

Creating a culture of safety

The business case for a compliance first mindset



How do you establish a shared, safety-first ethos, and why is it worth it?

A robust safety culture means more than just meeting your legal compliance requirements. It involves a team effort where every worker, manager, and leader contributes to common compliance goals.

Beyond protecting your people, the rewards of a company-wide safety commitment are proven and profitable. Organisations that make compliance a core part of strategy, operations, and staff development enjoy higher employee engagement and retention, enhanced productivity, and fewer workplace accidents. What's more, they avoid the job-related injuries, illnesses, and absence that cost the UK £22.9 billion every year.

- When workers understand their role in safety, they work smarter, look out for colleagues, and take accountability for their actions – strengthening morale and operational resilience.
- When your employees proactively report safety concerns, you avoid production delays, protect assets, and head off costly incidents before they happen.
- When safety is central to everyday decision-making, you see fewer disruptions, lower insurance and legal exposure, and healthier long-term performance.

Despite the clear business case for a strong safety culture, many companies struggle to move beyond rules-based compliance and reactive box-ticking.

Perhaps you're starting from scratch with safety policies and risk assessments. Or following regulations but still seeing work-related accidents. Or maybe you want greater returns from an already solid safety programme.

Whatever your situation and safety goals, strengthening awareness and accountability can boost performance and minimise the odds of incidents, reputational damage, and legal claims.

This whitepaper outlines the core elements of a positive safety culture and delivers practical tools to embed a compliance-led mindset across your business.

Your safety culture is the result of the attitudes, behaviours, communications, knowledge, and skills that make up your organisation's approach to health, safety, and compliance.

The effectiveness of your safety culture depends on several key characteristics...

What is safety culture?

The business case for a compliance-first mindset

Essentially, culture means ‘how we do things around here’. Your safety culture is the result of the attitudes, behaviours, communications, knowledge, and skills that make up your organisation’s approach to health, safety, and compliance. While you may have a strict safety manual, your culture determines what happens day to day – particularly when no one’s looking.

Cultural failings were contributing factors in some of the UK’s highest-profile safety incidents, including the 1988 Piper Alpha oil rig explosion, the 1999 Ladbroke Grove rail crash, and the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire. While these events had varying causes, post-incident investigations revealed a range of common behaviour-based safety issues – from progressively slipping standards to dismissed warnings and cost-based decision-making.

The effectiveness of your safety culture depends on several key characteristics:

‘Following an incident, businesses often just want a quick fix. They look at the machine that’s caused an injury and want to find ways to make it safer without causing too many problems for production.’

‘However, a company with a positive, proactive safety culture would aim to improve their processes, making them more efficient while enhancing safety outcomes for all staff.’

Ian Dunsford – Head of Quality and Technical, Opus Safety

Strong safety culture	Weak safety culture
Visible commitment from leadership	Disengaged, reactive safety ethos
Safety valued equally to cost and performance	Output and cost savings prioritised over safety
Shared, company-wide accountability and safety goals	Siloed safety activities, varied approaches, and tendency to blame individuals
Proactive approach to continuous improvement and learning	Incident-driven responses without follow-through or long-term change plan
Two-way communication and consultation	Safety rules imposed from top down
Empowered staff and simple, non-punitive reporting	Stigma or fear of consequences around safety reporting
Consistent safety standards and system design	Poor practice and workarounds are normalised and permitted.

Building action and accountability at all levels

What's the right approach for you?

A strong safety culture is a conscious decision and an ongoing commitment – and every employee plays a vital part. Your competent person can advise on the practical aspects of compliance, but it's up to leadership to live and breathe your safety culture. Change begins when a board-level pledge to prioritise safety is brought to life through accessible policies, everyday excellence, and open communication.

As an employer, you set the example and start the conversation. Wearing a hard hat and hi-vis encourages frontline workers to follow suit – but engaging with teams about real-world risks boosts buy-in and transforms your approach to incident prevention.

To move from a rules-led to a culture-led approach, compliance should be a critical strand of your business strategy and an agenda point at every board meeting.

Key leadership actions include:

- Following safety best practices at all times.
- Cultivating a secure working knowledge of safety regulations for your sector.
- Regularly reviewing incidents, near misses, and staff absence.
- Actively identifying emerging risks.
- Creating safe channels for safety reporting.
- Aligning rewards and remuneration with safety outcomes.

- Championing a fair, learning-focused response to incidents.
- Considering safety when shaping policies, practices, and commercial decisions.

Motivating managers to live your safety values

Managers play a decisive role in raising day-to-day compliance standards. Employees take cues from supervisors' attitudes and actions – for better or worse. If managers dismiss concerns, cut corners, or respond punitively, reporting declines and unsafe practices take hold. When they model openness and discipline, standards rise and safer behaviours become the norm.

For supervisors to actively strengthen your safety culture, they need practical skills and visible board-level backing. Without them, follow-through fails and leadership commitments become lip service.

Equip managers with:

- Regular, role-specific safety training to build confidence and knowledge.
- A clear understanding of why controls are in place.
- The language to articulate rules and risks to their teams.
- Structured opportunities to voice safety concerns with senior leaders.
- Clear safety responsibilities, including when and how to stop work.

Empowering employees to shape your strategy

Involving employees from the outset builds ownership.

For cultural change to succeed, employees need to have meaningful input. In reactive businesses, workers often feel rules are imposed by execs who are removed from operational reality. This disconnect erodes trust and weakens engagement.

Inviting teams to share their expertise and experience – right from risk assessment stage – boosts staff engagement, creates more targeted safety controls, and leads to more consistent compliance on the ground.

Consult with your team by:

- Surveying workers about hidden hazards, impractical procedures, and shortcuts that are becoming standard practice.
- Establishing safety circles and small working groups to examine existing and emerging risks. For example, recurring trip hazards, collision hotspots, or stock levels that hinder visibility.
- Asking employees to suggest workable solutions – and including viable ideas in your compliance plan.
- Encouraging future engagement and insights by communicating how staff feedback has shaped your programme.

Involving employees from the outset builds ownership and reduced the need for extensive top-up training. When individuals identify risks and help set control measures, they're more likely to weave them into everyday working practices.

Shopfloor scenario

Let's say a team member repeatedly works without ear protection. In a reactive business, managers are more likely to address the issue with one-off reprimands or disciplinary action.

Managers in mature safety cultures explore the reasons behind the breach, aiming to find a long-term solution. They might ask:

- Why aren't you wearing hearing protection?
- Is there a problem with it?
- Does it fit correctly?
- Is it uncomfortable or incompatible with other PPE?

Positive environments empower managers to actively identify risks and work with staff to implement suitable, sustainable controls.

“People working in a safety culture-orientated business are more likely to call out problems because they know they're going to be listened to.”

Ian Dunsford – Head of Quality and Technical, Opus Safety

Five steps to a stronger safety culture

Your goal is to create an environment where individuals are independently committed to safety.

Employees aren't working safely because they're being watched – they're key contributors to your compliance programme. They know the rationale behind the rules and apply them even under pressure or unsupervised. And they're motivated to protect themselves, their coworkers, and the long-term success of your business.

To get there, you need to implement critical basics and progressively build understanding and accountability across your organisation. Appointing an experienced safety partner as your competent person ensures you meet your legal requirements and supports you in creating a stable, sustainable safety culture.

Your trusted advisor can help you:

Bring your operations up to legal standard:

- Design and implement a fit-for-purpose health and safety policy.
- Introduce regular risk assessments aligned with your processes and premises.
- Establish quick and easy reporting processes for incidents, hazards, and near misses.
- Assess the physical condition of your sites and recommend immediate and longer-term fixes.
- Conduct a comprehensive gap analysis to pinpoint weaknesses in your current controls.
- Clarify roles, responsibilities, and oversight across teams and departments.

Explain the 'why' behind compliance:

- Support you in communicating the legal, financial, and moral drivers behind your compliance efforts.
- Help you outline why risk assessments are necessary, what they prevent, and how they reduce exposure.
- Translate health and safety laws into clear language for toolbox talks and team huddles.
- Reinforce the link between safety standards, staff well-being, and commercial success.

Consult with employees:

- Take a structured temperature check of staff attitudes, behaviours, pressures, and barriers to progress.
- Gather frontline feedback and ideas to inform your safety strategy.
- Measure engagement levels and spotlight priority areas for improvement.
- Establish effective feedback loops to share employee insights in action.

Use practical tools to streamline processes:

- Deliver tailored training based on your unique risk profile.
- Implement robust tools to help staff report incidents in seconds – from their phone, PC, or via a QR code.
- Create a centralised hub for safety data, documentation, training, and tasks.

Review, measure, and refine:

- Regularly revisit risk assessments, particularly after changes to processes, equipment, or staff remits.
- Assess trends across incident rates, accident and near miss reporting, employee absence, and safety observations.
- Adjust lagging and leading KPIs to reflect existing risks and future safety targets.

Tracking impact with the Bradley Curve

Developed by DuPont in 1995, the Bradley Curve is the most common metric for measuring the effectiveness of an organisation's safety culture. The curve maps four stages of maturity – Reactive, Dependent, Independent, and Interdependent – as businesses move from a reactive, rules-based approach to shared, embedded safety values.

The roadmap follows a four-step journey:

- **Reactive.** Safety is instinct based, with no formal compliance or prevention measures in place. Accidents are considered 'part of the job' and blame is typically apportioned following an incident.
- **Dependent.** Safety is driven by managers' oversight and enforcement, with workers typically following rules out of fear of punishment.
- **Independent.** Individuals take personal responsibility for their own safety, following best practices even when unsupervised.
- **Interdependent:** Safety is a common, company-wide goal, achieved through collaboration, shared commitment, and open communication. Employees take ownership of their own safety and actively look out for others' well-being.

Progressing along the Bradley Curve requires ongoing measurement and monitoring. A thorough gap analysis can pinpoint your current position based on physical risks and behavioural indicators.

Questions should uncover both compliance issues and their related root causes. For example:

- How often are slips, trips, and near misses happening?
- Are staff wearing correct PPE? If not, why not? Is it discomfort, inconvenience, or another reason?
- Is machinery guarded? If not, why are workarounds necessary and what's preventing the correct use of equipment?
- When shortcuts happen, are they being reported? If not, is the barrier behavioural or process-driven?

A follow-up review six to twelve months later helps you track progress, reset strategy, and assess the evolution of staff behaviours. Milestones might include increased observations, deeper engagement in safety discussions, and consistent compliance with site rules and working systems.

More importantly, improvement will show in staff attitudes to safety – spanning feedback, ownership, and proactive reporting. In reactive businesses, workers typically stop flagging issues when their concerns are ignored, keeping hazards hidden and unresolved.

By contrast, a robust safety culture brings employee feedback full circle:

- Workers feel confident and comfortable making safety observations – and concerns are promptly acknowledged and acted on.

- They have simple reporting tools – such as online safety management portals and QR codes – to make reporting quick and easy.
- Staff have their say in safety forums or working groups where issues and developments are openly discussed.
- Feedback-based decisions and actions are clearly communicated to the workforce.
- Strides in safety are clearly linked to staff ideas, reinforcing the value of participation.

Expert support at every step

Investing in a proactive safety culture protects the lives and well-being of your workers, while driving measurable commercial benefits. The move from a reactive to front-footed ethos is an ongoing process, accelerated by business-wide commitment, intelligent tech tools, and the support of a trusted safety partner.

Whether you're running one site or a national branch network, consistency and communication are crucial. Implement a single, scalable safety strategy and share learnings across your entire organisation, bringing together best practices and employee insights to benefit the broader business. A central online safety hub prevents vital updates and action points from slipping through the net – between shifts, across sites, and among different supervisors.

Platforms like Opus Compliance Cloud provide real-time visibility of safety performance, helping you seamlessly track trends, assign accountability, and view reporting activity across multiple locations. The software also captures feedback directly from your safety consultant, ensuring training gaps and risk assessment results are added to a live task list.

Shopfloor scenario

LA critical aim is for staff and leaders to develop the skills to spot safety hazards and the initiative to act on them – even when risks don't directly affect them.

This might look like a production manager raising concerns about office safety. Or a director taking the time to understand why forklifts are repeatedly parked unsafely – then relocating chargers to solve the problem. Or a machine operator reporting a workaround that could result in injury.

When positive behaviours are rewarded and hazard reporting is actively encouraged, compliance becomes a collective goal. Staff at all levels look beyond their own roles and take proactive steps to protect their colleagues and company.

How Opus Safety can support you

At Opus Safety, we help companies across the UK elevate standards, strengthen staff mindsets, and make compliance a workforce-wide commitment. To discuss how we can boost your business's safety culture through training, technology, and tailored safety strategies, reach out to the team.

We're here to help on **0330 043 4015** and hello@opus-safety.co.uk.

Want to learn more about strengthening safety culture? Tune into the Opus Safety podcast.



[Contact Us]



Website

www.opus-safety.co.uk



Phone

0330 043 4015



E-mail

hello@opus-safety.co.uk