

A background image showing several bags of Riscossa brand pasta, including varieties like "Pasta With Olives" and "Pasta With Olives & Herbs", arranged in rows.

CARING CULTURE

IN ACTION:

A NEW VISION FOR OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

For 70 years, Printpack has been at the forefront of sustainable packaging products, supporting 150 iconic brands. The family-owned packaging company employs about 3,300 people in 16 manufacturing sites between the U.S. and Mexico.

Printpack identified an ongoing challenge of maintaining consistent safety performance across a large manufacturing network. Cari Field, Director, Environmental, Health, & Safety at Printpack, wanted to solve that ongoing challenge. She knew that any solution had to have leadership involvement, standardized processes and provide continuous safety improvement.

When leadership is actively involved in safety, employees—or associates as they're referred to at Printpack—see safety training as more than just a box to check. It sends the message that safety is expected to be part of everyday work, not only something that's discussed when there's an audit, inspection or incident. A successful SafeStart implementation can help with that. **A strong foundation for implementing SafeStart** is having SafeStart champions in leadership roles. Field is a great example of a SafeStart champion—someone who leads by example, promotes safety in everyday

activities, understands the role human factors play in errors, and helps strengthen the safety culture by encouraging awareness, engagement, and positive safety habits across the organization.

Taking it one step further, a true SafeStart champion constantly seeks to reinforce human factors awareness and safe behaviors, and will bring that approach with them when they move from one workplace to another. Field learned SafeStart as part of a safety training initiative at a previous job and then advocated for its adoption at her next two places of employment. There couldn't be a better definition of a SafeStart champion.

SafeStart champions are typically enthusiastic advocates who help move SafeStart from "just training" into everyday operational practice. When speaking about SafeStart, Field says, "We talk a lot about safety training. I turn the tables and say SafeStart's not just safety training; it's an operational excellence program. That's really the heart of the message. It's not another checklist or compliance exercise; it's understanding those states of mind that we all experience that lead to errors."



When it comes to operational excellence, you can't have competing priorities. For example, if workers constantly hear "safety first" but only see production speed rewarded, it sends a mixed message, making safety and production competing priorities. Field uses the analogy of an eagle to describe competing priorities and operational excellence. Operations is the bird's body, while safety and quality are its wings. If either wing is weak or damaged, the eagle cannot fly effectively. In the same way, operational excellence depends on both safety and quality working together—if one suffers, the entire system suffers.

Operational excellence requires alignment at every level of the organization, from senior leaders to frontline workers. Priorities must be consistently reinforced through decisions, metrics, rewards, and daily actions. When priorities compete with one another, performance becomes inconsistent, increasing the likelihood of mistakes, near misses and injuries. As Field explains, "We need to remind ourselves that everyone is capable of unsafe acts, because that's human behavior, right?" Recognizing that human error is a normal part of being human helps organizations focus on creating systems and habits that support safer, more consistent performance.

Operational excellence requires alignment at every level of the organization, from senior leaders to frontline workers.



With SafeStart, Printpack explored how human behavior influences safety and operational outcomes, and categorized them into three groups: common behavior (human error), at-risk behavior and reckless behavior.



Common behavior (human error)

Described as **unintentional mistakes that everybody makes**, often caused by fatigue, frustration, distraction or system design issues. It is not a behavioral choice but an inevitable consequence of human fallibility. These are without blame.



At-risk behavior

A behavioral choice that increases risk. At-risk behavior involves conscious shortcuts, or procedural drift, **where workers underestimate risk or prioritize convenience**. This is the most common type of behavior preceding incidents and is often driven by the fact that nothing bad has ever happened before.



Reckless behavior

A conscious and unjustifiable disregard of substantial risk. Though rare, **this is when people know the behavior is dangerous**, understand the potential for harm and choose to proceed anyway, knowingly disregarding safety.



Printpack established these three groups of behaviors in an effort to change perspectives and avoid blame. Punishment does not fix human error. It is also important to respond appropriately to each category in order to build trust and improve the culture. For example, a managerial response to common behavior is to improve the system, at-risk behavior is to coach and communicate, and reckless behavior is to discipline.

Reckless behavior is the only category where punitive or disciplinary action is deemed appropriate, as consciously disregarding substantial risk undermines the organization's core values and cannot be tolerated. A firm disciplinary response is necessary to uphold accountability and protect the entire team.

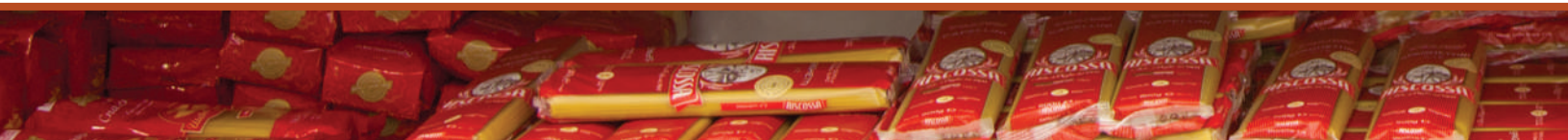
A key organizational shift involved eliminating "human blame" as the root cause in incident investigations. Associates are challenged to identify system failures rather than placing blame solely on their actions, reinforcing the belief that organizational systems shape employee behavior. This approach aimed to strengthen psychological safety, encourage reporting and create a culture focused on learning instead of punishment. "We're trying to teach them to look at the system, not the human. It's a struggle, but that's where our focus is right now—how do we blame the system and not the humans," Field says.



"SafeStart and SafeLead work best in environments where people feel safe to speak up and where respect is the norm," she continues. "Where leaders show their work through their actions and demonstrate what 'good' looks like. Psychological safety and mutual respect set the tone; continuous improvement keeps the work moving forward and participative leadership invites people into the process instead of directing it at them. Empowering associates to think and act in safety makes it part of the way they work, not the entire way that they work. It's not something they just have to comply with. Using meaningful praise reinforces the behaviors we want to see and taking time to coach instead of just telling shows a real investment in people. And at the center of it all is leading by example."

The metrics from Printpack's case study site reveal how SafeStart is an operational excellence program, given the results of the facility's SafeStart implementation in October 2024.

Over an eight-month period, the plant achieved a 57.5% reduction in total recordable injuries (from 6.48 to 2.75), a 53.5% reduction in lost-time incidents (from 2.95 to 1.374), nearly a 44% improvement in associate turnover (from 28.3% to 15.9%), a 22% improvement in quality performance (from .247% to .192%), an over 66% increase in reliability for mean time between failures for both converting and extrusion, and a 23% improvement in waste reduction (from 15.6% to 12%).



Field summed up these outcomes by saying, “SafeStart is a way to strengthen decision quality, not just prevent injuries. It’s one of the most powerful ways to ... shift the conversation away from safety training and towards how people make decisions under pressure. Every operation struggles with the same realities: they have production demands, interruptions, fatigue, competing priorities. SafeStart gives leaders and associates the common language to recognize when those pressures are influencing decisions and to pause before those errors occur. When decision quality improves, safety improves, but so do quality, uptime and reliability. SafeStart is not about telling people to be more careful; it’s about building awareness that reduces rework, equipment damage, near misses and unplanned downtime. That’s why SafeStart supports operational excellence and not just injury reduction.”

By strengthening decision-making, creating a common language, examining both leadership and associate behaviors, and driving meaningful cultural change, SafeStart has helped elevate safety performance while supporting operational excellence.

At Printpack, SafeStart has become much more than a safety program. By strengthening decision-making, creating a common language, examining both leadership and associate behaviors, and driving meaningful cultural change, SafeStart has helped elevate safety performance while supporting operational excellence. The result is a workplace where safety is more than a priority—it is a deeply embedded core value that guides everyday actions and decisions. As Field puts it, “A culture of care is a culture of safety.”

The Printpack information and quotes used in this case study were taken from a SafeStart Lunch and Learn session conducted by Cari Field, Director, Environmental, Health, & Safety, Printpack.

safestart.com

SafeStart, a division of Electrolab Limited
631 College St. E., Belleville, ON: 613-962-0284
Copyright © 2026 by SafeStart.
All rights reserved. Printed in Canada.