REBUILDING SAFETY CULTURE
Through Contextual Leadership & Engagement
By Kenneth R. Brashear

In high-risk industries, safety is often viewed through the lens of compliance and enforcement. However, "sustainable safety cultures are built on more than rules; they rely on trust, psychological safety, and a shared commitment to learning" (Campbell Institute, 2024).

When leadership overreacts to isolated incidents, it can undermine years of progress and create a climate of fear. While much has been written about compliance and enforcement, less attention has been paid to how leadership responses to isolated incidents shape long-term safety culture. This article examines a real-world case from the industrial construction sector to illustrate how reactive leadership can erode safety culture. Drawing on research in human error and organizational behavior, actionable strategies are presented for rebuilding trust and fostering a resilient, learning-oriented safety environment.

The Role of Context in Safety Culture

Safety is not a checklist, but a culture shaped by consistent behaviors, open communication and systemic awareness. According to Reason (1997) and Dekker (2017), human error is often a symptom of deeper organizational issues. When leadership does not consider the broader context of an incident, it risks misdiagnosing the problem and applying counterproductive solutions.

A single moment of noncompliance, when viewed without context, can overshadow years of diligent adherence to safety protocols. Sustainable safety programs depend upon recognizing behavioral patterns and understanding the organizational environment in which incidents occur.

Methodology: A Qualitative Case Study

The qualitative case study discussed in this article was initiated by the author, who was present on site when the event occurred and continued to observe the cascading effects on the site's safety culture over an 18-month period.

Data Collection

On-site observations included detailed field notes recorded immediately following the incident and regularly over the subsequent 18 months. These notes systematically captured direct dialogue, observed nonverbal reactions of personnel, changes in communication patterns, and specific management actions and communications as they unfolded. These observations focused on shifts in worker behavior, supervisor responses to incidents, and the evolving organizational atmosphere related to safety.

The author also conducted informal interviews and discussions with key personnel directly involved in or affected by the incident. This included the directly involved contract worker, two site supervisors, and three other relevant site personnel (e.g., long-term construction workers, safety team members). Discussions focused on their perceptions of the incident, its immediate impact and observed changes in site safety culture. Key points and direct quotes from these conversations were meticulously transcribed as field notes immediately after each discussion.

Furthermore, internal communications such as incident reports, follow-up emails, policy memos and summaries of management meetings circulated by corporate leadership regarding the incident and subsequent site-wide policy changes also formed a critical part of the data analyzed.

Data Analysis

The collected observational field notes, interview summaries and internal communications were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. Data was iteratively reviewed to identify recurring themes related to trust, fear, communication breakdown, leadership response and changes in proactive reporting behavior. This process allowed for the identification of patterns and underlying mechanisms that explain the observed shift in safety culture.

Limitations

A limitation of this qualitative case study is its reliance on a single incident and the author's direct participant involvement. While this position allowed for rich, contextual insight and direct access to information, it also introduces potential for observational bias. To mitigate this, multiple data sources (e.g., observations, interviews, documents) were triangulated where possible, and an effort was made to document observations objectively. Furthermore, direct interviews with the senior executives involved were not conducted; their actions and communications were analyzed based on their observable impacts and documented directives as reported by site personnel.

Case Study: Leadership Reactivity & Its Consequences

A contract worker on an industrial construction site entered a work area without noticing posted signs requiring safety glasses. A visiting senior executive saw the oversight and sternly corrected the worker in a manner perceived as abrupt. The worker, feeling angry and humiliated, turned away and walked off to retrieve his glasses. Another executive, interpreting the worker's behavior as disrespectful, requested the worker's removal from the site. Following a brief investigation, the worker's employment was ended, not for the safety violation but for perceived insubordination. Despite the site's strong safety record, corporate leadership labeled the site as "out of control" and implemented strict rules, mandating closer supervision of all construction contractors by site personnel.

This response aligns with Dekker's (2017) observation that misinterpreting human error without systemic context can lead to flawed conclusions. The decision to treat this isolated event as a cultural failure had significant ripple effects.

The Ripple Effect of Fear-Based Enforcement

The consequences of this decision were immediate and far-reaching. Supervisors who had worked diligently to build a strong safety culture were forced to defend against a narrative that did not reflect the site's reality. Workers who once felt empowered to report hazards and engage in safety discussions began to hesitate, fearing disproportionate consequences for minor infractions.

The shift from initiative-taking engagement to fear-based compliance demoralizes the foundation of a resilient safety culture.

As Edmondson (1999) notes, psychological safety is essential for learning and improvement. When workers fear retaliation, they withhold concerns and the organization loses critical opportunities to prevent incidents. Several personnel expressed concern regarding entering the work area out of fear of making a mistake. The site experienced a noticeable decrease in proactive hazard reporting and a general sense of mistrust permeated the workforce, demonstrating the direct link between leadership response and worker engagement.

The Dangers of Reactive Leadership

Reactive leadership may offer the illusion of control, but it often creates more harm than good. Focusing on punishment rather than understanding fosters mistrust and disengagement. Workers become more concerned with avoiding blame than with improving safety outcomes.

This case illustrates how a single misinterpreted event can derail years of progress. When leadership does not distinguish between isolated behavior and systemic trends, it risks alienating the workforce and weakening the organization's ability to learn from mistakes. As Dekker (2017) argues, safety is not about eliminating error, it is about understanding and managing it.

Psychological Safety & Workplace Well-Being

A culture of fear affects more than safety; it affects mental health, morale and retention. According to Conchie and Burns (2009), environments lacking psychological safety discourage open communication and collaboration. The American Psychological Association (2024) reports that 15% of workers describe their workplace as toxic, with chronic stress linked to depression, cardiovascular disease and burnout. The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General (2022) and OSHA (n.d.) both emphasize the importance of mental health in workplace safety. When workers operate under constant stress and fear, their ability to focus, communicate and make sound decisions is compromised. This not only increases the risk of incidents but also drives turnover and reduces organizational resilience.

Rebuilding Trust & Psychological Safety

While reactive leadership fosters fear and disengagement, organizations can take deliberate steps to rebuild trust and strengthen workplace safety.

Forward-looking safety cultures, driven by open communication, accountability and leadership support, empower workers to engage without fear of unfair consequences.

Instead of reacting to isolated incidents, leadership must embrace long-term strategies that prioritize context, consistency and collaboration. This includes recognizing that human error is not a moral failing but a signal of deeper systemic issues (Hale & Borys, 2013; Reason, 1997). Practical strategies include conducting contextual incident investigations by moving past blame to understanding systemic causes. Open communication by establishing means of reporting concerns, near misses and hazards without fear of reprisals. Leadership commitment is demonstrated by actively listening to worker input. Provide training to proactively identify hazards and focus on understanding and correcting the system rather than punishing individuals.

Toward a Resilient Safety Culture

Programs such as OSHA's Voluntary Protection Programs (**www.osha.gov/vpp**) offer a road map for this transformation. By emphasizing management commitment, worker involvement and robust safety systems, Voluntary Protection Programs demonstrate that excellence in safety is achieved not through fear, but through partnership and shared accountability.

According to Reason (1997), "Sustainable safety is not built on reacting to what goes wrong, it is built on learning from it." Organizations that embrace this mindset will not only protect their workers more effectively but also foster a culture of resilience, trust and high performance.

Conclusion

Developing and sustaining a robust safety culture requires more than policy implementation; it stresses contextual leadership, psychological safety and a commitment to continuous improvement. The circumstances presented in this case study illustrate how traditional reactive responses to an isolated incident can erode trust and fracture a culture that once had a solid foundation. Safety professionals and organizational leaders alike must lead with empathy, engage with context, and foster environments where workers feel safe to speak, act and improve. **PSJ**

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