



# NAC Executive Insights

## Safety Culture Series

# Management Commitment: All Safety Incidents Are Preventable

### Key Points

- The role of management regarding safety is to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of their people.
- Such a commitment affirms the core belief that all safety incidents can be prevented. This mindset means that management must work tirelessly to eliminate preventable injuries and never be content in allowing people to work in unsafe conditions.
- Top leadership commitment and engagement is a requirement in safety incident prevention.
- Leadership engagement, craft engagement, planning, and accountability are actionable elements of injury prevention.
- Company culture plays an important role in safety.

### Introduction

Safety consultant Dan Petersen, in his 2004 article for *Professional Safety* magazine, states, “Leadership is infinitely more important than policy. Through actions and decisions, a leader sends clear messages to the entire organization regarding which policies are important.” Decades later, this still rings true. Demonstrated management commitment has a tremendous impact on an organization, its safety culture, and its approach to preventing safety incidents. This cannot be overstated.

The core belief that all safety incidents can be prevented is a mindset—a relentless pursuit to ensure that no one is asked or allowed to work in unsafe conditions. This “Zero Injury” mindset is not focused solely on outcomes. It also focuses on developing a safety culture and performance expectations, and this is where a struggle occurs in determining how to translate commitment into action.

Leaders must be able to articulate their vision for what “good” looks like, help each person in the organization realize how their actions and behaviors align to support the desired outcomes, and hold people accountable for their individual contributions to executing the program. Equally as important, leaders must demonstrate to all in the organization how to foster and lead a “caring culture,” where people feel safe to share their ideas, observations, and concerns, know they are valued, and that their contributions are appreciated.

## **Leadership Engagement**

**Leaders must continuously demonstrate the behaviors they want emulated within their organizations.**

By actively participating and contributing to safety efforts, leaders set an expectation for every level of leadership. Proactive ways for management leadership to demonstrate their commitment include:

- Lead, or ensure participants lead, a safety moment at the start of meetings. (At Mortenson, morning meetings begin with a safety moment and afternoon meetings with a culture moment.)
- Lead or participate in bend and stretch morning crew meetings.
- Participate in a crew pre-task plan review during a site visit.
- Ask to see and review project high-risk activity plans during site visits.
- Participate in a site safety inspection/hazard recognition reporting.
- Participate in safety incident report outs/reviews.
- Engage site safety committee members during site visits. Listen to and understand their challenges and thank them for their contributions.

## **Craft Engagement**

**The greatest untapped resource, experience has shown, is the craft workers themselves.** To

understand the barriers to success the crafts face, leaders need to get out in the field. Demonstrate an interest in what the crafts have to say by personally talking with them during site visits. Be ready to act on what is heard to reinforce the commitment to removing obstacles and improving outcomes. Some ideas for formal feedback loops include:

- Establish a lead craft person safety committee chaired by the top project leader. Track and publish changes made or actions taken in response to concerns and solutions suggested by this group.
- Assign a project team member to meet with each crew at bend and stretch and/or to connect with each crew regularly throughout the day. This team member acts as an additional conduit to ensure communications from management are reaching the crafts and to make sure the needs and concerns of the crafts are heard and addressed by the project team. Additionally, this is an opportunity for project team members to build connections and strengthen their understanding of the work in the field.
- Label helmets/hard hats with first names to allow everyone to address one another respectfully by name and improve personal connections.

## **Planning**

**Planning for safe production starts in project pursuit.** Leaders should ensure they are:

- Pursuing work with like-valued customers.
- Assembling the right scope, schedule, and budget.

- Bringing together a team of individuals and trade partners with the appropriate experience and approach.
- Giving the team adequate time to plan the project and their work.
- Establishing open communications and a positive safety culture.
- Aligning and following through on expectations for site logistics, quality program execution, and lean practices.

Leaders need to do their part to set project teams up for success. Additionally, in the field, pre-task planning must add value for the crew conducting the work. It should not be an exercise completed for the sake of turning in the documentation.

To be effective, leaders should:

- Ensure pre-task plans are created and reviewed with the crew at the location where work is to take place. This enables crew members the opportunity to address current site conditions and adjacent activities in the plan.
- Rotate responsibility for plan creation through the crew to support the development of planning and risk mitigation skills in all crew members. Supervisors should review the plan and coach crew members as part of this effort.
- See that supervisors review cards and offer positive feedback and/or coach on how to improve the plan in the field.
- Educate crews on how to identify hazards and uncontrolled energy sources as well as identify and plan for errors and changed conditions such as missing crew members, new crew members, and time pressure.
- Recognize no plan is ever perfect. Rarely does “work as planned” perfectly reflect “work as performed.” Equip crews with the skills to recognize and adapt to minor changes and accessible resources to elevate concerns so “work as performed” results in “quality work executed safely.”

## Accountability

**Setting expectations, communicating, and consistently following up are key to the success of every effort, especially safety.** Recognition and rewards as well as disciplinary procedures have their place in an accountability program. Tips for success include:

- Lean more heavily on recognition and rewards, reserving disciplinary action only when warranted.
- Apply accountability processes consistently for all individuals, including management.
- In assessing whether disciplinary action is warranted, utilize an evaluation tool to accurately determine whether an *organizational* issue (policy, procedural, training) or a *shared* issue between the organization and the individual has occurred. If the individual truly acted on their own in violation of expectations

that had been set, communicated, and followed through on by the organization, then disciplinary action may be warranted. By using a structured evaluation tool, organizational responsibility and/or shared responsibility can be identified, where previously it may have been viewed as employee misconduct.

- Do not underestimate the value of a learning opportunity. Utilize disciplinary actions when warranted. For less critical violations or first or second missteps, document the violation and use it as a chance to show commitment to the individual and as a teaching moment to help make the individual and the team stronger.
- Demonstrate support for efforts to run the safety program more effectively to attain desired outcomes. If outcomes are off, leadership may not be effectively executing the program. In these cases, seek to understand the obstacles teams may face in implementing the program and, when warranted, be willing to hold individuals at applicable levels accountable. If execution is proper but not the desired outcomes, there may be a need to reevaluate the program. Ultimately, know that the leader's actions are closely watched and if numbers and statistics become the focus instead of the actions needed, teams will do the same and progress towards improved safety performance will stall out.

## **Culture of Care**

**Ensure people know that management cares.** Theodore Roosevelt is credited with the quote, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Safety is not about numbers. It is about care and concern for people. It is about making sure every person on a site goes home to their loved ones at the end of the day unharmed and not injured. Safety is the most important obligation any leader has to their organization and to the friends and families that entrust them with caring for their loved ones while on the job. Preventing safety incidents is not about keeping down rates. It is about providing members of the construction industry a place to build a safe and successful career where they can be proud of the work they do and create opportunities to enjoy their personal hobbies and passions outside of work.

Everyone has missed an exit while driving or forgotten to pack a cell phone charger for a trip or failed to attach a document to an email. The crafts are no different. They are human and they make mistakes. The systems they work in, however, are often so brittle that a small mistake for them results in an injury. When a safety incident does occur on a site, the role of a leader is not to make people who already feel bad about it feel worse. Do not be fooled into thinking people who make mistakes are flawed and a search will find a unicorn crew of error-free humans. Instead, support the team. Spend time investigating events where real learning opportunities can result. Be willing to look at program or organizational weaknesses and invest time and/or money in the types of changes that will make long-term improvements to safety for everyone.

Avoid the temptation of burdening the team with in-depth investigations of low severity and low likelihood events that result in the development of bureaucratic band-aids. Empower teams to identify upstream actions they can take to remove competing priorities and make the safe choice the obvious choice.

The belief that all incidents can be prevented does not mean “No one will make a mistake.” It means that by coordinating across trades, speaking up when someone or something is at risk, following plans, running programs, identifying changed conditions and stop points, and by making changes to the way businesses can build the capacity to be fail-safe, negative outcomes traditionally associated with construction incidents can be prevented.

## **Summary**

Management must continuously set the example for the organization by demonstrating an unwavering commitment to the wellbeing of all people in the workplace. Leaders must ensure that people are never asked or allowed to work in unsafe conditions on any site for any reason.

Demonstrate management commitment and mindset through the desired actions, behaviors, and expectations and personally participate in safety-related activities with other leaders and at project sites. Successful safety incident prevention requires engagement from leaders at all levels, including craft levels.

Management leadership must establish a safety culture and a mindset that supports open communication. Leaders must demonstrate that feedback given in the spirit of improving safety for everyone is valued. While no plan is perfect and no person is perfect, by creating a safety culture where all are committed to doing their part to eliminate unsafe conditions from worksites, everyone can help prevent safety incidents and markedly improve safety in the construction industry.

## **For Further Reading – Safety Culture Series (Executive Insights)**

- Introduction to the Safety Culture Series
- Safety Culture – Human Performance Principles
- Safety Culture – Worker Participation in the Safety Management System (SMS)
- Safety Culture – Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support: The Leaders’ Role
- Safety Culture – Drug and Alcohol Testing
- Safety Culture – Incident/Accident/Near Miss Reporting and Investigations
- Safety Culture – Safety Training
- Safety Culture – Safe Work Practices

## **About the Authors**

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