



Developing Culture to Build Adaptive and Reliable Workgroups in the Rail Industry

Filip Coumans
Senior Consultant
DEKRA Insight

SUMMARY

In a fast-paced and demanding industry, rail organizations are challenged to provide on-time service while they simultaneously protect the health and welfare of employees and customers alike. To achieve these objectives, rail leaders can develop an organizational culture that builds adaptive and reliable workgroups that effectively manage safety performance across multiple, complex situations. This means engaging employees in safety critical activities across worksites, stations, and ever-changing environments. This paper focuses on the concrete ways organizations can build a robust safety culture that engages dispersed workgroups, controls exposures, and cultivates individual fluency for identifying and adapting to unforeseen risks. It covers the basic constituent parts of safety improvement, the role leadership plays in driving culture change, how to create value for safety in the organization, the best safety leadership practices, and the nine culture characteristics predictive of safety outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Rail companies face a flurry of challenges to creating consistently high levels of safety performance. Whether in the yard or on the tracks, rail employees work in dynamic and often uncertain environments, with an unpredictable public, and in harsh weather. Work with machines and material that could potentially destroy life contribute to the risk. Added to all this is the difficulty with establishing coherent safety leadership and operational reliability across dispersed workgroups. Through our research and experience, we have identified the ways leaders can develop a culture that builds adaptive and reliable workgroups in the rail industry.

Ensuring that people are aware of risks and know how to handle changes in exposure—even in the field and in inclement conditions—requires a robust culture that constantly radiates a safety-first mentality. Cultures that are committed to safety empower employees to use their own initiative to navigate situations that lack clearly defined rules and procedures. Strong safety cultures are adaptive, and they infuse employees with safety knowledge and skills to do the right thing even in the absence of supervision.

LEVERAGING EXISTING SYSTEMS AND PROCEDURES

Rail industry operators can no longer just be good at what they do; they must be flawless in their execution—the safety of riders, employees, and the business depend on it. To meet the rising expectations and demands placed on operators, most organizations have layers of processes designed to meet safety goals. While these processes are a vital part of safety, they can become unwieldy and counterproductive. In addition to these challenges,



companies are demanding more out of each worker than ever before, with less supervision. Downsizing, mergers, buyouts, and the ever-present pressure to be on time all contribute to increasing complexity in the system, creating an environment that is less stable and certain.

Clearly adding layers of additional programs to an already overtaxed and dispersed workforce is not only undesirable and costly but can actually be detrimental to safety, environmental, and cost performance. The next level of safety reliability requires a strategic approach that leverages existing systems and incorporates a comprehensive solution that includes the behaviors at the working interface, safety-enabling systems, organizational sustaining systems, organizational culture, and leadership (Figure 1). [1]

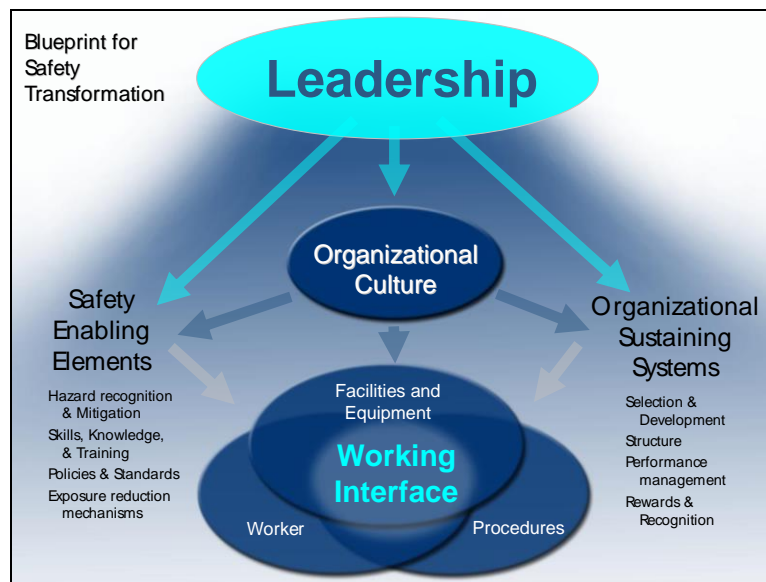


Figure 1. The Blueprint for Safety Transformation.

UNDERSTANDING THE SAFETY MECHANISM

In order to leverage existing systems, it is helpful to understand how safety outcomes are created. The primary activity of safety initiatives, whether at the site or corporate level, is to reduce the level of exposure that occurs in the workplace. All safety activities, mechanisms, programs, and measures are inherently linked to this fundamental task. Creating and maintaining a culture of safety and reliability is influenced by the following factors:

The working interface – The configuration of equipment, facilities, systems, and behaviors that defines the interaction of the worker with the technology. This configuration is where hazards exist and safety excellence is directly related to how effective the organization is at controlling exposure here.

Safety enabling systems – The basic systems or programs that ensure adequate safety functioning. The safety leader needs to know what these systems are, how they are audited, and how effective they are. More importantly, leaders need to see that enabling systems are part of a larger whole and not rely on them solely for safety improvement.



Organizational sustaining systems – Those processes that sustain enabling systems and assure their effectiveness. They include mechanisms such as selection and development, performance management, organizational structure, employee engagement, and other management systems. Effective leaders understand the relationship between the quality of their sustaining systems, their safety systems, and what occurs in the working interface. For instance, is the structure of the organization such that safety is given adequate emphasis? Does the performance management system meaningfully address safety leadership issues (not just through lagging indicators)?

Organizational culture – The driving values of the organization, the “unwritten rules” of the company. Unlike climate, which refers to prevailing influences on a particular area of functioning and is quick to change, culture is deeply embedded and longer lasting. Effective leaders look realistically at culture and identify issues that could undermine safety objectives. Cultural attributes such as low trust, poor communication, or mixed management credibility can neutralize even the best enabling and sustaining systems.

Leadership – Leadership drives both the culture of an organization as well as the functioning of enabling and sustaining systems. In this configuration, leadership refers to seeing the right things to do to reach objectives and motivating the teams to accomplish them effectively. Safety leadership is exercised by decision making which is related to the beliefs of the leader and demonstrated by his or her behavior.

ALIGNING CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP

Creating a culture of safety and reliability begins with an organization’s leaders. When supervisors and managers take ownership of safety activities, engagement, and outcomes of the organization, safety becomes proactive, employee driven, and a dynamic part of the fabric of the organization. [3]

In most organizations, supervisors and managers are a key influence on organizational effectiveness and the natural proxy for senior leaders in day-to-day activities. These leaders provide the first line of defense in managing safety issues, communicating organizational priorities and values, and building relationships with individual team members. Leaders are an essential force in creating a culture where safety is a driving value.

While many supervisors and managers declare their intention to advance a culture in which injuries are not acceptable, it is their actions that determine whether people in the organization take their words to heart. That is why it is important for leaders to recognize the specific ways they are currently influencing safety functioning through their decisions and interactions. Chief among these are how they respond to exposure data, how they react when an incident happens, and how they oversee the incident report process. For example:

- When leaders receive exposure data, do they acknowledge and thank those who flag exposures? Do they develop action plans based on the exposure’s potential?
- When an incident happens, do leaders demonstrate a personal interest in the wellbeing of the employee? Do they ensure the area is secure?
- When an incident report is in progress, do they ensure that both immediate and root causes are identified? Do they check that their defined action plan adequately addresses all causes?
- Finally, does their plan include “check backs” to confirm that exposure has been reduced and the possibility of recurrence prevented?

Leaders show they have taken ownership of safety through their words and actions. Knowing how many people in their group have been injured, the direction safety performance is moving, trends in the exposure data, where



critical safety action items stand, and being prepared with a safety improvement plan are all examples that demonstrate ownership.

True ownership is also characterized by optimism. Strong leaders avoid statements that suggest that safety outcomes are outside of their control. Instead, they express an understanding of the challenges and formulate plans to remedy them. Finally, ownership requires that the leader understand the interconnection of culture, leadership, and systems. This means that the leader does not blame injured workers, but is constantly looking for ways to ensure their safety.

CREATING A VALUE FOR SAFETY

Within most rail organizations there are multiple cultures. This is in large part due to the dispersed nature of the work being done, the separation between supervisors and workgroups, and the fact that rail employees can go long periods of time without contact with management. Compounding these challenges is the reality that leaders have limited control over the safety practices of workers operating in remote locations. Dispersed workforces mean there is considerably less opportunity for leaders to interact with individuals, communicate relevant safety concerns, and establish trust and rapport—the foundation for true safety commitment. Aligning far-flung people on expectations, behaviors, and procedures requires organizations to establish concern for employees, and assure first-line leaders treat people with dignity and respect and follow through on commitments. These things establish a good relationship with employees and foster a strong sense of reciprocity. When employees feel connected to the company, engagement flourishes.

In the process of driving culture change, individual leaders must stop and consider how their actions or decisions will impact others and, as importantly, what change they would like to see in others as a result. Culture changes one leadership behavior at a time, but individual actions aren't enough. If leadership activity is not coupled with a change in the systems that tell people in the organization what is really valued, then a short-term climate change will result—but it will not ultimately lead to culture change. The more often employees experience climate change without it sustaining, the less likely they are to buy in to and support the next change. To ensure that culture change sticks, there are a few areas the rail leaders can focus on to build value for safety within their organization. Value for safety is created when we make safety a leading consideration in:

- Selection process for hiring and promotions;
- The focus of training and development;
- How raises and bonuses are administered; and
- Organizational structure (reporting relationships and reporting ratios). [1,4]

Culture change in an organization can only be accomplished by leadership. Employees can't really change the culture because they are unable to transform the systems that continue to reinforce the old culture and norms. Employees can cause a shift in climate, but ultimately culture change is decided by leadership. The crucial first step for a leader is to understand that they own the culture—no matter how new they are to the situation or how poorly they view the cultural norms. Leaders must understand that it is their job to transform the culture so the attributes they desire become reality.

Here are some ways rail leaders can build core safety values into their organization:

Be credible – Employee engagement is more likely when workers believe that what management says is consistent with what management does. Absence of follow-up leaves dispersed workers feeling isolated and unsure of their importance. Leader behaviors that influence perceptions of trustworthiness include consistency, integrity (telling the truth, keeping promises), sharing control in decision-making, and through delegation, communication, and



benevolence (demonstration of concern).

Collaborate and empower – People are more committed to desired safety procedures and behaviors when they feel they have a say in what they do. This is especially true with frontline workers who know better than anyone the risks they face. Involve employees in the decision-making process and include their input when setting goals. Empower them to contribute ideas and solutions to exposure mitigation efforts. Encourage discretionary effort by giving people autonomy to make daily decisions. Failing to listen to worker concerns can cause them to disengage, ignore essential rules and procedures, and put themselves and others in danger.

Build relationships between team members – Strong working relationships are based on mutual trust and respect. Leaders can model good relationship practices with active listening and treating people with dignity. Ensuring that employees understand safety is about protecting them from harm and not about punishment or blame encourages them to approach co-workers working at risk, speak openly about concerns, and share experiences that can improve behaviors and build teamwork. With workgroups in the rail industry, strong teamwork is particularly important. If leaders fail to model the right behaviors, these workgroups can fracture, leading to disorganization and inadequate safety practices.

Help people see the big picture – People are more committed to a project when they understand their role and how it is significant to the overall operation. Explain the ways each of your workgroups contribute to the organization's direction beyond their job description. Show appreciation for individual effort and link performance to macro outcomes. Communicate the company's strategy during safety briefings and in face-to-face interactions. Failing to connect individuals to the enterprise can make them feel isolated and uninspired to commit to the organization's goals.

Provide regular feedback – Feedback demonstrates support, reinforces values, and builds accountability. People who are well informed about their performance are better positioned to make decisions about how they behave. Feedback influences how workers see themselves, giving them the confidence to take on new challenges. Effective feedback is timely, explicit, and personal. Use descriptive language that avoids subjective interpretation and confusion. General statements such as "well done" or "great job" decrease the impact and credibility of feedback. You cannot develop your performance unless you know what specific aspects of your behavior should change or which you should maintain. Make feedback sincere. You have to mean what you say and you have to say it with care and respect. When feedback is viewed as insincere, it can decrease the credibility of the leader.

Leverage digital communications – The gulf in daily communication opportunities demands that leaders find progressive ways to stay in touch with teams across the distances common for rail operators. Connectivity is essential for building trust and engagement in the workforce. It is also needed for effective collaboration that can solve immediate and long-term exposure issues, tap latent talent, and unlock innovative safety solutions.

Empower workers to participate in safety – One way to help employees feel a sense of control over their own safety is by giving them a voice. Encouraging worker contribution during safety meetings, in exposure reduction, and with hazard awareness strengthens the change process, builds a healthy safety culture, and cultivates a strong sense of team. It also stimulates individual reflection about personal habits of working. It is also important to encourage employees to stop work when exposure changes or they identify risk to injury. This is especially important when riders are in the path of exposure. Stop work authority is typically a recognized right of workers, but leaders need to be sure that they aren't unintentionally undermining its exercise. If your organization employs stop work authority, it is important to examine the cultural norms (both spoken and unspoken) and implied messages that can undermine such a policy. Some of the contrary messages regarding stop-work authority that employees all too often hear or perceive are:



- **Stopping work = interrupting the schedule** – Being on time is critical whether you are transporting people or parcels. Anything interrupting the delivery schedule is viewed negatively. Leaders need to ensure that workers place safety ahead of the need to be on time. The focus on short-term goals at the expense of safety and sustainable operations excellence can lead to costs far greater than arriving late.
- **Stop work only if imminent harm is present** – This message implies that near-certainty of an accident or injury is the prerequisite for stopping work. Further, it increases the possibility of waiting too late to interrupt a sequence of events that can lead to injury.
- **If you stop the work, you had “better be right”**– As stated above, being on time is often the primary factor in decisions in the rail industry. If an employee disrupts the schedule for a false alarm the underlying message is “she stopped the work for no good reason.” This approach fails to support employees who try to assure safety. It is critical that employees not be punished for exercising stop work when they legitimately feared an accident or injury could occur. To place employees unnecessarily “alone on an island” when they assess risk is detrimental to desired outcomes.
- **Stopping too early is a “chicken little” mentality** – Here, leaders and workers foster a mindset that holds: “We could never get any work done if we stopped for every little thing that people think is at risk.” In dispersed workforces, like those found in the rail industry, subcultures often form where bravado is implicitly encouraged, which too often fosters an at-risk environment.
- **Stop work = more work** – For many employees, stopping work means they will have to “make up” for perceived lost time, address the exposure themselves, and generally cut into the precious commodity of time of which they already have too little. [3]

Empowering rail employees to do the right thing means leaders need to ensure that higher-order systems and processes don't punish people for putting safety first. Cultures that maintain a persistent focus on managing exposure share common characteristics with respect to how they approach exposures. These cultures tend to respect and acknowledge current hazards, recognize when exposure changes, respond in a consistent and safety-focused manner, and remove barriers (personal, equipment, conditions) to hazard recognition and safe work. These characteristics can be developed to cultivate fluency for identifying and adapting to unforeseen risks. Let's look at each individually:

Respect and acknowledge hazards – It is critical that people acknowledge risks and respect the hazards they work with. Workers who ignore potential dangers because they believe nothing will happen to them or who take shortcuts to get the job done faster leave themselves susceptible to injuries. Rail leaders should ensure that employees are knowledgeable of workplace risks and that they treat them with the highest degree of caution at all times.

Recognize when exposure changes – Most industries have systematic rules and procedures designed to control behavior and keep people and equipment safe. Rail workers that successfully follows the rules, however, may not necessarily be effective at recognizing changes in exposure. Being good at exposure reduction takes something more than rules alone can accomplish. It requires vigilance on the part of everyone on the shop floor and a culture that supports a free exchange of ideas. There are key areas vigilant employees pay attention to with regard to recognizing changes in exposure, a few examples include: equipment (e.g., engines or equipment running louder than usual, temperature rising too quickly, plugged equipment), conditions (e.g., new water/liquid in work areas, daylight to darkness, emergency), and personnel (e.g., a new employee, experienced employee is called away to do another job).

Respond to exposures – A common saying is “red flags are our friends.” In safety, red flags are the things that signal workers that there is a change in exposure or an increase in risk. When exposure changes, employees



should pause the job or take a time-out to evaluate changing conditions, discuss concerns with fellow workers and supervisors, and develop a plan to mitigate potential risks. Supervisors support this practice by providing positive feedback to the employees for pausing the work, having discussions with workers, listening to their concerns, and being open to the solutions they suggest.

Remove barriers – Removing barriers is about addressing changes in equipment, conditions, and personnel. Supervisors use the hierarchy of controls to guide the effective removal of barriers. This could include elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls, and, the last line of defense, personal protective equipment. In a strong safety culture, rail workers know what to do to remove barriers, and they never feel hesitant to take the necessary steps to do so because of production schedules or time constraints.

LEADERSHIP STYLE AND PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT A STRONG SAFETY CULTURE

Safety starts with leadership. Leaders define the company's vision for safety and articulate the steps every employee must take to get there. Their dedication to safety motivates people and inspires them to look out for co-workers and fully engage in the safety process, cultivating a culture committed to keeping everyone safe, all the time. For leaders in the rail industry the best way to build a strong safety culture and invite employee commitment is by practicing a transformational leadership style. The transformational style consists of four dimensions that describe how a leader motivates and inspires people to go above and beyond the letter of their jobs. How well the leader integrates these dimensions into his daily activities and practices has a direct bearing on the quality of the organization's safety culture.

The four dimensions of the transformational leadership style [2] are:

- **Influence**—The leader builds a sense of mission-beyond-self-interest and a commitment to the safety effort. He engenders confidence, respect, and trust, considers the ethical consequences of his decisions, appeals to the core values and beliefs of others, and instills pride.
- **Engage**—The leader helps people commit to safety goals. She coaches, mentors, provides feedback and personal attention as needed, and links the individual's needs to the organization's mission.
- **Inspire**—The leader sets high standards and communicates about objectives enthusiastically. He articulates a compelling vision for safety and displays confidence about achieving that vision.
- **Challenge**—The leader provides employees with a flow of challenging ideas aimed at stimulating them to rethink old ways of doing things. He breaks dysfunctional paradigms and promotes rationality and careful problem solving.

Poor leadership style can erode the safety effort. It can deter people from committing to safety by sending them the message that their wellbeing isn't important to the leader or is secondary to other concerns (see above discussion on creating value for safety).

Fortunately, the transformational leadership style is something anyone can learn. Transformational style is a matter of how the leader approaches opportunities that impact culture change. If a rail leader wants to become a better transformational leader, it is important that he clearly understands his natural inclinations and learns to integrate them into his daily work of influencing, engaging, inspiring, and challenging people.

In addition to the discussion above on creating value for safety in the organization, there are several leadership practices that invite employee commitment to safety and develop an adaptive and reliable culture. Through our work with safety leaders across the world, we have identified practices that all effective safety leaders do. These leadership best practices instill in the organization's culture a spirit of doing the right things for the right reasons in the right way. Below are the seven best practices for excellence in safety leadership. [1]



Vision – Many leaders either lack vision or have it but find it difficult to articulate. Others seem to be natural visionaries and take this ability for granted. A great process safety leader holds a clear picture of the future state of safety in her organization and articulates that picture in a compelling way. She can “see” in some detail the desired future state and communicate this state to others. How does the desired future state differ from the way things are today? What kinds of things will people do and say that they don’t now? How will decisions be made differently, and what assumptions underlie these decisions? If by some miracle we could instantly change the organization’s culture today, how would tomorrow be different?

A leader with vision:

- Behaves in a way that communicates high personal standards for safety;
- Helps others question and rethink their assumptions about safety;
- Communicates the organizational vision through word and action;
- Demonstrates a willingness to consider and accept new ideas;
- Helps people understand how their actions affect people’s safety and impact the organization’s culture;
- Challenges and inspires people around the safety vision; and
- Describes a compelling picture of what the future could be.

Credibility – Great process safety leaders enjoy high credibility with direct reports, team members, workers, and with the larger organization. Expert knowledge and skill, though important, do not ensure a leader’s credibility. People have to trust the leader. They have to have faith that he will follow through on promises and will tell the truth, especially when it is unpopular or difficult to say. The credible leader is perceived to be free of personal agendas. Most important, the leader’s actions and words are seen as consistent. Such a leader is transparent with his decisions and plans for the organization.

A leader with high credibility:

- Demonstrates personal concern for everyone in the organization;
- Acknowledges his own limitations and errors
- Is believable, transparent, and trustworthy;
- Speaks inconvenient truths about safety; and
- Follows through on her commitments.

Action orientation – Great process safety leaders eagerly take action on behalf of safety issues and actively seek opportunities to do so. This propensity reinforces credibility and tends to flow naturally from it. Safety issues arise and the leader makes decisions: shut down the process or continue with it, do the maintenance task now or later, spend the resources necessary to address the hazard at its source or do something temporary to mitigate the problem. Action orientation means that the leader is persistent and innovative and feels a sense of urgency about safety.

An action-oriented safety leader:

- Addresses issues proactively;
- Seeks opportunities to make safety improvements;
- Makes tough decisions with regard to safety;
- Feels a sense of personal urgency about safety; and
- Is energetic about achieving excellence in safety.



Collaboration – Collaboration means working together, much like the way scientists and academics cooperate in intellectual pursuits. Collaboration also means soliciting and taking into account the views of others before making decisions. Collaboration is critical to effective process safety leadership because safety success requires the willing involvement of people throughout the organization.

Creating a culture that supports safety requires that every employee understand and embody the core concepts and related behaviors that constitute safety excellence. Participation and collaboration engender engagement; unilateral decision making shuts it down. To achieve meaningful engagement in safety the people involved in the process must feel they are important to its success.

A safety leader who collaborates well:

- Inspires the willing involvement of others;
- Engages others in safety decision making;
- Works cooperatively with others to achieve safety goals; and
- Solicits the views of others before making decisions.

Communication – Leaders who foster a culture of open communication enjoy the benefits of an informed workforce, including a stream of more reliable information that improves decision making. Increased communication supports cultural alignment and error-free productivity. Quality communication produces safety competence because it clearly details what the safety issues are, how they are being addressed, and the role each employee plays in mitigating risks and removing hazards.

A safety leader with good communication skills:

- Supports the top-to-bottom transparency of safety concerns and outcomes;
- Creates an atmosphere in which safety communication is expected and reinforced; and
- Shares safety-relevant information in a timely manner.

Recognition and feedback – The core principle behind the best practice called recognition and feedback is that performance improves when leadership notices positive change and acknowledges it. The acknowledgment doesn't need to be formal or financial, but it should be consistent and genuine, especially when new desired behaviors begin to emerge. Desired behaviors require reinforcement in order for them to become an established part of the culture.

The great process safety leader is tuned into the behaviors of employees, sets the expectation that safety-critical practices will be followed, monitors safety behaviors regularly, and provides immediate and constructive feedback. There is a time and place for negative feedback, but in the great majority of cases positive feedback is a better way to sustain desired behaviors.

A process safety leader skilled in the use of recognition and feedback:

- Notices and acknowledges positive changes in safety activity levels and hazard mitigation efforts;
- Gives added organizational visibility to internal best practices in safety;
- Provides consistent, accurate, and timely safety recognition; and
- Provides positive coaching and guidance as needed.

Accountability – In successful organizations accountability means ongoing evaluation of performance relative to an established objective, target, or standard and providing feedback and other consequences based on that



performance. Accountability includes objective evaluation of performance designed to help employees succeed. Accountability should focus on setting clear expectations and consequences regarding exposure-mitigation practices and upstream activities that produce safety outcomes.

Leaders who integrate the practice of accountability with the other leadership best practices are more likely to have a workforce that perceives the organization's decisions as transparent and fair. Employees who feel respected by management will be more engaged in building a lasting culture of safety excellence.

A safety leader who is skilled in accountability:

- Employs accountability in the context of the other six leadership best practices;
- Creates a company-wide attitude of personal responsibility for safety; and
- Bases accountability on exposure-mitigation practices and upstream activities.

THE NINE CULTURE CHARACTERISTICS PREDICTIVE OF SAFETY OUTCOMES

There are several culture characteristics that help us predict safety outcomes. Understanding these characteristics, measuring them, and tracking them over time gives us the knowledge we need to improve organizational culture, producing desired safety performance, increased engagement, and better overall production. The nine culture characteristics [1,4] are:

Procedural justice – This characteristic reflects the extent to which the individual perceives fairness in the supervisor's decision-making process. Leaders enhance perceptions of procedural justice when they make decisions characterized by consistency across persons and time, lack of bias, accuracy (decisions are based on good information and informed opinion), correctability (decisions can be appealed), representativeness (the procedure reflects the concerns, values and outlook of those affected), and ethicality. If employees consider the procedures to be fair, they are likely to be more accepting of an unfavorable outcome on a specific issue. They are also more likely to believe that over the long run important issues will be addressed. Other factors include how workers are treated following an injury and the manner in which safety rules and procedures are developed.

Leader-member exchange – This dimension reflects the relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the employee's level of confidence that his supervisor will go to bat for him and look out for his interests. Leaders can enhance perceptions of leader-member exchange by developing positive working relationships with their reports and getting each person to see how achieving organizational goals can be fulfilling both to the leader and to the employee.

Management credibility – Management credibility reflects the perception of the employee that what management says is consistent with what management does. Leader behaviors that influence perceptions of trustworthiness include consistency, integrity (telling the truth, keeping promises), sharing control in decision-making and through delegation, communication, and benevolence (demonstration of concern).

Perceived organizational support – This characteristic describes the perception of employees that the organization cares about them, values them, and supports them. The extent to which employees believe the organization is concerned with their needs and interests strongly influences their likelihood that they will "go the extra mile." Leaders can demonstrate organizational support by effecting and communicating efforts that go well beyond what is required. Employees who believe the organization cares about them are more likely to be satisfied.



Teamwork – Teamwork measures the perceived effectiveness of workgroups to function as an effective team. Group process affects whether people will talk to one another about safety, and it is directly related to safety outcomes such as level of at-risk behavior and injury reporting. It also influences perceptions of communication around safety and of organizational value for safety.

Work group relations – The Work Group Relations characteristic reflects the degree to which co-workers treat each other with respect, listen to each other's ideas, help each other out, and follow through on commitments made. Work Group Relations are related to supervisor fairness as well as to worker-supervisor relationships. These beliefs influence whether employees will speak up to one another about safety issues and raise safety concerns with the supervisor.

Social relationships within the workgroup influence important safety-related variables. This is especially relevant in dispersed workgroups, like those found in the rail industry. In a group in which people do not get along well together, individuals are less likely to go out of their way to speak up to co-workers about safety. Speaking up can be risky—one cannot be certain how the other person will react. Likewise, raising a safety concern in a safety meeting is risky—other group members might ridicule the concern. When there are low levels of trust, workers are less willing to take these risks. On the other hand, if relations between group members are good, people will feel more comfortable interacting around safety issues and raising concerns.

Organizational value for safety – This dimension relates to perceptions of the extent to which the organization values safety as represented by the prioritization of safety compared to other concerns; how informed management is about safety issues; and the willingness of management to invest time, energy, and/or money in addressing safety issues. The higher the perceived value for safety, the more likely it is that workers will raise safety issues, work safely, and not cover up incidents and injuries.

Upward communication – This characteristic addresses perceptions of the quality and quantity of upward communication about safety, the extent to which people feel encouraged to bring up safety concerns, and the level of comfort in discussing safety-related issues with the supervisor. The climate around communication influences the willingness of workers to speak up to one another about safety, the level of at-risk behavior, and the number of reported injuries.

Approaching others – The approaching others component addresses beliefs about the likelihood that workers will speak up to a co-worker whom they think is at risk for injury, pass along information about safety, or step up to help a co-worker do a job more safely. The more likely workers are to speak up with each other, the higher the level of safe behaviors in a workgroup.

CONCLUSION

Developing culture to build adaptive and reliable workgroups in the rail industry involves all levels of the organization, including frontline workers, supervisors, and executive leadership working together to create the type of organization that excels at safety. Organizations that lead with safety see measurable improvements in employee morale and performance, overall efficiency, and reduction in costs, injuries, and incidents. Employees who feel supported by leaders who are committed to safety are more likely to work in ways that the organization deems appropriate and safe, thus ensuring operational reliability even in the absence of supervision. Through a focus on leadership behaviors, rail organizations can set the tone for the type of culture they want to see, one that supports employees to speak up about concerns, step up to help one another, identify and mitigate exposures, and prevent injuries and incidents before they occur.



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