



CASE STUDY

Advancing a Vision for What's Possible

How BNSF's Intermodal Operations team created a culture aimed at zero

Situation

Covering more than 32,500 route miles, BNSF Railway is the largest intermodal railroad in the US, seamlessly handling more than 5 million intermodal loads annually. Its network is made up of some of the largest, most modern intermodal facilities in the industry, where it is responsible for loading and unloading freight 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

BNSF's Intermodal Operations team is in the business of moving things. The team helps oversee the movement of freight by trailer and container on railcars.

For many years, BNSF's intermodal facilities were all operated by contractor work groups. However, as the team looked for ways to operate more effectively and efficiently, some of those terminal operations were transitioned to BNSF employees. As this transformation has taken place, the leaders within Intermodal Operations felt it was important to better align their work groups with BNSF's overall safety vision of a workplace free of accidents and injuries.

"We believe all injuries and all accidents are preventable," says Brant Ring, BNSF's vice president of business unit operations. "And we don't just say that. Safety is a value to us. We believe, at the core of our being, that we can do this work without harm to people or equipment."

Solution

BNSF's Intermodal Operations team partnered with DEKRA to advance the team's safety action plan centered on a theme of focusing on and reducing exposure and building a culture of engagement. The effort started with a focus on the leadership skills of the frontline leaders and managers. The team set their sights on next-level safety performance. The next level of safety performance for BNSF's Intermodal Operations team is a coveted goal—zero injuries, zero incidents.

While there are metrics to gauge progress toward this goal, Ring points out that people are at the very heart of this mission. "It takes people to perform that work. People like you and me who want to come to work every day and feel the reward of a job well done and go home to their loved ones and their family members at the end of the day safe."

Across its intermodal facilities, people are charged with managing the delivery of freight safely and on-time. The key was to convey the message of zero broadly, so that individuals and workgroups understood the goal, believed it, and put it into practice with everything they did.

Ring clarifies, "Here at the railroad with our programs and our messages, it's not about the content. We're very good about getting the content to the front lines. But how do we really

connect with those people through messaging and with clear expectations, so that in that moment of choice, they choose the safe path?"

Once the leadership team had established the right safety governance, worked on enhancing their safety leadership skills, and were aligned on the safety mission, it was time to engage frontline employees and leaders more directly in the safety efforts. This was accomplished by implementing the Behavioral Accident Prevention Process[®] system (a peer-to-peer safety engagement system) at some locations, and engaging everyone in a program called "Approaching Others," which cultivated strong safety communication practices on the front lines and encouraged behaviors that advanced the zero-injury goal.

"We do that through training. We do that through safety messages. We do that in our day-to-day conversations," Ring explains. "We teach our employees in terms of what it means to accept feedback, how to give guidance feedback, how to accept guidance feedback, how to transfer these skills to our professional lives and our [personal] lives."

Culture change was also part of the improvement strategy.

"Part of our responsibility [as leaders] is to drive culture," Ring says. "Culture drives behavior. And behavior, at the end of the day, is what gets people home safely. And part of our responsibility is to set high expectations and an outline for the organization of what can happen, and then set a path forward for how can we do more good for more people, more quickly."

Developing leaders to guide the safety effort and inspire people to engage in the process were critical elements of the Intermodal Operations team's path forward. This meant describing a compelling vision for what was possible and building enthusiasm and optimism for the future.

"DEKRA helped us organize our thoughts around how to approach and engage the folks in the front lines because we believe that those that are closest to the work, those closest to the risks and exposure, should have the most to say about it. And that's really the essence of the value that DEKRA brought to us. How do we engage those people in this conversation and have them help paint the picture for us in terms of what safety could be, what safety should be, and what safety will be?"

At a Glance:

- BNSF Railway is the largest intermodal railroad in the US, handling more than 5 million intermodal loads annually.
- BNSF's Intermodal Operations team partnered with DEKRA to enhance safety leadership. culture, governance and engage employees to move their culture to a focus on identifying, controlling and reducing exposure. All in the service of eliminating injuries and incidents.
- BNSF's Intermodal Operations team, representing more than 600 BNSF employees and over 1.5M employee hours, ended 2017 with a reportable frequency rate of 0.54.

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– Brant Ring, BNSF's vp of business unit operations

Results

Communication in the intermodal facilities is better than ever. Workers approach one another openly to discuss exposure and find collaborative solutions to ensure no one is working at risk. The change in culture is apparent. People believe zero is possible and strive to live BNSF's safety vision every day.

In 2011, BNSF's Intermodal Operations team ended the year with a reportable frequency ratio of a 3.75. At the end of 2017, they were at a 0.54. Along the way and through intentional transfer of best practices, outcomes for contractor workgroups are also much improved.

Despite this remarkable success, the Intermodal Operations team isn't finished. "Our work in safety is never done," Ring says. "It does feel good to drive progress. But we're a long way from having eliminated all the risks to exposure from our day-to-day work practices. And we have new people coming on board every day."

Continuing to drive progress means never losing sight of what is possible, Ring says. "What's possible is that we can do this work, no matter the size of the operation or the complexity of the operation, we can do this work without harm to people or equipment."