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Safety Leadership

From virtual safety to real safety

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1. Introduction

I am an engineer. Many projects worldwide are led by engineers, and it is our responsibility to ensure the correct balance of safety compliance (the law) and safety leadership (the creation and maintenance of safe places for people to work). This paper deals primarily with leadership. It describes the fundamental basics of safety leadership. In my field, most project-leading engineers are fully qualified technically. If there is a weakness, it is in the field of leadership. In some cases, leadership skills are assumed with advancement in status, and this can be problematic. This paper will help leaders (engineers or otherwise) at all levels create productive and safe workplaces.

The main focus of this paper is the creation of safe places for people to work within the frameworks provided by the law and each organisations corporate governance. First, I discuss the emergence and expansion in numbers of safety professionals, and those of other new professions taking responsibility away from roles traditionally held by organisational leaders e.g., in procurement, finance, commercial, legal, HR etc. I examine the impact of these shifts in power and how they have contributed to the emergence of what I call 'virtual safety.' Next, we look at the starting point for any project: a client writing a proposal for a contract. Contracts are commonly written by procurement specialists and it's usually at this point that safety takes a step in the wrong direction. Contracts full of threats for non-performance don't produce safe working environments or efficient production. The early phases of projects affect the eventual safety performance. Some clients make it very difficult for bidders to deliver key safety feedback in a potentially risky environment during tendering. Freedom to speak up is a big-ticket item on safety.

Lord Reith summarised the BBC's purpose in three words: inform, educate, entertain. This is an excellent credo for learning. If this paper is going to have an impact on safety, then it must also fulfil those three criteria. I think that we (Hollin) have succeeded in our quest over the years making our courses and coaching

interesting, certainly interesting enough to sustain our business for twenty years. The attendant engagement that we have created drives the real, measurable improvements in safety performance.

I include some practical examples of varying degrees of safety excellence and also failures in safety leadership and strategy. I hope that readers will relate to the real-life examples and scenarios and use that empathy to understand what's happening with their own safety strategies and cultures. My intention is that this paper may spark or at least assist the badly needed change in safety performance. Please feel free to share this paper with the people in your own safety chain of command. Safety is currently in the doldrums. Everyone needs to wake up and smell the cappuccino.

2. Safety leadership

Every organisation has a legal and moral responsibility to create safe workplace environments for everyone involved in their enterprise, whatever that may be. The leaders of the enterprise should be deliberately making sure that this imperative is created, measured, and maintained. You might say that it's a basic human right to be provided with a safe place to work by your employer. I have visited many organisations where the safety protocol is both evident and excellent. When safety is skilfully lead, safety thrives, and everyone goes home, safe, every day. If safety is excellent, everything else usually is too.

Workplace safety has two distinct supporting foundations. One is safety compliance — all the legal details and formal requirements, processes, systems, training etc. The other is safety leadership — how the leaders create and maintain a workplace environment so that safety can thrive. The people carrying out the productive tasks are working in environments created and maintained by their leadership. Safety performance is primarily the responsibility of the organisational leadership. In the same way that leaders are responsible for strategy, business planning, budgets and meeting milestones, leaders are also responsible for safety.

I have personal experience in every role in the chain of command on construction projects. I define the 'safety chain of command' as the people in the hierarchy that create safe places for people to work, including the practitioners, i.e. the people doing the work. For construction projects the primary influencers that create and maintain the safety chain of command will likely be the Director, Project Manager, Site Manager, Supervisor and Worker. Information should move up and down this hierarchy in honest & equal volume and quality content.

This group is the primary influencer of the quality of workplace safety because every live construction site environment out there today is under the purview of these primary influencers. Everyone else has a secondary influence on safety (Safety advisors, business support people, IOSH etc). It's important to distinguish who really makes a difference in safety. This distinct chain of command creates and maintains safe working places.

This principle also applies to other industries. For example, if we are talking about factory safety, the hierarchy may be the CEO, operations director, area manager, works manager, supervisor, worker. There will be a similar chain of safety command in Hospitals, Educational facilities, transportation etc.

Hierarchy will dominate organisations as long as the primary consequences for each person's behaviour is strongly influenced by the person above them in the hierarchy. In terms of organisational systems, chain of command works best; it delivers certainty to each performer in the chain. Work is simple if you have one boss, work is confusing if you have different solid and dotted reporting lines to various people. This is one of the main reasons that matrix organisations are flawed. The military does not operate matrix organisations. I am sure you can imagine why.

In the UK, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 (HASWA) document states that employers must protect workers and others from getting hurt or ill through work. It sets out the general duties which:
1. Employers have towards employees and members of the public.
2. Employees have to themselves and to each other.
3. Certain self-employed have towards themselves and others.

Most countries have similar laws designed to protect people from harm.

3. A brief history of safety

Safety in projects in the UK has endured multiple changes since the HASWA was introduced in 1974. I was working in construction during all the key safety moments in time, from hats and high viz all the way to dynamic risk assessments and drones. My career started in 1969 holding the other end of the tape for a tunnelling surveyor. I lay for prolonged periods in wet places waiting for him to say, "OK." The project was a five-foot bolted segmental tunnel through the silts and sands of Marple in Cheshire. The contractor was Mowlem, and the water was kept out of the tunnel using compressed air. We entered the tunnel via a vertical air lock. My introduction to tunnelling was a pretty scary affair: crawling in muddy confined spaces, noisy grout pans, and miners relieving themselves into the muck skip. This was a whole new world from my cossetted life growing up in sleepy Hazel Grove in Cheshire, UK.

The hierarchy on site was obvious. The site agent was an engineer, and he had a staff (people who wore ties). The person in charge of the workforce was the foreman. It was both a civils and a tunnel job, so the tunnels section also had a pit boss. The site agent, pit boss and foreman met every morning at 7:00 a.m. over tea and cigarettes and agreed the job activities for the day. By 7:30, everyone on the site knew what was happening that day. The certainty was comforting. The job progressed well, I learned a lot, and my life had changed dramatically. The tunnel gang were all members of the same family, the lead miner traditionally hired from his extended family. Young Padraig sorted out the bolts, Uncle Donal drove the crane etc. Some of them headed off for the Holyhead ferry at Friday lunch time. There was a strong feeling of pastoral care for everyone (including me). It was a strange

environment — the combination of underlying threats coupled with a strong team spirit.

The '70s brought the emergence of the safety consultant. These people visited sites in the early stages of work, bringing with them the 'site starter pack.' We dutifully posted our posters and filed our HSAWA forms, filled in our statutory notices: That was 'safety' to us back then. I don't remember anyone being injured apart from cuts and bruises. I do remember nearly being hit by a bag of bolts that fell down the shaft and landed next to me, and always being wary when the noisy compressed air grout pan was being used in the tunnel. I was acutely aware of what appeared safe and not. I took my lead from the miners, gangers and foreman. I watched them climb up the bolts in the shaft but did not try it myself. I could climb a very long vertical ladder, no problem; "Hold the rungs tightly," I kept telling myself — a repeat of what the surveyor had told me (now this technique is called 'mindful fluency').

During the '80s seat belts in cars were introduced and the new law was heavily advertised. Initially, many people railed against wearing these uncomfortable belts. It's second nature now. On construction sites, the safety audit became more prevalent and comprised of a nice person visiting the site and talking to us about a bunch of safety legislation. They made us aware of dangerous substances, showed us how to use the latest gas detectors and cable detectors, checked lifting slings and hooks. They were pleasant, and friendly, their recommendations were easy to carry out. I remember the high viz vest being introduced on civils projects. Many of the workforce took some persuading. There was strong resistance from some trades, especially steel fixers. Miners strongly resisted wearing the hard hats. The compromise was bump hats, a much smaller hat that hugged the head. Many miners were still working wearing old suit trousers and a sleeved vest (grandad vest). At brew time the miners would wear their suit jacket, observing the site canteen dress code whilst digging into their ample portion of steak and eggs.

In the '90s, the safety 'professional' appeared on the scene and the mood changed a wee bit. The law changed a few times also. The safety professional became an in-house employee quoting statutory requirements — they were now frequently a 'quoting rules and regulations' type of person. Safety was weighed down with more and more paperwork, more and more seemingly pointless forms to fill in with mind numbing frequency. More and more safety audits carried out by people visiting the site and leaving without chatting to the site staff. Their report landed on site two weeks later, copied to all and sundry and containing numerous irritating comments and mysterious scores. RAG (red, amber, green) reports emerged with comparisons of all the company's sites including new subjective rankings that were received by many as punishment for the hard-working engineers and supervisors doing their best work. Before you leap down my throat, yes there were some very good safety professionals — I hired many of them. I am simply painting a picture of the norms over time through the eyes of a practitioner.

By this time, I was not still crawling around in tunnel verts. I was in a senior construction role handing out the annual company 'safety sword of honour' to our selected safety contractor of the year. We used to carry out all kinds of acts in the name of safety that I would now call virtual safety (for goodness' sake, a safety sword!). I was that guilty leader presiding over some well-intended but ultimately dubious acts in the name of safety. I cringe when I think of some of my own Director site visits. Director ego trips would be a better description. On some occasions I was that lazy leader falling for the temptation of self-publicity and PR, egged on by the people surrounding me. I have a lot of apologising to do. I should have been frequently saying to myself, "hire the best people and listen to what they say."

The years from 2000 to 2012 saw a lower number of injuries in the UK. Some organisational leaders started viewing safety as very important. Many organisations declared victory on safety as injury numbers reduced. Then the graphs began to plateau. Client organisations took more interest in safety as the corporate manslaughter (2007) legislation emerged. Big safety conferences appeared on the scene with attention-grabbing presentations by speakers, some of whom had been injured themselves. More safety consultants emerged, promising company directors' surety and protection from the apparent threats in the new safety laws.

Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS) emerged and was hailed as the 'next great thing' to get past the plateau and deliver the stated desire for zero injuries. People added the word 'behaviour' to their safety and other corporate programmes, but few of them learned about the crucial underlying behavioural science. 'Behaviour' gained notoriety. Many people used it in a quest to add credibility to whatever they were doing. As a result of this misuse, these bad actors have brought disrepute to behavioural science.

BBS is now too general a term to be meaningful to anyone. BBS may have meant something specific in the past, but that is no longer true. There are some BBS programmes that are terrible. There are some brilliant safety programmes that are also called BBS. It's not the name that's important. If they are creating and maintaining safe workplaces, from my perspective, they can call it what they like. I always ask, "Is what you are doing scientific? Is it objective?"

Over the last ten years, a number of quirky safety experts have emerged, mostly talking complete nonsense. They rail against BBS. Many peddle some strange theories on safety. These folks have clearly never wielded a spade. These imposters speak from the comfort of their tenured cloisters, making money out of safety. There is a massive industry in safety and a lot of it is a massive distraction to real safety.

During the last decade or so, there have again been reported reductions in incidents and injuries. Some of this improvement is due to advances in technology: everything from the introduction of gloves that allow workers to comfortably carry out their work, to the most up-to-date remotely operated machinery. Safety has improved but only modestly, and not for all the reasons that some believe. Many organisations are

improving safety slowly and claiming victory despite the distracting 'virtual safety' practices they are pushing on to their staff and workforce. The downstream impact is that genuine safety improvement is moving at an ever-slowing pace.

Company directors/executives are legally bound to create a safe place for their employees to work and be mindful of other people in the vicinity of their operations. I hear many stories of board meetings that have safety as the first item on the agenda, but the short amount of time allotted amounts to nothing more than lip service. Many operate without a safety strategy and without a consistent and replicable way to lead safety. Many pile initiative on initiative, process on process. Industry is flooded with attitude-changing programmes, awareness courses, IT systems for near-miss reporting, 'zero' visions, safety observation schemes and a myriad of other well-intended but largely unscientific programmes to improve safety performance. Organisations spend money on these flawed schemes soothed by the rationale that they are investing in safety. What's missing from this scenario? An understanding of the drivers of human behaviour.

The story of safety over the years appears in many available publications. It is ably described in Dominic Coopers excellent paper, 'The efficacy of industrial safety science constructs for addressing serious injuries & fatalities (SIFs).' The paper reviews occupational injury trends from 1986 to 2018, and includes comment on safety Initiatives, unemployment rate, and notable disasters during this period. (Safety Science, Volume 120, December 2019, Pages 164-178). Dominic's paper title may lead you to believe that he is an academic. He is, but he also used to be a scaffolder. He has eaten in the site canteen with everyone else!

Many typical mature organisations have multiple safety processes — often, so many processes that it becomes impossible to tell which are helping create a safe workplace and which stymie safe working. Organisational leaders are often reluctant to remove a defunct or unnecessary process in case someone is injured following its removal. Some safety initiatives have served companies well, but, like training wheels on a bicycle, could now be holding them back. The right thing to do is only go forward with what is really improving or maintaining safety performance. Some organisations spend time identifying and removing 'distractions to safety.' This includes removing unhelpful/unnecessary bureaucracy and recognising that some processes are out of date. The best leaders run frequent, simple worker surveys to feed the lists of distractions to be analysed and sorted one way or another.

The emergence of social media has created a huge impact on society, politics, organisations, families etc. These days some people appear to be more influenced by influencers than they are by experts. There's a lot of unchecked and unwise bullshit in the world today and that's sadly also true in the world of projects and organisations including safety. Who would have thought there would be radical disrupters in the work of safety? They are out there for sure. I saw it on Facebook!

Safety is now in a place where a serious review/reset is required. A combination of legislation, company safety processes, and client safety processes have led to a world where there are now too many significant distractions to the creation of a safe workplace. Safety compliance is a multi layered beast that can and does deliver dangerous levels of distractions resulting in significant instances that I call 'blind eye syndrome:' knowledge workers and manual workers alike do their best within the environment set for them by their leaders, feeling helpless to improve their workplace environments.

4. What does safety look like right now?

Many organisations operate fully funded safety compliance but do not fully fund safety leadership support or training. These organisations ignore the rich potential offered by the eyes and ears of their employees. The only people that know what's really happening on sites are the people working in their various workplaces. When I suggest to directors of some organisations that they run a simple climate survey with their workers I get immediate resistance. They will commonly improvise on a stereotypical set of deluded reasons why that should not happen.

I suggested carrying out an anonymous climate survey to the CEO of a UK PLC. He responded, "We are a listed company, the happiness of our workforce must improve every year. We are not stupid; we will not be doing the survey you propose.'' Other less cynical leaders may say, "Gosh, that sounds like a lot of work," or, "We already do an annual staff survey." I often hear, "It's quite a task arranging worker surveys. Once a year is probably enough." Some folks in leadership roles should not be there!

There are of course organisations that run climate surveys with all employees on a monthly basis. They make good use of the data so that everyone sees that it's worthwhile. Their investment goes partly into the survey but mostly into 'making sure we are all able to make the required adjustments that will both keep people safe and keep the crucial feedback flow alive.' These companies know how to keep the feedback tap turned to 'full on.' What is the right interval to ensure that all the crucial information is learned and gets to the decision makers? Some exceptional organisations carry out feedback in real time (in the same way that computer games deliver continuous streams of feedback and reinforcement). A professional sports person playing in front of a crowd gets a steady stream of praise or a steady stream of disapproval; either way it's a steady stream of feedback. Most workplaces do not have this level of volume or frequency of feedback, far from it.

5. Is everyone happy with safety?

The pragmatic viewpoint regarding today's safety is to be cautiously optimistic. I am unhappy about a lot of things happening right now in the name of safety. I am irritated by anything that has morphed into a cottage industry comprising people taking money away from real safety and spending it on PR. Pictures of irrelevant nonperformers wearing bow ties or ball gowns accepting safety awards that have very little to do with improving safety annoy me. Measures like 'number of hours since last accident' are a dubious thing to make into a headline. Organisations derive

comfort because they have their safety departments, safety professionals and their monthly safety measures and reports with their coloured graphs.

The paradox is that virtual safety is both complex and complicated and real safety is simple and straightforward. So why do most organisations choose virtual safety? I think that 'real safety' is glanced at, then dismissed as too simplistic. Teaching leadership skills to the chain of command is a misunderstood and unrealised keystone to success. All the best organisations do this competently and quietly. Dr Scott Geller talks at length about 'actively caring.' Is this non-macho credo too simple for the typical 'virtual safety' organisation?

Executives seem to desire one-page summary reports with coloured graphs showing red, amber and green coloured numbers. Red bad, green good. Up bad, down good. Work performance is made 'virtual' for these folks by their administrators. One safety professional said to me, "Our executives only really like instant pudding." It means that they can review safety quickly which is a good thing for them. The chances are that the politics of belonging to an executive group are going to be much more enticing than a serious discussion on safety.

In my past work life, I sat among these groups of senior people and played that game — I guess I have some more apologising to do. Of course, there are organisations where safety is taken seriously by its executives and they do not fall for the temptations of simple graphs, a nod and a wink and moving on to something more fun. This executive level is where safety starts in an organisation.

Barriers to a basic level of performance are deeply ingrained in some organisational cultures. Mature organisations have a strong collection of behavioural patterns that have been shaped over time. Organisations are perfectly designed to get what they get now. Each organisation's current workplace environment supports all the day-to-day behaviours, both functional and dysfunctional, maintaining them over time. This is known as 'institutional repertoire'. How would you describe your organisations institutional repertoire?

6. What changes are people/projects/organisations asking for right now.

It's likely that the future will involve the use of more AI products. Covid popularised the use of proximity sensors. Working conditions could be monitored, technology could set off alarms when people wander into exclusion zones. Drones were used extensively after the Christchurch earthquake to monitor the stability of partially damaged buildings. Technology already means that young people can avoid lying in mud in tunnels because of the very latest in surveying equipment, not to forget the modern technology involved in the tunnelling itself. Mental health is now much talked about in organisations and has often been passed on to the safety department. I find it ironic that most of the stress in an organisation is caused by the actions of its leaders, yes, the ones saying stress in the workplace is a bad thing!

Technology, like all new sciences, can be used for good or for evil. During Covid, some companies monitored the active screen time of their employees. Workers' vans are fitted with GPS sensors, monitoring all movements. Tachographs have been used in heavy goods vehicles for years. CCTV monitoring is being utilised more and more. AI has the potential to be a massive step forward and it could also be scary and misused. Leaders must decide to what extent AI can genuinely help and at what point its use becomes Orwellian.

7. What are people currently asking us (Hollin) regarding safety?

Many organisations that contact us have a problem of some kind with safety incidents and injuries. They may have a client that is pressurising them, they may be being investigated by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Occasionally, they want us to tell them why their worker threw themselves off their structure!

If an organisation has an immediate need for an opinion from us about safety, a conversation will take place between the client representative and one of our experts. Many ask us to design a safety programme for them with a fully costed solution to be considered in competition with other suppliers. This request is fatuous, it reminds me of the classic request for us to propose a brand-new idea that has been fully tested! There is no such thing as an 'off the shelf' safety programme. Organisational behaviours are situational, they are unique.

Our response is always to 'find out what's really happening now, everywhere in the organisation.' Step one is to agree on the steps that will help us discover the extent of the problems so that we can gather and analyse some data and workers opinions. Then we can have an informed discussion regarding a prognosis going forward. It is common for us to unearth behaviours in organisations that the executives were utterly unaware of. The keys to the best solutions on safety are discovery, analysis and then strategy. We often go forward in success with the clients that demonstrate wisdom, patience, and great leadership.

8. Key learning points from this paper

a) Every organisation has a legal and moral responsibility to create safe workplace environments for all the people involved in their enterprise, whatever that may be.
b) It's a basic human right to be provided with a safe place to work by your employer.
c) Freedom to speak up is a big-ticket item on safety.
d) Contracts full of threats for non-performance don't produce safe working environments, or efficient production.
e) When safety is skilfully lead, safety thrives, and everyone goes home, safe, every day.
f) If safety is excellent, everything else usually is too.

g) The people carrying out the productive tasks are working in environments created and maintained by their leadership. Safety performance is primarily the responsibility of the organisational leadership.

h) I define the 'safety chain of command' as the people in the hierarchy that create safe places for people to work, including all the people carrying out the work. These are the practitioners, i.e. the people doing the work.

i) Many typical mature organisations have multiple safety processes, often so many processes that it becomes impossible to tell which are helping create a safe workplace and which stymie safe working.

j) Some safety initiatives have served companies well, but, like training wheels on a bicycle, could now be holding them back.

k) There's a lot of unchecked and unwise bullshit in the world today and that's sadly also true in the world of projects and organisations including safety.

l) Many organisations operate fully funded safety compliance but do not fully fund safety leadership support or training.

m) I am unhappy about a lot of things happening right now in the name of safety.

n) The paradox is that virtual safety is both complex and complicated and real safety is simple and straightforward.

o) I hope that this paper may spark or at least will assist the badly needed step change in safety performance.

p) Safety is currently in the doldrums. Everyone needs to wake up and smell the cappuccino.

q) Good leaders create and maintain a productive, happy and safe workplace environment for all. Great leaders also collect feedback from everyone working in their environment and adjusts accordingly. That's it in a nutshell…

9. Further reading.

If you'd like to learn more, Howard's books are available from www.hollin.co.uk

- Safety leadership
- Escape the too hard box
- Power coaching
- The too busy trap
- The steps before step one
- Notes on behavioural management techniques
- Ideas for wimps
- The adaptive strategy

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Please feel free to share this paper with the people in your own safety chain of command.