

# The Best *Vs.* The Worst

by Mackenzie Wilson

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

## Production Vs. Safety: Ancient Myth or Current Reality?

by Mackenzie Wilson

**S**afeStart author Larry Wilson tackled an age-old problem in the latest round of SafeConnection Panel discussions: blaming 'production' for rushing at work. Experts from world-class companies gave invaluable contributions on how they are tackling the classic conundrum of balancing production and safety.

A reality-check to begin: It is not rushing 'for production', it is rushing to make up for time lost because of a mistake, whether in the process itself or in the lack of preparation. Unfortunately, it remains common to find people who think that safety costs time and money while not improving production or quality. The fact is that taking the time to reduce human error increases both!

- Yes, putting a guard on a rotating machinery, say, doesn't actually make it go any faster, but if that guard prevents an injury that would have resulted in lost time, then it will certainly be beneficial to production.
- The takeaway? High-reliability organisations have shifted away from being only production or quality oriented, and focus on more than just the hazards.
- They do this because they know that reducing human error will probably improve production, boost morale and decrease customer complaints and quality problems.

Boiling it down: Given this background, the question that Larry wants to pinpoint now is how the panellists feel in terms of the overall perception around the production/safety balance and if their colleagues still think the two are at odds with one another:



*Research insight from SafeStart Vice President Teg Matthews: From his experience of roundtable focus groups, Teg estimates that one in five HSE professionals have a blind spot in which they don't see any problem when it comes to balancing production and safety.*

*About 70 percent still struggle with the issue but will openly talk about what they are doing to address it. The remainder, ten percent, come from organisations where safety is genuinely built into the cultural system and thus there is no tension between the two.*

- Hector Salazar (Director H&S, Dragados Canada) explains that three in four field supervisors he works with in India feel they are wrestling or conflicted over what is more important between production and safety, or how to go about blending both.
- Providing a European perspective, Keith Hole (Director and Thought Leader, TSM UK Consulting) suggests that "about 75 percent still need to take on [this] journey. 25 percent get it".
- Conclusion: Tension between production and safety remains a real issue – all around the world.

Not to be overlooked: there has been significant progress in terms of integrating safety into all business processes and recognising its importance across the board.



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*Industry perspective from SafeStart's Teg Matthews: "We need to make sure the people on the front line understand – that's the alignment and systems piece – and that they have the skills to talk about safety and how it fits in. We need them to understand too that there is a system of communication within the organisation that allows that to go both ways, up and down". Sometimes the emphasis on safety that senior management would like to communicate is not what's being perceived on the front line.*

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- "We drive this concept of safety, quality, environment, operations all [going] hand in hand", says Arun Subramanian (Senior Associate Vice President & Head – HSE, Coromandel International). "You cannot isolate them or their functions. It's internally driven by organised programmes by top management."

- David Bianco (Global SafeStart Program Manager, Epiroc) agrees: "viewing safety as another 'thing', or a layer on top of everything you do is usually a problematic paradigm.... It's really about integrating".

- David adds that the technologies Epiroc uses on the factory floor have visual guides for putting the product together that include safety-related considerations and human factors such as "look for the line of fire" or "this is a heavy object, you could get fatigued". Culture change takes time – but there is a positive remedy that can be brought to bear on this problem: young entrants. It is not a quick fix, but it could be a meaningful one if a company is committed to a long-term view:

- "New employees are much smarter. If these programmes can be driven to catch them at school level and colleges, you don't just wait for industry to drive safety, environment, and quality but teach the students", Arun says. The new generation of individuals coming into the workforce present an opportunity to bridge the production/safety gap.

- Larry agrees: "Especially for the habits", he says. "If you learn good habits from the beginning, you don't need to unlearn them".

- For an organisation to go from being solely production-oriented to being a balanced and safety-focused one will probably take five to ten years, with "top management as a critical catalyst", notes Ravindra Dhapola (Head Corporate SHE, CSR & Sustainability, Tata Coffee)

- This time frame was echoed by other panellists such as Arun and Hari Kumar (Director Group EHS Assurance, Emirates National Oil Company).

How about the production/safety balance for companies working with contractors? Certainly, the challenge of getting the message of 'safety as equally important' to a transient workforce would only be magnified. And that calls for patient and constant cultivation via 'safety champions' and communicative leadership of the right mindset:

- As Hari says, "companies put effort into their organisation but don't have the same control over contractors". He notes that for the last six years his company has been engaging contractors on Life Saving Rules, awareness and (behavioural observation) cards, but "mindset" is what they would still like to fine tune.

- At Coromandel, Arun also understands the challenge of working with many contractors. Yet he believes that, "if you can get a number of champions within the organisation, you can ease out the challenges for transforming contractors". Specifically, he explains that Coromandel kickstarts a program for the contractors before they are engaged to help shift from a production focus to safety. Then, the 'champions' follow up and monitor them in the field to encourage and guide them.

- Moreover, he says that all companies start with safety in their meetings to communicate its importance and have that trickle down throughout the field.

- To quote Hari again: "every life is equal.... Culture change is not just your own employees but involves the contractors as well, they might not have the resources for transformation".



The panellists also explain the importance of understanding production's point of view, as well as creating reasonable projections and margins for error.

- Keith explains that, in construction, the procurement process (such as getting the contractors or setting up the project) can often begin to drift, with people who aren't even involved in the on-the-ground construction squeezing the actual construction timespan on site, while the client still wants their project completed on time: "We need to educate the client and the people involved", he says.

In business as in life, 'wait times' can happen: it's what you do about them that counts:

- To this end, David explains that often when there is a delay, people don't use the wait time productively. "There are a number of times we don't have the part we need when we need it, but we know that when we get it and install it, it will be out of sequence with what we normally do", he says. "So, taking that opportunity and deciding how we're going to do it when the part actually comes in, as opposed to assuming 'my guys know what they're doing'" is key.

- Moreover, he says that, as collaboration between safety and production people deepens, "we get a better end result for the workers and for the company".



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*Topic context from SafeStart's Larry Wilson: "The part about the client is really key: in order for this to work you have to explain the reality of humanity to the client. You don't want the publicity of opening up your new business on the heels of a tragedy...and you don't want the tragedy. So, if something happens like an unforeseen delay, either due to our-fault negligence or circumstances of force majeure, we have to have an understanding that we mitigate the risk, we don't just increase it".*

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While the reality is that production and safety can come into conflict, these panel discussions have shown that collaboration and integration of the two is the way to achieve optimal outcomes.

**Safety can improve production, and production can assist safety. The two don't need to be mutually exclusive, but it takes maturity to realise that human error is a problem, not just for safety but also for production, quality and customer service.**

**And that it can be minimised significantly by improving the system and training the employees. However, this will take strong leadership, and good communication from top management down to the shop floor to make it work.**



## Take Aways

- ✓ Production and safety are not in opposition, but need integration
  - ✓ Time taken for safety is never wasted time
  - ✓ Admit your leadership blind spots – and work on them
  - ✓ Progress has been made: sharing lessons helps!
- ✓ New workers and 'safety champions' seed culture change
  - ✓ Communicate human realities to your clients

- Based on SafeConnection panels on North America, Europe, The Middle East, India and Asia.  
- All opinions expressed in here are purely those of the panelists. They do not necessarily reflect the opinions or views of SafeStart and the panelists' companies.  
- For more information about the SafeConnection Expert Panels and to watch past or current sessions, please visit <https://uk.safestart.com/safeconnection/>.

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