

COMPLACENCY KILLS

Five Leadership Disciplines That Keep Organizations Performing at Their Best

Complacency rarely announces itself. It shows up in familiar phrases: “We've always done it this way.” “That won't happen to us.” “The plan is good enough.” The danger isn't confidence. It's confidence without curiosity; the belief that yesterday's success guarantees tomorrow's results.

In fighter aviation and throughout the military, there's a saying: **“Complacency Kills.”** It's a warning born from experience. When we stop questioning assumptions, overlook details, or allow familiarity to replace preparation, we create the conditions for failure.

In business, the consequences may be less immediate, but they can be just as damaging: lost customers, safety incidents, declining performance, costly rework, and missed opportunities. The challenge for leaders is that complacency doesn't always look like laziness or a lack of effort. It often exists within experienced, successful teams that have become comfortable with how things have always been done.

So, how do we prevent it?

In fighter aviation, we rely on disciplined processes before, during, and after every mission. These same principles can help organizations recognize complacency, challenge assumptions, and build teams that consistently execute at a higher level.

1. Plan for Contingencies: Prepare for What Could Change

Most organizations develop plans around what they expect to happen. High-performing teams also consider what could go wrong. What assumptions must remain true? What resources are vulnerable? What might our competitors be doing? What early indicators would tell us the plan is no longer working?

Contingency planning isn't pessimism. It's preparation.

In fighter aviation, we identify potential threats, establish decision points, and develop alternative courses of action before leaving the ground. When conditions change, we want to respond deliberately rather than react in confusion.

Consider a sales representative visiting a long-standing customer. The relationship is strong, business has been consistent, and the rep assumes the next meeting will be business as usual. Unfortunately, a competitor has been asking better questions, uncovering changing customer needs, and developing a plan to win the account.

When the customer raises concerns and mentions the competitor, the rep is unprepared. Rather than addressing the objections, they rely on the strength of the relationship. A few weeks later, the account is lost.

The problem wasn't a lack of experience. It was the assumption that past success would be enough.

Complacency begins when we stop asking what might be different and rest on our laurels.

2. Red Team the Plan: Challenge Assumptions Before Reality Does

One of the most effective ways to combat complacency is to invite someone to challenge your plan before you execute it. In the military, we refer to this as *Red Teaming*.

Bring in people who understand the objective but weren't directly involved in developing the plan. Their responsibility is to identify weaknesses, challenge assumptions, and uncover potential problems that the planning team may have overlooked.

Ask them to examine priorities, timelines, resources, customer impacts, and potential failure points. The goal isn't to criticize the people who developed the plan. It's to make the plan better. This requires something equally important: leaders who welcome constructive disagreement.

If employees believe questioning a decision will be viewed as disloyalty or negativity, the most important risks may never surface.

If you don't challenge your plan, your customers, competitors, or circumstances eventually will.

3. Brief the Team: Alignment Before Execution

One of the most common leadership mistakes happens between planning and execution.

A team develops a thoughtful plan, leadership approves it, and everyone rushes to get started. A few weeks later, people disagree about priorities, responsibilities, and what success actually looks like. Confusion creates frustration. Frustration leads to workarounds. Eventually, those workarounds become the accepted standard.

Complacency has found an opening.

In fighter aviation, we don't assume that because a plan exists, everyone understands it. We brief the mission. A good mission brief establishes five things:

- **Purpose:** Why are we doing this?
- **Objective:** What specific outcome are we trying to achieve?
- **Obstacles and resources:** What could prevent success, and what do we have available?
- **Execution:** Who is responsible for what, and by when?
- **Contingencies:** What will we do if conditions change?

A brief isn't another hour-long meeting. It's a focused conversation that creates shared understanding, establishes expectations, and ensures everyone knows their role.

On my final military flight, a student flying another aircraft on my wing experienced a loss of cabin pressurization at 26,000 feet. We had prepared for emergencies and briefed how we would respond. We worked through the situation and brought both aircraft home safely.

During the debrief, the student said, “Sir, that went exactly how we briefed it.”

My response was simple: “That's why we brief.”

A plan sitting in a document doesn't drive performance. A team that understands and owns the plan does.

4. Establish an Execution Rhythm: Recognize Problems Before They Grow

Even the best plan and mission brief can lose momentum once execution begins. Priorities shift. Obstacles appear. Small deviations become normal.

During an air-to-air intercept, fighter pilots operate against a timeline with predetermined decision points. At each point, we assess our position: Are we ahead, behind, or on time? Are we achieving the conditions required to continue, or do we need to adjust? The important distinction is that these checkpoints are established before execution.

Businesses need the same discipline.

An execution rhythm is a predictable cadence of short, focused check-ins where teams compare actual progress against the plan, identify obstacles, clarify accountability, and make timely decisions.

I once worked with a global technology services team whose members were spread from India to California. Over a nine-week initiative, we established weekly execution reviews lasting less than 30 minutes. Leaders reviewed prior commitments, upcoming actions, emerging threats, resource needs, and decisions requiring guidance.

The teams completed their missions on time or ahead of schedule.

I've also witnessed the opposite.

A construction company was building a new manufacturing facility to replace an existing operational factory. The old facility was contractually scheduled to shut down on May 1, making the completion date critical.

Supply chain disruptions, unrealistic contractor commitments, and poor coordination caused delays to compound. With no disciplined execution rhythm, communication consisted largely of disconnected emails and one-on-one conversations.

There were few established checkpoints, unclear accountability, and no predetermined corrective actions when milestones were missed. The project fell significantly behind schedule, damaging customer trust and exposing the company to substantial daily liquidated damages.

The difference between these organizations wasn't the complexity of their projects. It was the discipline to monitor execution, recognize deviations, and take corrective action. A disciplined execution rhythm closes that gap.

Complacency grows in the gap between what leaders assume is happening and what is actually happening.

5. Debrief: Make Continuous Improvement a Standard

The most dangerous words after a successful project may be, “Great job. Let's do it again.” Success deserves recognition, but it also deserves examination. A good outcome can hide poor decisions, unnecessary risks, and processes that worked only because someone got lucky.

That's why fighter pilots debrief after every mission; not just when something goes wrong. A debrief is a **teaching and learning opportunity**. Its purpose is to understand what happened, why it happened, what worked, and what should change.

It is not a blame session.

An effective debrief encourages people to set aside names, titles, and positions. Observations should be evaluated on their merit, not on the seniority of the person offering them.

During a series of business debriefs, a sales executive asked his team two powerful questions: “What can I do better as your leader?” And, “What did you learn that we can pass to the other regions?”

That's the mindset of a leader building a learning organization.

Debriefs should happen after major projects, customer wins and losses, operational milestones, and significant safety events. Some may require an hour. Others take 10-minutes. The important thing is that they happen consistently and result in meaningful improvements.

When people know their observations will be heard, they pay closer attention during execution. They identify issues earlier, raise concerns sooner, and look for better ways to work.

Together, these behaviors create a culture of continuous improvement where complacency struggles to take hold.

The Forge Connection: Turn Disciplines Into Standards

The five disciplines discussed here are not complicated. In fact, most leaders already understand their value. The challenge is consistently putting them into practice. Organizations often rely on individual leaders to remember to ask the right questions, conduct the right meetings, or follow up on commitments.

But what happens when that leader leaves, gets promoted, or becomes overwhelmed?

In The Forge Leadership System, leadership development isn't an event. It's about establishing repeatable behaviors, clear standards, and accountability that become part of how teams operate. Contingency planning becomes an expectation. Challenging assumptions becomes acceptable. Mission briefs create alignment. Execution reviews establish accountability. Debriefs turn lessons into improved processes.

Each discipline reinforces the others. Together, they create a repeatable approach to leadership and execution that doesn't depend on one exceptional individual.

Conclusion: Complacency Is a Leadership Challenge

Complacency doesn't always begin with a major mistake. More often, it develops through small assumptions, skipped conversations, missed warning signs, and the gradual acceptance of lower standards.

The organizations that consistently perform at a high level aren't necessarily the ones with the most talented people or the most sophisticated plans. They're the ones that develop the discipline to prepare, challenge, align, monitor, and improve.

The question for leaders isn't whether complacency exists somewhere in their organization. It's whether they have established the behaviors and standards necessary to recognize it and prevent it from becoming part of their culture.

Experience should make us better prepared, not less prepared and high performance should never depend on yesterday's success.

At SL Partners, we help organizations build the leadership standards, accountability, and execution discipline necessary to sustain high performance through The Forge Leadership System.

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