

The Best **Vs.** The Worst

by Mackenzie Wilson

The World's Best Safety Experts tackle the worst and most persistent safety problems.

Corralling the recalcitrant manager

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“I was originally going to title this ‘Corralling the slippery manager’ says Larry Wilson, SafeStart Author and SafeConnection moderator, at the start of the session. “But I softened it somewhat because, in the vast majority of cases, these aren’t bad people, they’re just pro’s at playing dodgeball...and, like it or not, there are probably some at almost every company”. These managers obviously don’t oppose safety publicly (or indeed privately), but we hardly ever see them get into top gear. As a rule, they are good at things other than health and safety, and that’s typically what they want to push.

“They are also good at procrastinating,” says Dr Waddah Ghanem (Senior Director, Fellow Board Directors Institute GCC). Whether they delay, stall or just don’t engage wholeheartedly with safety initiatives, a recalcitrant manager has a significant effect on the organisation. This leads Larry to examine what has actually worked for panellists and what they wished they had known when they were starting out.

What percentage of managers and leaders are we talking about? Or, put another way, how likely is it that a new safety professional will run into the problem of recalcitrant managers?

• “I’ll actually have to give two answers” says Alex Carnevale (President, Dynacast International). “When you’re talking about [managers] who have grown up in a manufacturing or production environment, it’s about 25 percent, but when you’re talking about [managers] that don’t work in that kind of environment it’s high: around 80 percent”. He is quick to add a disclaimer that is often echoed during this panel: it’s not that these managers are trying to do the wrong thing or don’t believe in safety, but, when it comes to priorities, health and safety isn’t among them.

• Anthony Panepinto, PhD (Senior Director Health, Safety, and Environment Affairs, Proctor & Gamble) agrees: “Throughout my career [I’ve seen] people who grew up in an operational capacity tend to have a greater sensitivity to safety, health and environment”, he says, “but with people that come from a financial background, it’s maybe 80-90 percent”.

• Hector Salazar (Director H&S, Dragados Canada) who has worked in Latin America, India and Canada, feels that “only five percent are the real, real recalcitrants” who outwardly oppose safety and influence others in the organisation to follow suit.

Having noted these distinctions, the group set about further delineating the distinct types of recalcitrant manager the better to combat their effects:

• Anthony provides this useful categorisation: “There are four degrees. Firstly, there is Idolatry, where the manager believes they are some sort of management ‘guru’, and you can’t tell them anything. Next, is Indifferent, meaning they talk about safety but only when they need to. Third are the Inactivators who feel they are too busy to deal with health and safety and that someone else will take care of it for them. Last is the Inconsistent manager who does all the right stuff when someone is watching, but only then.

For the recalcitrant manager, there is a key technique available: **discover and understand their motivation:**

• “There are also some managers who want to do good things but don’t know how. It could be an education thing, or they’re intimidated,” says Alex. “But very, very few people are against safety, so that’s a great starting point. It’s just a matter of working it through.”



Experience insight from SafeStart's Larry Wilson: "Where you try to do this and engage the folks makes a big difference. One-on-one seems to go much better".

One of the best ways to get the manager to see where you're coming from – and begin to move in the right direction – is through **storytelling**:

- "Very early in my career I was the first on scene of a fatal incident, a decapitation," Anthony says. "It still disturbs me to this day. I try to get across to new operations leaders that you do not want this to happen to you, because it will haunt you forever".

- Alex agrees, remembering commenting at a site to a manager who was holding the handrail going down the stairs. The manager told him how an employee had fallen while going down the stairs without holding the handrail and died. "Not only was everyone in the factory affected" says Alex, "but him telling me the story affected me. Storytelling and an emotional connection is how you get to that point".

When it comes to working with lots of contractors, it's not about just one leader, but **creating a group of leaders**:

- "The level of investment going on in Toronto, Ontario is huge," Hector explains, so "we need to incorporate small and medium contractors into it". They created an alliance and association of partnership that moves around Dragados. "When the door they want to open is the contract for the next project, and you make safety, and safety performance, a key objective" he says, "the recalcitrant will be in the back seat and they won't make too much noise".

Larry asks the panellists, all long experienced in health and safety, what they wish they had known when they first started out:

- "Go to the person you think is your nemesis," says Anthony, "sit down and ask them what motivates them to come to work every day, and what demotivates them to drive operations in a safe, healthful way".

- "Be clear, know what you have to do, then reach out" says Hector. "Gain the willingness of people to follow". He also shares that it's better to take action now, and to not let up. "Keep the pressure up and don't give up. Eventually the walls of Jericho will fall down", he jokes.

- Alex has found that "the holy grail is to find a way to simplify what you're asking without watering it down. It's not an easy thing to do".



Experience insight from SafeStart's Larry Wilson: "The inconsistent one might be the most difficult. Certainly it was in my case, as a consultant going in and then leaving. You think you really got through to them but then you leave and nothing happens." Alex agrees: "The real two-faced ones are a bit of a different case. Those ones need to be dealt with swiftly...[as] it goes a bit beyond the recalcitrant manager to the undermining manager".

The panellists share a few examples of strategies that **don't** work:

- "I was trying to get money for industrial ventilators", says Anthony. "I had a whole bunch of data to support it, but the senior leader said to me 'Well, you showed me dead rats, not dead people, so why should I give you this money?'. This drives home the point that, at the end of the day, people care about the people. You don't want to lose sight of your common goal."

- Try to avoid direct confrontation, especially in front of others. Alex shares a story from when he was quite young, remembering an encounter with a seasoned leader: "He was the CEO," says Alex, "and I called him out in a meeting for not caring enough about safety. I was lucky he was a pretty well-balanced manager! We had a one-on-one conversation afterwards, and he was able to see that I was coming from a good place and was just clumsy in my delivery".



- Adding to this, Anthony says that “everyone likes a choice. What I try to do is play ‘let’s make a deal’, give them three options to improve safety and have them choose which ones they want to go forward with”.

Whether you wish to call them slippery or recalcitrant, recalcitrant managers are a challenge to deal with. And there are lots of them everywhere. But regardless of how common they are, the panellists show that they are not impossible to deal with. Using empathetic communication to find common ground is a great way to get your foot in the door, be it through a one-on-one sit-down chat or through storytelling. Understand that it’s unlikely they don’t care about the safety of the people, they just have competing priorities. Once you have mutual understanding, you can begin to move forward.

As Larry says, “if you’re going to hold up a mirror to these people, try to hold up a friendly mirror”. Keep things simple, and keep the safety of the employees at the forefront of your objectives. Most importantly, don’t let up.



Pro tip on solving the recalcitrant-manager puzzle: “They all think they have some secret mission that no one else knows about”, says Hector. “So, talk to them, and find out what that is.



Take Aways

- ✓ Health-and-safety recalcitrance can even affect a majority of managers in some settings
 - ✓ It is particularly acute for managers with only desk experience
 - ✓ A small proportion will go further in actively opposing safety measures
 - ✓ Know the types and, avoiding confrontation, discover their motivation
- ✓ Use storytelling and emotional connections to get the point of safety across
 - ✓ Create alliances in order to circumvent recalcitrant contractors

- Based on SafeConnection panels on North America, Europe, The Middle East, India and Asia.
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