



The **4 Pillars** of World-Class Safety

White Paper

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What does it take to be labeled world-class in safety?

There is generally no agreed answer to that question, despite years of research by consultants, safety professionals and academics. But after 50 years of combined experience in consulting on safety to some of the largest, more admired, most profitable, and most “safety serious” organizations in the world, we have identified four principles – four pillars – that we believe define world-class safety.

The pillars are based on DEKRA’s research, the experience of the authors, and the experience of more than 50 colleagues who help our client companies improve organizational safety day in and day out, with input from top Safety and Health leaders from many of those same client organizations.

To begin with, we can state with certainty that achieving a rate of injuries below a certain threshold does not, in and of itself, qualify an organization for world-class status. We say this because achieving a number means nothing without regard to how

that number is achieved. A low injury rate is one outcome that results from creating the conditions that qualify an organization for world-class status. And in our view, organizations don’t lose that distinction if they suffer a one-time catastrophic safety incident.

Indeed, we have found that those organizations that are on the path to world-class safety put into effect a set of measures and metrics, including injury rate data, that not only confirm safety success but also create a sense of discomfort and unrest when certain leading metrics begin to show an undesirable change, even if the lagging results are exceptional.

But while numbers and hard data are important, they are only a reflection of a critically few characteristics that shape an organization’s safety results. In our experience, what distinguishes the best safety companies from all the other organizations are four distinct pillars. These pillars lie below the organizational and safety foundation. This paper is devoted to describing the pillars and explaining why they are vital factors in creating and sustaining a world-class safety organization. The pillars are:

1. Passion for People – a deep personal commitment to eliminating all harm to people. This commitment must be driven by top leadership and permeate all levels of the organization.

2. Focus on Exposure Control – a relentless focus on the exposures that contribute to accidents. A focus on exposure is a radical departure from a focus on hazards or unsafe actions. It requires probing deeply into the factors causing vulnerability to address them before accidents and injuries occur.

3. Resource and Systems Alignment – providing adequate resources and supportive systems to meet organizational objectives. This means having enough trained people and equipment as well as supportive safety and performance management systems to ensure that the right things get done safely as well as on schedule.

4. Embracing Change – a recognition that science, technology and generational change are inevitable and positive. Change is seen as a chance to further control and reduce exposure. It is a given that improvement must be never-ending and that where there are breakthroughs or better ways, they must be welcomed and mastered.

In this paper, we are building a model for world-class safety, based on these four pillars. We know of no companies that currently meet all the requirements set forth here. We have seen some of these characteristics in some of the best safety companies we have worked with but we have yet to see all of them in any one company. We combine them here to set the bar purposely high, because –

- a. We believe this is what is required to be world-class in safety, and
- b. We want to encourage organizations to strive for excellence in all four areas.

Let's look at each of these pillars in turn and explore how each helps to answer the question, "What does it mean to be world-class in safety?"

1. Passion for People

World-class safety begins with Executive Leadership. Executive leaders, including the Board of Directors, CEO and the senior management team, must see it as their personal responsibility to keep people safe every day. In the most successful companies, this drive is rooted in a code of ethics. Many leaders support safety efforts because they recognize that safety is a critical building block to creating an organization of willing and engaged workers. However, in companies that truly excel in safety, the passion for safety comes from a deeper place, from the hearts as well as the minds of their leaders. We refer to it as a personal safety ethic. When safety derives from a personal safety ethic, the leader is committed to the safety of people because "the right thing to do" is deeply embedded in their personal value system.

Executives in world-class safety organizations instill safety as a core value, not as one of several priorities. Priorities change; values are forever. When safety is a core value, it becomes infused in the way every job gets done. Example: In one client company, we were told that safety was so embedded in the culture that an employee simply would not violate a procedure. We observed a range of shop-floor tasks being performed and talked to numerous employees. When we asked workers why they followed the procedures, which took longer than taking a short cut, they appeared taken aback by the question. "We just don't do that here," was answer we heard over and over. One employee said, "We are committed to everyone going home safe every day." Following procedures, obeying safety rules, and looking out for each other – employees regarded these activities as part of their commitment to one another. No one we spoke to suggested it would be easier or would save time to not follow procedures. Safety was a value lived by every employee.

In world-class safety organizations, executive leaders are role models and sponsors of safety activities. Like executives everywhere, they constantly challenge their people to achieve better outcomes, but they emphasize that safety comes first. As advocates, they initiate conversations about safety at all levels, asking, for example "What gets in the way of doing your job safely?", and take follow-up action where appropriate. They ask thought-provoking questions about safety and encourage others to do the same. Questions like: "What are you doing these days to keep your people safe," and "How could you tell if the standards of safety were slipping in your area of responsibility?"

Finally, leaders who lead from a personal safety ethic do not draw the line at safety on the job. They are equally passionate about off-the-job safety and embrace protecting anyone who comes into their organization. They share their knowledge, systems and philosophy with anyone who is interested in learning their perspective and they are especially focused on helping others to improve. In our experience, no organization can hope to achieve world-class safety status unless leaders at all levels feel empathy and accept personal responsibility for safeguarding the work force, their families and the community.

2. Focus on Exposure Control

A single-minded drive to achieve an aggressive incident rate goal is, in our view, self-defeating. It almost always leads to behaviors and actions that discourage honest reporting of accidents, incidents, and near misses, thus distorting reality. This is the exact opposite of what organizations that are serious about safety do: They encourage reporting, then work to uncover and understand exposure. In world-class organizations, people are empowered to report exposures, take control, and, if necessary, pause the task or stop production until the exposure has been mitigated.

When leaders understand that safety does not improve until exposure is controlled, reduced or eliminated, they can avoid one of the biggest traps: the assumption that most accidents are the result of employee mistakes that are solely because of the employees and not the result of leadership or system failures. Leaders in organizations that aspire to world-class status are proactive in getting colleagues to avoid starting with a blaming orientation and jumping to conclusions. Rather than assuming human error or human error alone, they strive to understand the influences on decision making that led to the incident. In an organization fixated on injuries rather than exposure, people decide how much exposure to accept based on a calculation they make to determine the likelihood of an injury occurring. They focus on the likelihood of injury rather than assessing the level of exposure and whether it is controlled to an acceptable level. Invariably, the calculation a person makes on whether they are likely to get hurt becomes flawed. They experience so many “successes” (non-accidents) that they fall victim to the “wishful thinking fallacy” – the belief that despite known dangers, people aren’t going to get injured.

Organizations that operate at a world-class level are firmly ahead of this issue. They help employees make safety decisions based on the level of exposure rather than the likelihood of an accident. Why? Because once an employee is “at risk” – meaning they are exposed to an unacceptable level of exposure and/or the exposure is not controlled – the outcome is no longer within their control. They may be lucky today, but one

“I DIDN’T THINK I’D GET HURT”

An employee in one client company decided to step up on a 14-inch cinder-block wall to access a piece of equipment he was working on. The increase in exposure, he later told us, seemed slight, not worthy of a second thought. The worker mounted the wall, then slipped and fell, injuring himself seriously. He dropped 14 inches onto a piece of iron welded to an I-beam, dislodging his jaw and ear canal. When questioned about whether he thought it was acceptable to climb on the wall, he told us “No.” Then why, we asked, did he step up on the wall? “I didn’t think I’d get hurt,” he answered. In other words, he made the decision based on his calculation of the low likelihood of injury, not based on the higher exposure level. This organization had not developed a deep value for focusing on and controlling exposure.

day their luck will run out – we just don't know when. For this reason, world-class organizations proactively verify that employees understand the concept of exposure, know how to control the exposure and are using those controls to the fullest. This verification process assures leadership that either exposure control is happening or, if not, what led to the decision to work at an increased level of exposure.

In organizations focused on exposure, people understand that potential matters. They pay disproportionate attention to those exposures with the greatest potential for life-altering injuries and fatalities. World-class organizations never lose sight of their dedication to the elimination of all injuries, but they are proportional in their allocation of resources and in their response.

One client, a railroad executive, resisted moving toward the concept of exposure and especially the idea of potential exposure. Brushing aside our studies and stories, he was convinced that focusing on reducing injuries was the path to achieving world-class injury rates. Then the “great pork chop incident” occurred. An employee at a safety recognition dinner bit down on a pork chop bone and broke a tooth. The incident was reportable. The organization convened a high-level group to discuss how to prevent this incident from ever happening again – including the idea of serving tofu (to railroad men) at future company events. When the executive realized how much management time and effort his relentless focus on injuries, especially FRA reportables, was taking, he had a revelation: ultimately the focus on injuries was siphoning off resources that could have been better used to mitigate dangerous potential exposures.

Often employees in organizations share with us high-potential, near-miss events that did not receive the attention they deserved because they didn't result in an injury. The problem? No recordable, no drive to improve, and a credibility issue for management.

Organizations that shift their emphasis from stopping accidents to identifying, mitigating, and eliminating exposure lead the way in safety. Their leaders understand that exposure is upstream of incidents; it can be measured, and intervention at the exposure point allows them to control it. We know that there are hundreds and

thousands of exposures for each incident. A focus on incident data gives a false sense of security. Like a medical X-ray that shows hidden threats to the human body, identifying and measuring exposure provides a rare view of the risks to safety that lie hidden beneath the visible surface of the organization.

Even when an organization achieves safety excellence as measured by lagging metrics, those in the world-class category continue to build safety muscle. They also build the skills that enable their people to detect subtle changes in exposure and to look at a job, environment, or situation through a new lens to uncover previously unrecognized exposures.

3. Resource and Systems Alignment

While the first two pillars --Passion for People and Focus on Exposure Control – can enhance organizational performance and safety in the short term, world-class companies sustain the effort over time through a network of systems and resources that are adequate to support organizational objectives.

Resources

When an organization's resources are not aligned with its objectives, workers pay the price. Consider Pat, a frontline – and perennially overworked – supervisor. Pat loved the company he worked for, but he resented it too. At the time we talked to him, the workload he was shouldering had forced him to work 40 days in a row. And that wasn't unusual. He said he had missed the last 23 events his three kids had participated in – birthday parties, sporting competitions and the like – and no one in management had expressed the slightest concern for his wellbeing or appreciation for his dedication. An unusual case? No, Pat told us, all leaders and most employees were working the same way, and would for the foreseeable future. “We're short staffed, always,” he explained. Pat and his fellow workers had lost control of their lives and no one seemed to care.

When the executive team heard Pat's story and others like it, they knew they had to do something. We were working with them on how to use safety to change the culture in their 100,000-employee organization. As part of this process, the Executives identified six tenets to guide them. The one inspired by Pat's story was expressed this way:

- We set work pace and production targets with team member wellbeing at the forefront.

The company had a history of focusing on one metric – throughput – without regard to staffing levels, employee turnover, safety or other considerations. Some leaders hit production targets regardless of staffing levels; in the past, they had been regarded as heroes. It took time, but executive management dealt with the underlying issues that created the reliability problems and adjusted production targets in the short term until the issues could be resolved. It will take years before the workforce loses its skepticism, but Pat says that he has been able to see more of his children's events and has at least one day off per week.

Improvement in safety over the long term requires having the right people, in sufficient numbers, in the right jobs, properly trained and compensated, with the right materials and equipment, supported by their superiors, and empowered to identify exposures and faulty work practices, and take corrective action.

Most organizations learn the hard way that the consequence of a misalignment of objectives and resources achieves business goals only in the short term and usually at the expense of safety and morale.

In the back of their minds, managers know that if they lag on safety training, have a shortage of qualified people, or make a habit of canceling, shortening, or postponing safety meetings, they are sending a negative message to their workforce about the value of safety. By so doing, they are inviting people to take risks they shouldn't be taking. The line between the start of a rise in exposure and an eventual injury is virtually impossible to detect, but in retrospect the connection can be seen as inevitable.

Systems Alignment

The performance management system validates to employees what is truly valued. This system includes employee selection, compensation, training and development, and organizational structure. World-class organizations use this system to encourage actions and motivate behaviors that build and sustain a culture of safety excellence. World-class organizations don't use lagging metrics alone to measure success and failure in safety. Instead, they take the time and effort required to clearly articulate the safety expectations for each person in the organization. Some organizations spell out and prominently post a statement of pledges, as simple as "What you can expect from us" and "What we expect from you."

Dovetailing with the performance management system are an organization's safety systems. The safety systems of world-class organizations are primarily focused on identifying, controlling, understanding and reducing exposure – not merely avoiding accidents and injuries. This does not mean that these organizations ignore safety programs that assure compliance. Compliance is regarded as a given and is non-negotiable. But more than that, the safety systems provide employees with the knowledge and skills to willingly fulfill their safety obligations and to do so in a way that promotes a culture of safety of oneself and of others.

Safety systems that carry the active support of the workforce create an organizational "pull" for safety. We know that organizations can transition from "push" to "pull" only if leadership drives safety with a genuine passion for people. Indeed, the idea of creating a pull for safety – where employees at all levels become eager to participate in and have a recognized role in safety – is built into all great safety systems. In many organizations, safety is regarded as something "we have to do." In world-class organizations, it becomes something "we want to do."

Having passionate safety leaders, a focus on exposure and supportive safety and performance management systems will sustain a culture of safety excellence for many years. However, to cope with changing business conditions, one additional pillar is needed to survive periods of organizational chaos and disruption.

4. Embracing Change

The fourth and final pillar that distinguishes world-class safety organizations relates to how they create an environment where change is embraced and where change is very deliberate and implemented with skill and excellence. We all recognize that change is difficult, yet individual and organizational success typically depends on change and, in some instances, significant, disruptive or even radical change.

Change in these organizations is not seen as a bad thing because change has been utilized for improvement in the past and tends to be well thought-out and planned. For organizations to be relentlessly focused on exposure, they must be open to new ways of overcoming and controlling existing exposures. They must also be willing to let go of those things that don't add value. Change in a world-class organization does not simply mean getting a new program implemented. Change is understanding what is necessary to advance performance, improve organizational functioning and enhance people's capability to execute flawlessly with new or different methods or technology. The organization assesses the current situation, then sets realistic objectives on what can be achieved and proceeds to develop a tactical plan that lays out the resources required. These organizations go one step further in their tactical plan: they identify what actions will be needed at each level to create enthusiasm for the change and to help people envision what is possible. It is not until the assessment and planning is complete that the change is implemented.

One organization we worked with had a significant exposure problem on an assembly line. People were exposed by having to do repetitive lifting of heavy boxes. An engineering solution called for redesigning the entire line, but management soon realized they couldn't install the new equipment necessary in the limited space available. The cost to expand the building and install the new equipment couldn't be justified. One engineer suggested providing each employee with wearable robotic lifting aids. Before they started their transition in safety, such an idea in

this organization would have been ridiculed and quickly dismissed. In fact, some people were initially skeptical, but as workers started testing wearable equipment, the skepticism quickly faded. Fast forward six months and employees on the line were fitted with wearable robotics. The wearable equipment not only allowed employees to safely carry the boxes but also made it impossible to employ poor lifting techniques. This success story is hardly unique. The lesson: those organizations that embrace change and are willing to push the limits of technology are going to continue to push the limits on just how good they can be in safety.

The overriding objective of embracing change isn't achieving new speed records. Rather it's achieving whatever goal(s) the organization sets for itself. To have the change embedded deeply and sustainably is critical. World-class organizations are not afraid to evaluate objectively the idea that what they are doing is not optimal, that there may be a better way of accomplishing their objectives. They will stop performing activities and programs that add little or no value – but first they must be willing to subject those things to scrutiny. Each system or requirement under scrutiny is studied to assure that its elimination will not have unintended consequences; once satisfied, the change is carefully planned and executed.

It is easy to see how leaders might resist change, especially those who are, or view themselves, as successful. But they do so at their peril. World-class organizations proactively promote diversity and creativity in thinking. They not only embrace new ideas, they solicit them aggressively. They do not stand in place, marveling at their efforts and congratulating themselves and each other on their successes. Instead, they are constantly pushing the envelope, searching for better ways to control and reduce the exposures employees face daily, pushing for new and more effective ways of doing what needs to be done. They are constantly evolving, and when they can, they embrace revolution or breakthrough ideas and technology. They regard disruptive technologies and new ways to eliminate or control exposure as opportunities to be examined as possible game changers.

Summary

Organizations can achieve outstanding safety results using a variety of different methodologies. The same is true for Olympic athletes. Those that do the hard work, put in the effort and succeed are truly champions. Leading an organization to true world-class safety is incredibly difficult. It is a journey that is never quite finished. There is always one more rung on the ladder of progress to climb. When the drive to world-class safety comes from the heart, is ethics-based, and engages the whole organization, the journey to a safer future never ends.

So, what is world-class safety? Organizations that are world-class in safety have four underlying pillars: They are driven by leaders who have a strong personal safety ethic, become champions for safety and drive that ethic throughout the organization where it becomes engrained as a core value. They focus employees at all levels on continuously seeking to identify, control and reduce exposure. They align their objectives, resources and systems to create and reinforce the desired culture. Finally, they welcome change and pursue opportunities for continuous improvement while proactively seeking breakthroughs to accelerate the journey.

Interested in accelerating your journey to world-class safety?



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