is a compulsion to find a way to delegitimise it or over-complicate it so that it fails.

Example: *Employee suggestions that may improve driver safety are 'parked' indefinitely or rejected outright because the organisation doesn't have the time or resources.*

Rejecting Feedback

Rejecting performance feedback by not engaging with employees or customers, not keeping up to date with safety regulator advice, and not tracking and implementing advancements in safety research. Feedback is often rejected when an organisation is not interested in challenging the status quo.

Example: *Employees responsible for driver safety are not allocated sufficient time or financial resources to monitor driving safety research or changes to regulatory requirements that may inform updates to policies and procedures.*

How does complacency come about?

In the context of safety culture, complacency manifests when driver safety is not an organisational priority. This is often because an organisation has not recently experienced or had to respond to improving risk management strategies or a significant motor vehicle incident. Complacency can also result from a reactive, not proactive, approach to driving safety management.

Organisations focus on serious motor vehicle incidents because of the resulting insurance claims and reportable lost-time injuries. This may result in oversight of minor motor vehicle incidents and near misses, which are likely to occur more regularly and not necessarily result in an immediate serious motor vehicle incident. By focusing only on serious motor vehicle incidents, or their absence, organisations are likely to believe their safety culture is better than it is and underestimate the potential for improvement.

Complacency may also be the result of misalignment between driver safety attitudes and safety culture in an organisation. Organisations emphasise safety culture in activities that are central to their core business. In some organisations, driving is not seen as central to core business, so is not given the same amount of attention, resourcing and risk mitigation compared to other workplace risks and hazards[6]. This may result in poor measurement, investigation and response to safety incidents that relate to driver safety. While an organisation may have a continuous improvement approach to other safety concerns, driving safety is 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Neglecting driver safety in a safety culture, or long periods without motor vehicle incidents, can cause organisations to become complacent with the status quo. In addition to the individual dangers of complacency, such as exposure to increased risk of motor vehicle incidents, working in a culture of complacency poses a significant threat to the organisation from a business perspective. Complacency can erode the foundation of an organisation's safety culture as new research, legislation and employee improvement suggestions are overlooked and strategies become outdated or ineffective. Combined, the individual and organisational consequences of a motor vehicle incident are devastating.

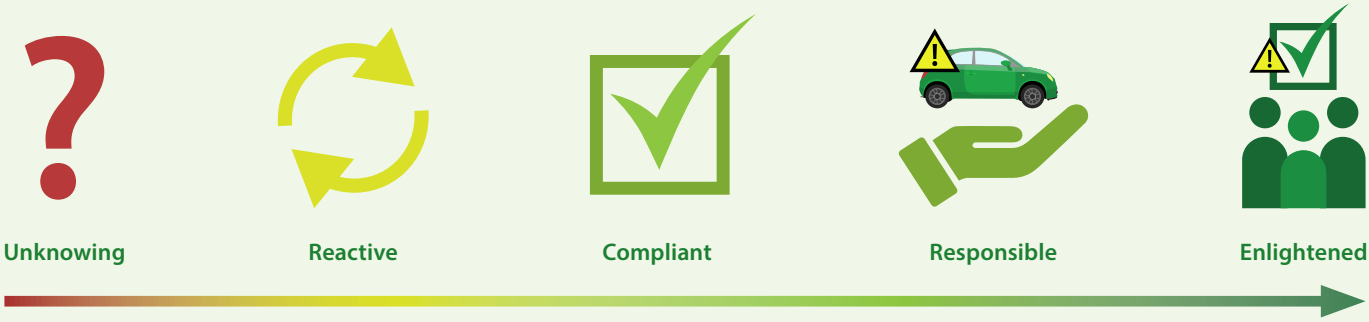
Complacency culture in the road transport industry

Motor vehicle incidents are a significant occupational risk for those required to drive a vehicle for work. A worker who drives for work is at twice the risk of being involved in a motor vehicle incident. Such incident rates suggest a range of contributing factors associated with work driving and safety, with complacency being one of them.

Driving safety is the shared responsibility of the individual behind the wheel; the organisation for which they work, including those who purchase vehicles, schedule and carry out servicing, design rosters and investigate safety incidents; other road users; and road safety regulators. The Work Health and Safety Act 2011 places a general duty on businesses to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that workplaces are without risks to the health and safety of any person. This includes when on and around the road[7]. Therefore, it is the shared responsibility of organisations and their employees and contractors in the road transport industry to prevent complacency culture from undermining a proactive organisational safety culture and mitigating the influence of complacency on workers' attitudes towards driver safety while at work.

Maturity curve and the safety culture[10]

An organisational culture of safety is the link between an organisation's safety procedures and systems with actual safety outcomes. For safety systems to be utilised to their potential, there first needs to be a culture that understands that such systems are worthwhile. As an organisation's safety culture matures and develops, the safety risks in the organisation decrease. The phases an organisation's culture goes through are outlined below.



Level of culture	Description	In the Organisation
Unknowing	People do not know what to do.	At this point, very little or no positive safety culture exists. Individuals look out for themselves and have little knowledge of how to operate effectively in the safety systems. Accidents or safety incidents are seen as part of the job and productivity takes priority over safety.
Reactive	People respond to issues as they arise.	Organisations or individuals only care about health and safety after an incident. There is a focus on measuring safety through lagging indicators only, and safety policy is usually enforced through disciplinary actions.
Compliant	People follow safety guidelines because they know they have to.	There is general compliance with safety systems. Productivity sometimes takes priority over safety and most safety incidents are reported and subsequently investigated.
Responsible	People follow safety guidelines because they know they are good guidelines to follow.	There is an organisation wide, often organisation driven, commitment to safety, with the workforce proactively engaging in health and safety. There is more of a focus on leading and current safety indicators as well as lagging indicators.
Enlightened	People act as safe as they know how to, and follow safety guidelines because they know it is worthwhile to do so.	Safety is genuinely seen as an organisational value. Safety is a clear priority over productivity and safety incidents lead to tangible changes in daily work to improve safety.

PART II: Continuous Improvement Culture

What does continuous improvement look like?

Much like complacency, continuous improvement occurs at all levels of an organisation: worker, manager, team, and organisation. A culture of continuous improvement may be developed in an organisation if:

- data from the investigation is reported rather than suppressed
- driver safety is valued at all levels of the organisation, that is promotional messages are regularly communicated by executive leadership, management, and colleagues
- driver safety is a focus of improvement, and provided necessary resourcing, at all levels of the organisation
- motor vehicle incidents are attributed to a series of complex individual and organisational factors
- driver safety performance targets are continually updated
- driver safety-related work processes are continually revised and streamlined.

Characteristics of a continuous improvement safety culture

Characteristic[9]	Brief Description
Small changes and big changes	Big organisational changes can have a bigger safety impact, but smaller changes can have a big morale and self-efficacy impact.
Short- and long-term thinking	Quick tangible wins are great for letting everyone know that change is happening, but long-term strategies always need to be considered.
Shared ownership	Encouraging employee feedback and employees know their input is valued.
SMART goals	Improvement criteria is: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely.
Critical reflection	For continuous improvement to be continuous, evaluation of the safety state must also be continuous.

Small changes and big changes

Small changes are considered as important as big changes. Big changes can have significant impact and signal progress, making them more enticing to management who want to appear impactful. However, small changes can be inexpensive and less daunting to employees who are hesitant to change, making them easy to implement regularly. Organisations with a continuous improvement safety culture recognise the value of, and implement, both big and small changes.

Example: *Amending an incident report form to include a 'free text' section that has been requested by employees is considered as important as the introduction of a new organisational policy on incident reporting.*

Short- and long-term thinking

Quick wins are used to satisfy employees' immediate needs without detracting from the urgency of long-term interventions. Quick wins can be used to communicate to employees that management is listening and address immediate safety concerns. Long-term strategies are considered equally important for the purpose of aligning a company with regulatory requirements, driver safety research, and emerging technology designed to improve driver safety.

Example: *Amending the fatigue management policy in response to concerns from drivers that shifts are too long, while monitoring fatigue management research and technology for strategies that could help manage the risk of driver fatigue in 'real time'.*

Shared ownership

Employees are closest to problems and therefore likely to provide the most reliable feedback and suggestions for improvements. Organisations with a continuous improvement safety culture create opportunities for employees to provide regular feedback. Feedback is celebrated and actions are communicated with transparency so employees know their input is valued. Employees also are more likely to see the value in changes implemented as a result of their own input, and will be more likely to embrace changes.

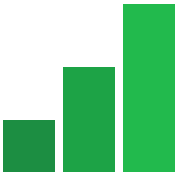
Example: *A working group, made up of drivers, schedulers and fleet management, is mandated with reviewing and generating ideas to improve driver safety.*

Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely (SMART)

Improvement strategies are developed in accordance with the SMART criteria.

Example: *A strategy to increase the ANCAP safety rating of all vehicles to 5 stars is not realistic if employees are required to use their own vehicles and the organisation is not willing to pay for them to be upgraded.*

Specific



Measurable

Achievable

Realistic

Timely

Critical reflection

A variety of data is used to critically reflect on driver safety and recent improvements. Critical reflection occurs regularly through implementation of interventions and at each level of the organisation.

Example: *Data is gathered on lost time injuries, hazard and incident reports, insurance claims, employee feedback and intervention-specific metrics, and compared at pre-, during- and post-implementation intervals.*

How does continuous improvement come about?

Continuous improvement reflects the idea that organisations should undertake incremental improvements to services, products and processes. For organisations who use the road network, this means regularly evaluating and updating policies, procedures, training materials and equipment, monitoring advancements in road safety research and regulatory changes, and engaging with drivers for feedback and new ideas.

Organisations who take a continuous improvement approach to driver safety are likely to have a proactive management team and implement a combination of long-term solutions and quick wins. Employees regularly provide feedback, challenge 'the way it's always been' thinking, openly report safety incidents and hazards, and embrace initiatives that improve driver safety.

There are many well-known business processes that promote continuous improvement, including Six-Sigma, Lean, DMAIC, and Kaizen. While each of these processes uses different terminology, the objective and cyclic, continuous improvement, is shared. Kaizen is the most straightforward process, with its four steps comprising identifying opportunities for improvement and planning, implementing and evaluating the new intervention10.

The below example of the Kaizen continuous improvement process shows how it can be used to improve driver safety.

Step 1: Identify	Most fleet vehicles have a 3 star ANCAP safety rating and do not have modern safety features, such as emergency brake assist or lane departure warnings.
Step 2: Plan	As fleet vehicles are retired, they will be replaced with 5 star ANCAP safety rated vehicles. Fleet vehicles will be audited each year for updates to their ANCAP safety rating. Retirement of fleet vehicles will prioritise those with the lowest safety rating (with the exception of damaged or poorly operating vehicles).
Step 3: Execute	ANCAP safety ratings are recorded for all fleet vehicles. Those with the worst ratings are retired and replaced within 12 months. An annual review of safety ratings is written into the fleet vehicle policy. The person/team responsible for fleet vehicle acquisition is given responsibility to ensure the new policy is adhered to.
Step 4: Review	In 12 months, the fleet vehicle audit is compared with the previous year's audit to ensure there has been an increase in the number of 5 star ANCAP safety rated vehicles and those with the worst ratings have been retired.

Roche: A case in point

Roche is committed to promoting increased awareness and responsible driving behaviour for all employees to prevent vehicle accidents and reduce personal injury and property loss claims.

Since 2005, Roche has successfully implemented Virtual Risk Manager® Driver Profile, RoadRISK™, One More Second® and RoadSKILLS™ modules, and the Manager Information System that supports these tools. Roche has also developed, implemented, monitored and improved its policies, procedures, processes, driver manual and ongoing communications including initiatives on collision reporting and investigation, anti-lock brakes, speed, seatbelts, alcohol, fatigue, holiday driving, back pain, journey management to minimise employee kilometres, vehicle checks and driving while pregnant.

Through these interventions, Roche has reduced all its major collision types, lowered its claims ratio from 36% to 28%, and cut its collision costs by 55%.

But it hasn't stopped there. Roche embraces continuous improvement, with ongoing objectives to:

- sustain and maximise the use of Virtual Risk Manager® for existing and new employees.
- develop new initiatives to reinforce corporate policy.
- design and implement new Virtual Risk Manager® modules, including the Safe Driving Pledge, Risk Foundation™ policy assessment, version 2 of the RoadRISK™ Profile, RiskCOACH, bespoke KPIs and CrashCOUNT.
- engage in external programs such as benchmarking and road safety outreach.

PART III: 10 Things to Remember

1. Driving a motor vehicle is a workplace safety risk and doubles an individual's risk of being involved in a motor vehicle incident.
2. Workers' driving behaviour is influenced by their organisations' safety culture.
3. Motor vehicle incidents and worker injury or death as a result of these incidents may be attributed to a breakdown in safety culture; that breakdown often results from complacency.
4. Complacency often occurs because an organisation has not recently experienced a significant motor vehicle incident, allowing workers to believe the current approach to safety culture is good.
5. Signs of complacency include reliance on comfortable methods, rigid thinking, rejecting new opportunities or ideas to improve organisational safety, low performance standards, and rejecting safety performance feedback.
6. According to the Workplace Health and Safety Act 2011, organisations in the road transport industry have a responsibility to prevent complacency culture from undermining organisational safety culture to improve workers' attitudes towards driver safety while at work.
7. A continuous improvement safety culture can positively influence worker attitudes and behaviour when driving and reduce complacency.
8. A continuous improvement safety culture requires regular monitoring and adapting to the changing needs of drivers and their environment.
9. Traits of a continuous improvement safety culture include small and big changes, short- and long-term thinking, shared ownership, SMART intervention strategies, and regular reflection.
10. There are many different continuous improvement processes that can be adopted, including Six-Sigma, Lean, DMAIC and Kaizen.

We all have a role

It is the shared responsibility of employees and the organisation to address complacency, using a top-down and bottom-up approach. From the top down, the organisation and its leadership team should establish and communicate a continuous improvement safety culture as a priority while providing the time and financial resources required for necessary action. Organisation leaders can implement a continuous improvement process, allocate resources to implement the process, and communicate continuous improvement as an organisational priority.

From the bottom up, individuals should make efforts to positively influence management by providing regular feedback, encouraging change, and challenging the status quo. Workers should embrace opportunities to share ownership of a continuous improvement safety culture.

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