

The Best *Vs.* The Worst

by Mackenzie Wilson

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

Balancing Just Culture and Accountability:

How do you make it fair?

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How do companies strike a fair balance between the fact that humans make mistakes and the need to make people accountable for workplace safety? SafeStart author Larry Wilson put this critical safety culture question to SafeConnection Expert Panels.



Topic context from SafeStart's Larry Wilson: "This subject is very near and dear to my heart. We all make mistakes – we're human – so we don't want to blame people for every single slip, but we also don't want to live in a world where no one is accountable for their safety."

Expert view: To help overcome the challenge of doing all this, many companies have adopted "lifesaving" or "golden" rules that have a zero-tolerance component to them. Have Golden Rules worked? And how can this kind of zero-tolerance policy be improved?:

Beyond the 'big stick': The "big stick will get you a good level of safety, but it won't get you a great level of safety", observed Ian Thorpe (Vice President, Health and Safety, HPCL Mittal Energy Limited), citing his company's \$4 billion project to build an oil refinery in India: "A zero-tolerance program [with respect to lifesaving rules] was needed at the time—we got good results and a reduction in injuries".

The trick to greatness is understanding why a worker may have broken a rule if you want to prevent it from happening again. The first step is categorising each human error appropriately:

- It is vital to differentiate: we divide them as "overt, covert, or just human", said David Bianco (Global SafeStart Program Manager, Epiroc).

- Or was it a deliberate violation? "Error is an unintentional deviation from safety practices," said Arun Subramanian (Senior Associate Vice President & Head – HSE, Coromandel International Limited).

"Violation is something that is intentional. This is where you have to bring in the cardinal rules and see if it's a routine violation, a situational violation, or an exceptional violation"



"Key insight from SafeStart: "I think a bit of the importance of the why gets forgotten or somehow becomes less prominent than the discipline aspect – people want to know the consequences and get that clear as opposed to the 'why' and sticking that in their head, like how important it is not to walk between rail cars, LOTO, confined space entry," says Larry Wilson on the subject of safety practices. "For all of those lifesaving things the 'why' behind them is more important than the disciplinary measures that will happen after".

Flipping the perspective: The panels shared a universal experience that poor outcomes often have systemic roots, which means that leaders can make a difference. "Making a rational, consistent, fact-based decision... brings coherency to the organisation", noted Alex

Carnevale (President, Dynacast International):

- "It's not always [the worker's] fault", says Dr. Praveena Dorathi (Environment Health & Safety Head, Work Dynamics, West Asia, JLL). "It's often the fault of the systems".

- "There needs to be more dialogue in terms of understanding what drives [the] overt or covert behaviour that occurs", says David Bianco. "It could be built into the process of a fault in the system, and at the end of the day, if we don't do anything they're going to continue to happen because of complacency and habits."

- Sometimes the systemic fault lies in ambiguous language: "We may come up with golden rules but are those golden rules very clear?" asks Peter Batrowny (President & CEO, PB Global EHS, Inc.). Drawing from his experience in the military, he explains that "you have to be very clear about what the expectations are. That's something that organisations aren't always good at".

Hidden Rules can be another source of consequential violations:

- Peter Batrowny gives the example of workers fixing jammed machines without following proper LOTO (Lock Out, Tag Out) procedure in order to keep the line moving. Often the worker might not only get away with this but even be praised for taking the risk. Maybe the entire shift might be praised for breaking a production record! "That becomes a kind of informal reward", he says, "but if someone gets hurt [because of it] then we start talking about blame, and that's the kind of inconsistency that makes 'being fair' very difficult".

- SafeStart's Larry Wilson agrees, citing an example of poor safety practices at a sawmill that he'd witnessed: "They had a zero-tolerance policy on lockout. And I remember the supervisor just looking at me saying, 'can't it wait? We're working on a record day'".



- Alex Carnevale draws the inevitable lesson from such hidden-rule situations: "if it's happening and, as leaders, we don't correct it, then we've sanctioned that behaviour. We have signed off on it happening again, whether we think we have or not".

Once leadership has moved beyond the big-stick approach and scrutinised their systems for hidden rules or ambiguity, the emphasis for injury reduction moves to *communicating the underlying importance of safety rules*:

- "You can tell people about the rules but if someone really understands the 'why', then it starts to become coherent and consistent" says Alex Carnevale. There must be clarity on what the expectations are and why.

- Ian Thorpe's company has its own employees, regular contractors, and then project contractors: "Each culture needs a different method". Contractors might require more of a "big-stick approach" but "rewarding the positive is much better....by using incentives and rewards, you can figure out what 'good' looks like and show that to the contractors because sometimes they just don't know".

- As Arun Subramanian puts it, *model the behaviour in your employees that you want to see in the contractors*: "When your own employees don't follow procedures, you can't expect the contractors to...so first set the example within the house and get the contractors to follow suit".

Here, as in so many other areas of life and good business, it is a question of balance:

- David Bianco captures the social contract aspect: "you narrow it down to 'if you do the right thing, we'll do the right thing'".

- Building trust throughout, from top management to workers on the shop floor, brings about a situation where, in the words of Alex Carnevale, "people [are] being accountable to themselves, the business, and each other: that's a true value and that ultimately gets you to a much better place."

- That clarifies leadership's responsibility: make sure that there is clarity on the expectations, that these expectations are in line with the organization's values, and provide functional feedback channels and measurement systems.

If consistency, coherency, and communication are "in place, then the accountability should flow", notes Alex Carnevale



Take Aways

- ✓ For optimal workplace safety culture, the big-stick approach is not enough.
- ✓ Analyse: get to the why of human error and problematic safety behaviour.
- ✓ Is the root in fact systemic? Look for 'hidden rules' or linguistic ambiguity.
 - ✓ Bear in mind: different approaches for different cohorts.
- ✓ Leadership: always model the safety behaviour you want to encourage.
- ✓ Balance, as always, is the key! Accountability throughout brings results.

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