

ADDRESSING COMPLACENCY BIAS

in Film & Television Production

By Chris C. Johnsen

In the high-stakes world of film and television production, where deadlines and budgets often drive decision-making, the tendency of crew members to become overconfident and less vigilant over time, especially when performing routine tasks, presents a significant risk to safety.

Called complacency bias, this tendency toward overconfidence can lead to a reduction in adherence to safety protocols, potentially resulting in incidents and fatalities (Hollnagel, 2014; Reason, 1990; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Complacency arises from a natural human drive to seek comfort and stability, often as a response to achieving a level of success or routine that seems satisfactory (Bargh & Morsella, 2008). This drive is deeply rooted in psychology, enabling people to conserve mental and emotional energy by minimizing the need to confront new challenges or reassess our surroundings (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Once a certain level of proficiency or security is reached, the brain gravitates toward maintaining that state, reducing the perceived need for vigilance or continuous improvement (Reason, 1990). While this state can foster a sense

of contentment, it also poses risks by diminishing awareness of potential dangers or necessary adaptations (Dekker, 2014).

Complacency bias is closely related to several cognitive biases that impact decision-making. Bias refers to a tendency to favor or disfavor particular perspectives or outcomes in an unfair manner (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In the context of safety, this can manifest as confirmation bias, where individuals seek out or interpret information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998), or anchoring bias, where undue weight is given to the first piece of information encountered (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Implicit bias involves unconscious attitudes that shape judgments and actions (Bargh & Morsella, 2008), while selection bias occurs when certain groups or data points are systematically favored or excluded, leading to skewed results (Rothman et al., 2008). Hindsight bias involves perceiving events as having been predictable after they have occurred (Fischhoff, 1975). Recognizing and addressing these biases is crucial for improving decision-making and enhancing safety.

Impact of Complacency Bias on Production Safety

In film and television production, complacency bias can have a profound impact on safety practices, particularly in environments where minor incidents are more frequent than major incidents. When crew members become overly comfortable or assume that the low probability of severe incidents means that safety protocols are unnecessary, complacency bias becomes a significant issue (Reason, 1990; Sneddon et al., 2013). This bias can manifest as reduced focus on safety measures, disregard for minor hazards and a tendency to overlook routine safety inspections.

Comparable patterns have been documented in other high-risk industries. For example, offshore drilling crews showed lapses in situation awareness and vigilance when exposed to routine, low-consequence events, a condition that often precedes more severe incidents (Sneddon et al., 2013). Aviation incident analyses

also reveal that overconfidence in routine procedures has repeatedly contributed to catastrophic failures (Reason, 1990). The 80/20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, states that approximately 80% of effects come from 20% of causes. Applied to film and television production safety, this principle suggests that a small proportion of safety issues or risky behaviors often contribute to the majority of incidents. For instance, a limited number of high-risk practices or complacent attitudes among crew members might account for a disproportionate share of incidents or near-misses on set. Identifying and addressing these critical areas (e.g., specific risky behaviors, inadequate safety practices or complacency among key roles such as firearm inspections or harness rigging tasks) allows for more targeted and effective safety initiatives (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Challenges in Addressing Complacency Bias

The infrequent occurrence of major incidents can lead crew members and management to underestimate the importance of maintaining rigorous safety standards. If a production has only experienced a few minor injuries without any fatal incidents, the crew and management may become less vigilant about adhering to safety procedures as workers operate under the assumption that major incidents are unlikely to occur. This complacency can be dangerous, as it may lead to neglecting necessary precautions that could prevent both minor and major incidents. Overlooking safety measures increases the risk of minor injuries escalating into more severe outcomes, especially if conditions change or an unexpected chain of events occurs. Dekker (2014) emphasizes that these breakdowns are rarely the fault of a single individual but are usually systemic, arising when organizations grow accustomed to risk without consequences.

Safety Impact of Stunt Performance Professionalism

Stunt performers play a crucial role in film and television production, bringing a high level of professionalism and

STRATEGIES FOR MITIGATION OF COMPLACENCY BIAS

- **Reinforce safety through ongoing training.** Conduct regular, hands-on safety drills tailored to specific crew roles to keep protocols fresh and relevant.
- **Prioritize safety over production pressures.** Maintain strict adherence to safety procedures, even under tight deadlines or budget constraints.
- **Leverage leadership and peer influence.** Have respected crew leaders model safe behavior and engage specialized trades through peer-led initiatives.
- **Encourage open communication.** Foster a culture where all crew members feel safe to report hazards or voice concerns without fear of backlash.
- **Implement independent safety oversight.** Use third-party safety officers to conduct impartial audits and ensure compliance with safety protocols.



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adherence to safety protocols. These professionals are trained to handle dangerous stunts and maneuvers, and their expertise helps mitigate risks associated with their tasks. Stunt performers work closely with directors and actors to ensure that all safety measures are in place, which often involves detailed planning, rehearsals and risk assessments (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

However, complacency can sometimes arise within this highly skilled group, particularly when actors or directors prioritize dramatic effect over safety. For instance, an actor's desire to perform a stunt without proper training or a director's insistence on a high-risk shot can lead to dangerous situations if the established safety procedures are not followed strictly. Research in other high-risk domains has shown that stress, fatigue and overconfidence reduce vigilance, especially when tasks are repeated frequently or appear routine (Sneddon et al., 2013).

To address these challenges, it is essential to maintain clear communication and enforce safety standards consistently. Stunt coordinators and supervisors must ensure that any requests for stunts or risky shots are evaluated thoroughly and that safety measures are adapted accordingly. The collaboration between stunt professionals, actors and directors should prioritize safety without compromising the artistic vision of the production.

Safety Role of the First Assistant Director

In most productions, the first assistant director (1st AD) plays a vital role in overseeing safety on set. The 1st AD is responsible for managing the daily operations of

the production, including scheduling, coordinating activities and ensuring that safety protocols are followed. This role involves close collaboration with various departments such as stunt coordination to ensure that all aspects of production adhere to safety standards (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

The 1st AD's responsibilities include conducting safety briefings, overseeing the implementation of safety protocols, and addressing any concerns related to safety. By maintaining a strong focus on safety and ensuring that all crew members are aware of and adhere to safety procedures, the 1st AD helps to mitigate the risks associated with complacency bias (Hollnagel, 2014). This position is crucial in fostering a culture of safety on set where every team member understands the importance of following protocols and is encouraged to speak up about potential hazards.

Real-World Examples Highlighting Complacency Bias

Several tragic incidents in film and television history illustrate the deadly consequences of complacency bias. The incident on the set of *Rust* in October 2021 is a poignant example. Actor Alec Baldwin discharged a firearm he believed to be safe, resulting in the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and the injury of director Joel Souza. This tragedy highlighted significant lapses in safety protocols and underscored the deadly consequences of complacency bias. The firearm was not properly inspected before it was given to Baldwin, reflecting a lack of rigorous safety checks. Additionally, inadequate training and awareness

among crew members regarding the importance of safety protocols were evident. The rushed production environment exacerbated the issue, as the focus shifted to meeting deadlines rather than maintaining safety standards (Gonzalez, 2021; Kelner, 2021; Production Bulletin, 2021).

In a 1993 incident, actor Brandon Lee was fatally shot by a loaded gun that was supposed to only contain blanks during filming for the movie *The Crow* (Gonzalez, 2021; Production Bulletin, 2021). Crew members had become so familiar with the process that critical checks were skipped—a pattern consistent with research by Sneddon et al. (2013) that found reduced vigilance during repetitive tasks in hazardous industries.

Similarly, the 1982 helicopter crash on the set of *Twilight Zone: The Movie*, which killed actor Vic Morrow and two child actors, was attributed to a series of safety oversights and a complacent attitude toward the dangerous stunts being performed (Murano, 2009).

Another notable example is the death of stunt pilot Art Scholl during the filming of *Top Gun* in 1986, highlighting complacency toward the inherent risks of performing aerial stunts (Check-Six.com, n.d.; Murano, 2009; Production Bulletin, 2021). As in these examples, routine tasks, overconfidence, peer pressure, groupthink, and time and budget constraints can all contribute to complacency bias, leading to serious incidents. These tragedies are not random mishaps but systemic failures of safety culture, aligning closely with the academic literature on human error, organizational resilience and vigilance loss (Dekker, 2014; Reason, 1990; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Mitigating Complacency Bias

Several strategies can be implemented to effectively combat complacency bias. Regular training and drills are essential for keeping safety protocols fresh in the minds of crew members. These sessions should be directly relevant to their tasks and include practical, hands-on components. Vigilance is best maintained through repetitive, scenario-based practice that keeps hazards visible and salient (Sneddon et al., 2013). Strict adherence to protocols must be enforced, including thorough checks of all equipment and ensuring that all safety measures are followed, regardless of time constraints. High-reliability organizations preserve safety by consistently prioritizing protocols over speed, even when production pressures mount (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Fostering a safety-first culture is crucial. Encourage crew members to speak up about safety concerns and ensure that their voices are heard. Safety should be prioritized over meeting deadlines or cost-saving measures. Leadership plays a key role in modeling this behavior and demonstrating that safety is nonnegotiable. Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) emphasize that leaders in high-reliability organizations sustain safety by modeling mindfulness, remaining alert to weak signals of failure, and reinforcing safety priorities during routine operations. Hopkins (2019) further demonstrates that organizational tolerance for risk flows directly from leadership; when leaders signal that delays are acceptable in the name of safety, crews recalibrate their expectations and behaviors accordingly.

Independent safety oversight can provide an additional layer of protection, with safety officers conducting impartial audits to ensure compliance with safety protocols. Research by Sneddon et al. (2013) shows that periodic, external evaluations prevent routine complacency from setting in, ensuring that crews remain accountable and hazards are not overlooked. After any incident that occurs, a thorough review should be conducted to understand what went wrong and how similar events can be prevented in the future.

In the film and television industry, where profit margins and production costs are often at the forefront, making the business case for mitigating complacency bias is essential. Investing in comprehensive safety measures and maintaining a vigilant approach to risk management can lead to significant long-term savings by preventing costly incidents and production delays. Adhering to safety protocols reduces the likelihood of work stoppages due to injuries or legal issues, which can disrupt schedules and inflate budgets. Moreover, a commitment to safety fosters a positive work environment, enhancing crew morale and productivity, which directly impacts the production efficiency. By addressing complacency, production companies can avoid high costs associated with medical claims, legal disputes and insurance premiums. Prioritizing safety not only protects the well-being of the crew but also supports the financial health of the production; proactive risk management is a prudent investment rather than a financial burden (Hopkins, 2019; Reason, 1990; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Engaging Specialized Trades

Reaching gaffers, grips and other specialized tradespeople who may be skeptical of

safety protocols require a strategic approach that emphasizes the practical benefits and intrinsic value of adhering to safety standards. Engaging these professionals by acknowledging their expertise and the demanding nature of their roles helps in framing safety discussions as enhancements to their existing skills rather than as criticism. Effective communication involves illustrating real-world examples where negligence led to serious consequences both on and off set. Sharing case studies or testimonials from industry peers who have faced serious repercussions can help underline the potential risks of complacency.

Incorporating hands-on safety training directly relevant to worker tasks such as rigging practices or electrical safety makes the training more applicable and less theoretical. Involving respected peers or mentors within their trade to lead safety initiatives can leverage peer influence, as professionals are often more receptive to advice from colleagues they respect. Highlighting the benefits of safety protocols in terms of job security, productivity and professional reputation can also be persuasive. Emphasize how adhering to safety standards not only prevents incidents but also contributes to smoother operations and can enhance their professional standing. Fostering a culture of open communication where safety concerns can be discussed without fear of reprimand creates an environment where crew members feel valued and are more likely to embrace safety practices as part of their professional responsibilities.

Conclusion

Tragic incidents such as those on the sets of *Rust*, *The Crow* and *Twilight Zone: The Movie* highlight the devastating consequences of complacency bias in film and television production. Through continuous training, strict adherence to safety protocols, fostering a safety-first culture and implementing independent safety oversight, the film and television industry can mitigate the risks associated with complacency bias and improve overall safety standards (Dekker, 2014; Reason, 1990; Sneddon et al., 2013; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Understanding how complacency develops and taking proactive steps to address it can help create safer environments for all crew members, ultimately ensuring that safety remains a fundamental aspect of production. **PSJ**

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