

CREATING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE

Lessons Learned in Work Zone Safety

By Sheri Herbst & Thomas Whitman

In many industries, zero is the enemy. Failure to rack up sales, new customers or profits can have dire consequences. But for safety professionals, zero is the ultimate goal. It means no one injured, no one making a call we all dread.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PA Turnpike) achieved that benchmark in February 2025 with its safety audit results. The Department of Labor and Industry reported zero adverse operational findings, a significant reassurance that the company safety standards and targets were being met.

While these numbers tell a story, they are not the whole story. Reaching that goal is not about luck or isolated wins, but about building a culture where safety is woven into every decision, conversation and mile of roadway.

The PA Turnpike's journey underscores what organizations everywhere can embrace: safety excellence is not a destination, but a continuous process with lessons that apply anywhere.

Leadership Accountability: Safety Starts at the Top

Every transformation begins with leadership. When executives treat safety as a compliance checkbox, progress stalls. When they treat it as a core value, change accelerates.

The work to improve PA Turnpike's overall safety culture began by addressing a flawed but human belief that safety incidents are unavoidable, particularly in certain industries. A decade prior, a safety audit revealed gaps that could not be ignored. Instead of patching holes, leadership reimagined the entire framework. Safety was moved out of traffic operations and engineering into human resources. This was a symbolic and practical shift that elevated the visibility of employee well-being. Later, it became an independent unit reporting to the chief administrative officer with its own management structure, ensuring that decisions were free from competing priorities.

Leadership accountability sets the tone for the entire organization. When executives champion safety, it signals that protecting people is not negotiable. Structural changes are not just bureaucratic, they are cultural. Embedding safety into governance creates a foundation

for everything that follows. Ways to make this work include:

- Set safety as a standing agenda item at leadership meetings.
- Add safety metrics to performance evaluations in every department.
- Bring safety professionals to the table for every decision.

Employee Engagement: Two-Way Dialogue Drives Results

People, not policies, lead injury prevention. The people closest to the work often have the clearest view of hazards and improvement opportunities. That is why engaging the front line is not optional; rather, it is essential.

At the PA Turnpike, more than half the workforce operates in the field, mowing hillsides, repairing guidrails and clearing debris across more than 560 miles that span mountainsides, waterways and valleys while traffic speeds by at 70 mph. These workers know where risks hide. To tap into that knowledge, leadership established five regional safety committees, each meeting bimonthly to review incidents, suggest improvements and serve as peer liaisons. Ideas and decisions moved in both directions, creating meaningful dialogue that built trust.

Recognition also reinforces engagement. The PA Turnpike's Safety Miles program rewards proactive behaviors such as hazard identification and corrective action ideas. Gamifying the process with points and prizes turns safety into a shared mission rather than a mandate.

Engagement builds ownership. When workers feel heard and valued, they become partners in prevention. Talking with workers rather than at them is more than just good practice; it can be a life-saving strategy. Ways to put this into practice include:

- Form safety committees or designate liaisons.
- Recognize and reward proactive behaviors.
- Use multiple channels (e.g., bulletin boards, dashboards, town halls) to keep communication flowing. Reevaluate periodically to ensure that communication is meeting people where they are.

Work Zone Risk Management: Proactive Measures Can Save Lives

Having a proactive safety culture means anticipating risks, mitigating them when possible and analyzing incident response for improved

TAKE STEPS TOWARD SAFETY EXCELLENCE

- Make safety a leadership priority.** Put safety on every leadership agenda, include safety metrics in performance evaluations across departments and involve safety professionals in major decisions.
- Create two-way communication.** Establish safety committees or worker liaisons, actively solicit frontline feedback and use multiple communication channels to keep safety information flowing.
- Recognize proactive safety behaviors.** Reward workers for identifying hazards, suggesting improvements and taking preventive actions to build ownership and engagement.
- Use data to drive risk reduction.** Conduct regular risk assessments and root cause analyses, monitor incident trends and adjust safety strategies based on measurable results.
- Invest in safer work methods.** Implement engineering controls, ergonomic improvements and innovative equipment to reduce worker exposure to hazards.
- Commit to continuous improvement.** Celebrate progress, act on worker ideas, regularly evaluate safety programs and treat safety excellence as an ongoing process rather than a one-time achievement.

performance. Innovation, whether within daily tasks or embedded in organization-wide behavior, is not a luxury but a necessity.

Unlike a factory floor, highways cannot shut down for repairs. Work zone crews labor inches from live traffic, often in unpredictable conditions. For the PA Turnpike, that reality demanded uncompromising risk management.

When PA Turnpike created the subcommittee on work zone safety, it proved to be a key turning point. This group meets monthly to analyze crash patterns and identify trends. As a result, the company's 5-year crash rate dropped by more than 20% even as national averages held steady or worsened.

Innovation amplified these gains. When data revealed a spike in strain injuries during debris removal, management challenged maintenance staff to find a solution. One result was a truck-mounted, retractable scoop that clears obstructions without exposing workers to traffic. Later, hook-lift platforms capable of being swapped among maintenance vehicles were added to the fleet, reducing fall risks during elevated work.

Steps organizations can take include:

- Conduct regular risk assessments and root-cause analyses.
- Invest in engineering inspections, ergonomic solutions for repetitive work and external evaluation partners to keep teams nimble.
- Track trends and adjust strategies based on data.

Communications Strategies: Influencing Behavior Inside & Out

Clear, consistent communication motivates behavioral change. Without it, even the best internal programs fall short. Safety is not just an internal responsibility or priority; it is a public charge.

Safety does not stop at the work zone. Drivers, contractors and legislators all play a role in maintaining work zone safety. Changing behavior requires clear, consistent communication.

The organization's "Go Orange" campaign illustrates the power of messaging. By encouraging drivers to sign pledges and wear orange on Wednesdays, it personalizes the consequences of unsafe actions. Another campaign placed state troopers in construction equipment to curb speeding. In one month alone, troopers issued nearly 500 citations and warnings.



PA TURNPIKE

More than half the workforce at PA Turnpike operates in the field, mowing hillsides, repairing guidrails and clearing debris across more than 565 miles that span mountainsides, waterways and valleys while traffic speeds by at 70 mph.

Legislative advocacy complemented these efforts. PA Turnpike and its partners worked to secure laws permitting electronic speed enforcement and green-light visibility enhancements for maintenance vehicles. These measures helped reduce repeat violations and improve safety statewide.

Steps organizations can take include:

- Partner with the organization's communications team or outside contractor to launch campaigns that make safety personal.
- Leverage relationships with enforcement agencies and industry groups to demonstrate impact.
- Use technology and training strategically to educate stakeholders.

Conclusion: Continuous Improvement Is Nonnegotiable

A decade after its overhaul, the PA Turnpike continues to evolve. Success is not measured by a single audit or campaign. Instead, it is gauged by the expectation of progress. No matter the discipline, shifting safety culture comes down to implementing these four lessons:

- **Communication means engaging with, listening to and learning from workers.** From low-tech, effective options such as bulletin boards to companywide town halls, understanding where information flows best and getting the messaging out there matters.
- **Put employee feedback first.** Treating everyone with respect helps the entire organization succeed.

- **Never stop driving toward excellence.** Celebrating wins, acknowledging efforts and looking for ways to say yes more often, especially when workers reach out with ideas, builds trust. So does operating with the belief that advancing excellence should never mean that perfection is expected.

- **Executive involvement must go beyond buy-in.** Safety improvement should be measured, monitored and expected at the organization's highest levels. Safety professionals deserve seats at any decision-making table and recognition for the value they bring to an organization.

For 85 years, the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission has operated with a commitment to safety. But this story is not about one organization. It is about what any organization can achieve by shifting its focus from what has been done to what works. Whether the work zone is a highway, a hospital, a factory floor or a construction site, the path to zero injuries begins with culture—and culture begins with you. **PSJ**

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