



NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Leadership Involvement in Office and Site Visits

Key Points

- Leadership site visits provide a great opportunity to validate the safety culture.
- Leadership presence is motivational to staff as it demonstrates the importance of their work.
- Leaders should engage directly with frontline trades to reinforce/enhance the safety culture.
- Leaders should conduct site visits with leaders from key partners (client, contractors, subcontractors).
- Leaders should connect with staff to reinforce key safety messages and excellent observations made during the visit. Also, leaders need to be clear about areas that require improvement.
- Leaders need to build a strong, trusting relationship with the site leadership team.

Introduction

This Executive Insight describes how leadership involvement in office and site visits can support and sustain an outstanding safety culture. Leaders typically stay abreast of construction project progress through reports, check-in calls with the site leadership team, or through attendance at periodic performance meetings. This Executive Insight will outline the added benefits of conducting office and site visits.

Importance of Leadership Site Visits

Leaders typically monitor project progress through reviewing key performance indicators and attending progress meetings, but full transparency can be limited by a lack of face-to-face interaction. Site visits provide the leader an opportunity to use his/her own senses to validate what is reported, experience the safety culture at the site, and use his/her influence to reinforce desired behaviors and deliver key messages to the team.

Leaders' visibility at a site can have a massive, positive impact on the project team. Leadership casts a large shadow with staff looking and listening to what the leader is focused on and as an indicator of priorities. It is important that the leader sets a great example by following the site safety rules and comes prepared with an agenda to ensure key points are addressed during the visit.

A site of office visit is also an opportunity for leadership and staff to interact, to observe the great work that is being accomplished at site, and to better understand and overcome challenges.

Things to Do during a Leadership Site Visit

Many activities can be accomplished during a site visit. The following are some recommended activities:

- **Demonstrate care:** Interact with a range of people across the project team to hear what is on their minds. Use open-ended questioning to get people talking about how things are going on the project. In particular, find out what is going well and where opportunities exist for improvement. Where possible, offer support to remedy the situation. These actions will help the leader determine the safety culture at the site and provide the leader with insight into areas to monitor in the future more closely. Getting to know the project team will help eliminate communication barriers, build trust, and improve performance and safety across the organization.
- **Attend the pre-job safety meeting:** Interact with trades prior to work starting. This demonstrates that the leader sees this as a priority and as an important part of the safety program. Attendance provides an opportunity to see how things are done and to discuss the leader's priorities. It also provides the leader the opportunity to personally recognize the trades and reinforce the importance of working safely.
- **Conduct safety observations and leadership safety audits:** It is important that the leader interacts with staff to influence the safety culture at the site. Walk the site and watch how activities are being conducted. Find opportunities to engage with craft workers and show a genuine interest in what they are doing. Ask them about their tasks and the risks associated with the work. Ask a series of open-ended questions to assess the understanding of procedures and processes and the actions taken to eliminate and mitigate risk. Also, discuss possible actions to eliminate or further reduce risk. Always thank the individual for what they are doing and for their commitment to the safety program. This conversation provides a good insight into the safety awareness at the front line.
- **Connect with other key leadership at site—client, contractors, or subcontractors:** Where possible, conduct the site visit with leadership from one of the key partners on the project. This is an opportunity for the leaders to connect, reinforce priorities, and address possible misalignments. Being at site together, the leaders will have the opportunity to assess perspectives with the site team and by walking the site together, there will be opportunities to mutually reinforce messages or agree on areas for improvement.

- **Communicate with staff:** Staff are always interested in the leader's perspectives, so it is important that an all-staff town hall meeting or a series of smaller meetings be held while at site. Make sure these meetings reinforce leadership's commitment to safety and the importance of safely completing the project. Provide feedback from the visit, reinforce the positive takeaways and highlight any areas that may need improvement. Also, identify where leadership's experience and perspective can be supportive for the staff. These meetings are also an excellent forum to recognize staff as appropriate.
- **Interaction with the site leadership team:** It is critical that the leader has a strong relationship with the site leadership team to maintain transparency in progress reporting. Staff can tend to report the positives while avoiding or deferring negative issues. This is not helpful as everyone must have the same, accurate picture of the facts to enable any needed early interventions to get things back on track. The leader needs to build a relationship of trust with the site leadership team as described in some of the other Executive Insights (Human Performance Principles, Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support). Site visits offer an opportunity to build on this relationship by holding open and honest conversations around progress, safety performance, and challenges. The leader should provide feedback on what he/she has experienced on the visit and have an open conversation on how things can be improved and how the leader can support the onsite leadership team. This interaction is a great way to demonstrate the leader's care, commitment, and support.

Benefits of Leadership Site Visits

Site visits offer the leader an opportunity to "walk the talk" by demonstrating that what gets done at site is important. Safety culture will be reinforced by the leader's actions and behaviors at the site since multiple opportunities will present themselves to interact with staff to reinforce messages. Teamwork and trust across the project can also be enhanced by interacting with a range of individuals and by demonstrating a willingness to listen to the workers and support the project.

By reinforcing the safety culture, the leader's site visit demonstrates that the organization values its employees' well-being. When workers feel safe and confident in their working environment, they are more focused and productive. Workers are more likely to be motivated and committed to their tasks, leading to improved performance and efficiency.

When a site visit does not go so well (e.g., observations do not meet expectations), the site visit provides the leader with data to better assess what actions are needed. Site leadership sets the tone at site. In some instances when it appears the site leadership is not placing the right emphasis on the objectives of the project, a coaching conversation will be required or in some cases a change in site leadership may be necessary.

Safety observations and leadership audit conversations provide the leader with a good sense of the safety culture at the site. If the leader feels more must be done to strengthen the safety culture at the site, he/she can stop the work to reinforce certain messages, engage with the site leadership team to place more emphasis in certain areas, or mobilize additional expertise at site to enhance the safety culture.

Conclusion

This Executive Insight describes the value of leaders conducting site visits. The leader can interact with the site team in numerous ways and gain first-hand knowledge of the site safety culture. The leader can also support the safety culture by reinforcing key messages, recognizing examples of great behavior and performance, and acting on areas that require improvement. The site visit can reinforce the safety culture and improve worker morale and their performance and efficiency.

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](#)
- [Safety Culture – Management Commitment: All Safety Incidents Are Preventable](#)
- [Safety Culture – Subcontractor Involvement in the Safety Culture](#)
- [Safety Culture – Recognition and Reward](#)
- [Safety Culture – Job Safety Analysis](#)

About the Author

David O’Connor was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. In his 40-year career with Amoco and BP, he has served in engineering, technical, and leadership positions in the UK, Norway, Egypt, the Middle East, Algeria, and the U.S. In 2015, he became head of all BP global projects in the Upstream Division. He is known for transforming project organizations into the best learning organizations in the industry. David retired from BP in 2020.

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