

Proactive Safety Leadership: How to Avoid Being Safe by Accident

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To achieve exemplary safety performance, leaders must improve their impact by adopting management strategies based on the science of behavior.

The default approach to managing safety, commonly known as “exception management” (or the safety cop approach), focuses on exceptions—what went wrong, errors, violations of procedures, and at-risk behaviors. Such a focus leads to the use of corrective feedback at best, and more negative consequences (like discipline), at worst. The science of behavior shows that over time, an overreliance on negative consequences leads to undesirable side effects such as lower morale, suppressed reporting of incidents and near misses, lower trust, and decreased engagement. The alternative is positive safety management which focuses more on what is going well—adherence to procedures, productive safety conversations, safe behavior, and improvements. The science of behavior has proven that a greater focus on desired behavior not only strengthens desired behavior, it also leads to greater teamwork, improved trust, more open conversations about safety, and increased engagement.

Following are **six tips** that help leaders begin to use scientifically sound strategies for managing safety:

Build Relationships.

It's no coincidence that leaders who have strong relationships with their direct reports tend to have better safety performance. So how are relationships built? The first step is to treat direct reports like people, not just employees. Leaders must demonstrate that they truly care about their direct reports—and in particular about their health and safety. The second step is to ask more and tell less. Leaders too often believe that because they are the “boss” they are supposed to have all the answers. By asking more than telling, leaders learn more about direct reports, leave them feeling valued and respected, and end up with more optimal safety solutions. A third key to relationships is building trust with this simple formula: do what you say you will do. While the formula is simple, following through with it is not.

Relentlessly Address Hazards.

Frontline employees gauge how truly important safety is in an organization by management's willingness to eliminate hazards. When leaders make hazard identification and remediation a priority, frontline employees are willing to get more engaged in safety. Be sure to ask about hazards frequently, make reporting hazards easy, take personal responsibility for hazard remediation, and communicate status frequently.

Conduct Daily Safety Interactions.

Take the time to talk to people about safety every day. Those interactions allow you to learn about hazards, address concerns, and importantly, to influence behavior. But be careful that you don't just initiate interactions when there are problems or at-risk behaviors. Look for and recognize the safe behaviors you want more of. Remember to ask more than you tell, focus on specific behavior (not generalities), and be sincere in your interest in safety. Engaging in frequent safety interactions will strengthen critical safety behaviors, making them more consistent, and at the same time build relationships, trust, morale, and engagement.

Respond Positively to Reporting.

Incidents and near misses provide valuable lessons about how safety is working. They uncover weaknesses in safety systems and processes that, in turn, enable changes to be made to prevent future incidents. But most leaders inadvertently discourage reporting of minor incidents and near misses by how they react. Signs of frustration, disbelief, or