The Desert Ride and the Danger of Knowing Better: Risk Normalization and Training the Tenured Worker



The Ride into the Dark

The road between Glendale and Kingman, Arizona, cuts through some of the most breathtaking desert landscape in North America.
But that night, I couldn't see any of it.

It started innocently enough. I'd just wrapped up a presentation at the Safety Leadership Conference — a long day, a good day. I was tired but restless, buzzing from the conversations and the energy of people who care deeply about keeping others safe. I had rented a Triumph Bonneville T120 — a perfect blend of power and grace — and I was itching to ride.

The plan had been simple: get a head start toward the Grand Canyon. I'd make it to Kingman before midnight, grab a cheap motel, and head north at sunrise.
I figured I'd beat the morning heat and check a lifelong goal off the list — reaching the Canyon by bike.

The sun had already started dipping behind the desert ridges as I rolled out of Glendale. I should have stopped. Anyone who's ridden a motorcycle long enough knows that riding at night in unfamiliar territory is asking for trouble. But I'd ridden in worse, I told myself. I knew the risks. I could handle it.

That's the thought that gets us every time.

Within an hour, the light was gone. The desert swallowed the last of the sun, and I found myself surrounded by an ocean of black. The air, which had been comfortably warm when I left, dropped fast. It's the kind of cold that doesn't hit all at once — it creeps in, seeping through your jacket, numbing your fingers one joint at a time. The Triumph's engine hummed beneath me, steady and strong, but even that warmth couldn't fight the chill clawing up my arms.

I was alone. Really alone.

No lights behind me. No gas stations ahead. The occasional glow of an 18-wheeler approaching from the opposite direction was the only thing that broke the darkness — and when it did, the flood of blinding headlights erased the road

entirely.

Each time a semi passed, the wind tore at me, shaking the bike and rattling the bags I'd tied down to the seat. The Bonneville's headlight — usually my lifeline — suddenly felt small, weak, swallowed by the desert. My eyes strained to see the lines on the asphalt, the subtle dips that hinted at uneven pavement or the shimmer of sand across the road. Every mile felt like a gamble.

It was so dark that I couldn't even tell when I was climbing. Later I'd realize that somewhere in that stretch, I crested a mountain. I never saw it. Just a gradual incline into black, no horizon, no point of reference — only instinct and faith that the road would keep curving where the map said it would.

The temperature dropped again. My hands cramped around the handlebars until my knuckles ached. My shoulders were locked tight, frozen in that defensive posture that every rider knows — the kind that sets in when your adrenaline won't let you relax because you know, deep down, one mistake could end it.

There was fear, but it was quiet. The kind that doesn't shout. It whispers. It asks: *What are you doing out here?*

But I pressed on. Because that's what experience tells you to do — you keep going. You think, "I've done this before. I'll be fine." You think you've got this handled.

And that's the problem.

The Moment of Reflection

I made it to Kingman sometime after 10 p.m. I don't even remember pulling into town — only that the glow of streetlights felt surreal after hours of black.
When I finally parked, I sat there for a while, the engine ticking in the cold, my hands still clamped around the grips.

It took several minutes before I could even straighten my fingers. My shoulders were so tight that I could feel the pulse of blood pushing back into the muscles. I was exhausted, mentally and physically.

I'd made it. But I also knew — really knew — that I'd made a huge mistake.

And sitting there in that parking lot, still shaking from the cold, it hit me: this is exactly how risk normalization feels. You don't see it coming. It creeps in when you stop respecting the danger. You start believing that your experience exempts you from risk.

It's not arrogance. It's human nature.

Risk Normalization: When Experience Becomes the Hazard

Risk normalization is one of the most dangerous forces in workplace safety. It's the process by which repeated exposure to risk without negative outcomes leads people to underestimate that risk over time.

In plain language: you get away with something enough times, and your brain starts to believe it's safe.

Every industry has its version of this. The warehouse worker who lifts without asking for help because "I've done this for 20 years." The electrician who skips the test

light because “I can tell when a line’s hot.” The construction veteran who doesn’t tie off for a quick job.

They’re not being reckless. They’re being human.
They’ve been there before. They’ve done the job safely a hundred times. The risk feels theoretical — until it isn’t.

Researchers have studied this for decades. In 1998, psychologist Dr. Judith Komaki found that experienced workers are more likely than new employees to take shortcuts — not because they don’t care, but because they believe they can manage risk better. Another study published in *Safety Science* found that tenured employees in high-risk jobs are twice as likely to engage in unsafe acts compared to new hires. The researchers called it “the paradox of expertise.”

In other words, what makes you good at your job can also make you vulnerable to complacency.

The Blind Ride We All Take

That night in the desert, I was living that paradox.

I had convinced myself I could handle it — the dark, the trucks, the cold. I’d normalized the risk because I’d survived similar situations before.

But survival isn’t the same as safety.

It’s the same logic we see in workplaces all the time.

If nothing bad happens, we subconsciously treat that as validation that our behavior is fine.
It’s why near-misses are so valuable — and so underreported.

According to your recent survey, safety professionals reported a median ratio of about 50 near misses for every 1 incident. That means 50 warnings for every actual event. Fifty times the system said, “You’re close to the edge.”

But we rarely hear about those 50. We celebrate the absence of incidents as success, when in reality it’s often a symptom of luck — or silence.

That’s what riding blind in the desert felt like. Every passing truck was a near miss. Every gust of wind that didn’t push me off the road was another silent statistic in a string of “nothing happened.”

And I was mistaking “nothing happened” for “I’m fine.”

When Knowledge Becomes Dangerous

Here’s the hardest part: the more we know, the harder it becomes to recognize when we’re slipping. Knowledge gives confidence, but confidence can dull perception.

New employees live in a state of heightened awareness. Everything is new. They’re watching, asking, double-checking. Tenured employees, on the other hand, operate from instinct — and that’s not always bad. Experience allows efficiency and flow. But it also creates blind spots.

It’s like riding with high beams in the fog. The more light you shine, the less you actually see.

Your own experience blinds you to the nuances, the things you used to notice.

That’s why training tenured employees is one of the toughest challenges in occupational safety. You’re not teaching them something new — you’re helping them *unlearn* what they think they already know.

Retraining the Experienced Mind

Traditional retraining doesn’t work because it focuses on repetition, not reflection. A veteran worker sitting in a refresher course about ladder safety isn’t going to have an epiphany. They’re going to tune out because they already know it all.

What breaks through isn’t repetition — it’s emotion, story, and ownership.

1. **Make It Personal**

People remember stories, not slides. In a 2018 *Safety Science* study, hazard recall improved by 55% when stories were used in training instead of pure instruction.

When I share my desert ride story in workshops, I can see the moment it clicks for people. Everyone has their version of that dark road — the time they ignored a gut feeling, took a shortcut, or said, “It’ll be fine.” Stories bring risk back to life.

2. **Use Peer Learning**

NIOSH studies have shown that pairing new employees with seasoned mentors can cut early-stage incidents in half. But what’s equally important is the reverse — letting younger workers influence their mentors. Fresh eyes see what experience overlooks.

When you create cross-generational mentorship — the veteran teaching skill, the newcomer reminding awareness — both sides grow safer.

3. **Encourage Reflection**

One of the simplest, most effective ways to reset perception is to ask:
“What are we doing today that’s quietly getting riskier over time?”

At Toyota, displaying live injury data on the production floor reduced incidents by 38% in a year — not because of punishment, but because visibility rekindled awareness. Reflection doesn’t require blame; it requires honesty.

4. **Turn Near Misses into Lessons**

Every near miss is a story waiting to be told.
The more we talk about them, the more we normalize prevention instead of accidents. Make near-miss reporting part of the culture — not as a disciplinary tool, but as a shared language of learning.

The Physiology of Complacency

There’s also a biological layer to all this.
Neuroscientists have shown that the human brain constantly adapts to stress. When exposed to the same hazard repeatedly without negative outcome, the brain’s amygdala — the part that triggers fear — becomes desensitized. In essence, your body stops reacting to the risk.

It’s the same mechanism that allows firefighters to walk into burning buildings or soldiers to operate under gunfire. But in everyday work, this adaptation becomes

dangerous because the risk response is muted.

That’s why the absence of fear isn’t a sign of control. It’s a warning sign.

The night I rode through the desert, my fear came back — full force. It reminded me of what complacency had taken away: respect for risk.

The Ride Back

A few days later, I rode that same stretch of road again — this time at dawn.

The sky was just starting to lighten when I left Kingman. The air was cool, but not cold. The Bonneville’s engine felt alive, its hum deep and steady beneath me. As the sun rose, the desert transformed — from shadow to gold, from void to color.

And then I saw what I’d missed.

The mountains I hadn’t known I’d climbed. The massive red rock formations carved by time. The long, sweeping valleys that stretched to the horizon.
It was beautiful — and humbling.

I realized that I hadn’t just missed the danger that night; I’d missed the experience. The very reason I’d set out to ride in the first place.

That’s what risk normalization does. It doesn’t just increase the chance of harm — it dulls our awareness of what’s around us. We lose not just safety, but presence.

How to Reignite Awareness in Tenured Employees

The key isn’t fear — it’s *attention.* We can’t scare people into safety. But we can reawaken curiosity, ownership, and pride in doing the job right.

Here’s what works:

1. **Shift from Rules to Purpose**

Veteran workers don’t need another rule — they need a reminder of *why* the rules exist.
Tie every policy to a story, a name, a lesson learned. When people feel purpose, compliance follows naturally.

2. **Create “What If” Conversations**

Instead of lecturing about what went wrong, ask, “What could go wrong?”
This subtle change transforms training from passive listening to active problem-solving.
It also reveals assumptions — the ones that have quietly settled into your culture.

3. **Celebrate Reporting**

In safety culture research, one of the strongest predictors of success is psychological safety — the belief that speaking up won’t lead to punishment. Reward near-miss reporting, questions, and creative fixes. The goal isn’t to eliminate reports; it’s to increase them until awareness becomes a habit.

4. **Use Technology to Reinforce, Not Replace**

Online and mobile platforms have made it possible to keep safety front of mind every day.
Micro-lessons, hazard-spotting challenges, and short refresher videos build consistency without fatigue.
A NIOSH review in 2022 found that mobile-based safety learning improved retention by 50% compared to annual training alone.

The key is to use technology as a *reminder*, not a substitute for human connection.

The Leadership Responsibility

Leaders carry the most influence in fighting complacency.

A study from Griffith University showed that employees mimic 67% of their supervisor's safety behaviors within six months.

If leaders rush through safety meetings, workers will, too. If leaders take shortcuts, so will their teams.

But when leaders show humility — admitting their own blind spots, sharing stories of near misses, listening instead of dictating — they give everyone else permission to stay human, curious, and aware.

Safety leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about asking the right questions — over and over.

The Lesson from the Desert

That ride taught me more about safety than any conference ever could.

It reminded me that risk doesn't care how long you've been doing something.
It doesn't care about your credentials, your confidence, or your track record. Risk only cares about one thing — opportunity.
And when you stop paying attention, you give it one.

Experience is invaluable, but it's not invincible.
It has to be renewed — through reflection, through training, through honest conversations about what we've started to take for granted.

The truth is, risk normalization doesn't happen because we stop caring. It happens because we stop noticing.
And the longer we go without consequence, the quieter that inner voice becomes.

That night, mine had gone nearly silent.
But on the ride back, watching the sunrise over the desert, it spoke up again.

It said, *You got lucky. Remember this.*

And I did.

The Road Forward

In every company, there are thousands of versions of that dark desert highway.
They exist in quiet habits, in old routines, in the comfortable familiarity of people who've been doing the job for years.
And every one of those roads holds a risk waiting to be rediscovered.

The goal isn’t to shame tenured workers or preach perfection. It’s to remind them — and ourselves — that expertise doesn’t replace awareness. It must be partnered with humility.

Because the moment we think, *“I’ve got this handled,”* is the moment we stop looking far enough down the road. And that’s when the curve we didn’t see — the one we thought we knew — can catch us off guard.

The ride back from Kingman taught me something else, too: awareness doesn’t just keep you safe. It keeps you present. It lets you see the mountain you’re climbing, the landscape you’re moving through, the beauty that’s lost when you let familiarity take over.

That’s what safety training is really about. Not rules. Not checkboxes.
Awareness. Reflection. Renewal.

And maybe, every once in a while, a story that reminds us what the dark feels like — and why we should always wait for the morning.