

A photograph of a construction site at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. In the foreground, two construction workers in hard hats and safety vests are silhouetted against the bright light. They are standing on a metal scaffolding structure that is part of a building under construction. The scaffolding consists of numerous vertical and horizontal metal poles connected by cross-braces.

Building a Safety Talent-Rich Organization: 5 Disciplines for Aligning Talent and Safety

DEKRA

Do you have the right people in the right places to drive your safety strategy? Many senior leaders recognize that achieving world-class performance requires new competencies and skills for safety professionals and all leaders. The challenge is that few organizations currently give strategic attention to safety talent development or have the systems to accurately assess safety talent strength. Even fewer focus on safety leadership as critically as other leadership competencies for their senior executives. And addressing this gap is about to get a lot harder:

- Experts predict a dramatic shortfall between the growing number of safety positions and the number of qualified professionals who will be available to fill them. One recent study found that employers plan to hire 25,000 safety professionals over the next five years, but only 12,000 students are expected to graduate from programs related to occupational health and safety.
- Across industries we are seeing “inverted bell curves” where talent is weighted heavily at senior and primary positions, with insufficient qualified succession pools at mid-levels.
- Increased competition for talent has rapidly shifted the demographic landscape, with operational leadership and other competencies given priority over safety.

Keeping up with the growing demand for safety talent and safety competence clearly requires solutions that extend beyond traditional staffing approaches. It will take a robust safety talent strategy instead. This paper proposes five disciplines for building a safety talent-rich organization and suggests ways to position safety along the career path of every future executive.

The Importance of Safety Talent

“The talent void in safety positions has transformed from an organizational challenge into a critical business issue”

– Dina Pyron, Partner, Ernst & Young Oil & Gas Sector

Safety management has historically been an afterthought as a place for the most talented professionals in the organization. In part, this is due to the stigma that safety is a “shop floor” issue focused on how workers interact with technology. Safety, however, is not an isolated function; it is deeply integrated with every aspect of organizational life. Exposures to risk are created not just at the shop floor but also through management decisions, organizational policies, and cultural norms. The leader’s value for safety—what she focuses on, ignores, chooses to emphasize or delegate to others—sets the example for how people approach safety issues. This is why safety leaders are so critical. When there is strong alignment between safety and talent, leaders are better equipped to build the organization’s commitment to safety.

Organizations squander a valuable resource when they limit the role of the safety professional to running programs and enforcing rules. When senior leaders engage safety professionals as partners in change, however, they gain access to safety and performance expertise that can make a critical difference in operational performance. Similarly, operating leaders who have experience in safety are better equipped to make the right call about decisions that affect overall organizational functioning. In talent management terms this means that in high-functioning organizations safety is both a “path” and a “gateway” for career development.

Safety as a Path — For safety experts (those whose chief role is safety related or who fill safety functions), the challenge is to meet both the organization’s need for expertise as well as the individual’s need for growth. Rather than leaving safety experts in a kind of specialist cul-de-sac, effective leaders make safety a path to executive positions in the organization. Career development activities for

safety experts should focus on expanding the individual’s skills beyond technical expertise to broader leadership competencies.

One company successfully developed its safety professionals by training them to advise the senior leadership team. The role of these professionals was initially narrow: collecting data, compiling reports, and acting as enforcers. Rarely did their insight make its way to where safety strategy was formed. Using serious injuries as a focal point, the safety professionals were coached on how to analyze and interpret data as well as how to collaborate with others to address their findings. The safety professionals now partner with executives to assess and address risk. They point out areas of concern, advise leaders on how best to apply resources, and provide an on the ground picture of safety functioning that executives wouldn’t get otherwise.

Safety as a Gateway — In addition to expanding and developing the role of safety experts, high-functioning organizations also use safety as a “gateway” that leaders must pass through their way to more senior positions, much the same way that operational positions have been used for years.

Paul O’Neill’s tenure at Alcoa is frequently cited as the exemplar of connecting leadership and safety. Among his first actions as CEO, O’Neill made safety outcomes the primary indicator of senior leadership performance. From a career-development standpoint, positioning safety as a gateway means articulating specific safety competencies that leaders must possess and placing future leaders in positions that give them hands-on experience with managing safety issues.

The specific ways in which an organization aligns safety and organizational talent will vary depending on the organization, its size, objectives, structure, and other factors.

Building a Talent-Rich Organization

“The single biggest constraint on the success of the organization is the ability to get and to hang on to enough of the right people.”

– Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great”

The goal of all talent management strategy is to build what we call a “talent rich” organization: a place where we have enough of the right people in all the right places to support the company’s mission. Safety talent-rich organizations continuously think about where they are and where they want to be—and who they need to get there. There are five critical disciplines that support alignment between safety and talent.

1. Understand the Role of Safety Talent

When safety is a strategic activity, the safety practitioner's position, function, and contribution must necessarily be broader than that of a technician. Organizations need to think of safety talent development as something that extends beyond technical expertise. The highest-ranking safety leaders need more than profound safety experience and knowledge; they also need the skills and organizational status to function as effective change agents. To begin making this transition, senior leaders should focus on how safety roles are defined and the career progression of these roles. They should examine:

- **Work Profiles** — Are there job descriptions for safety experts in the organization? How are the roles described? Do leadership-development programs include safety competencies? How are competencies assessed and developed?
- **Career Path** — Is there a career path for safety professionals? If so, does it include advancement to greater safety responsibilities? Advancement to responsibilities beyond safety? Does the career path for high-potential executives mandate a rotation within the safety arena?

2. Build a Place for Safety in Talent Management Systems

Talent search, assessment and selection, and retention all support an organization's strategic objectives—including safety. Executives need to ensure that their systems do more than fill open positions. They should consider how short and long-term safety objectives influence these activities, engage safety talent in the ongoing success of the organization, and provide sufficient professional opportunities to facilitate progression along the career track. Some critical focus areas include:

- **Talent Assessment and Selection** — How do senior leaders assess safety talent in the organization? Is safety part of the assessment criteria for leadership selection and development?
- **Safety Talent Development** — How is safety talent developed? Is there a development path for safety management? Is there an objective for safety talent development?
- **Safety Talent Search** — How do executives identify talent that supports their safety objectives? How is a safety leader selected? What does the organization's assimilation process look like for the safety professional?

- **Talent Retention** — Are there sufficient opportunities for individuals to progress along the safety career track? Is the safety professional treated with the same respect afforded to other critical personnel?

3. Develop a Cultural Value for Safety Leadership

To foster great safety leaders, the organization's executives must have a deep understanding of, and appreciation for, safety culture. Senior leaders should drive discussions around the value of safety leadership as a competence, expectations of what good safety leadership looks like, and safety's role in the wider business. Specifically leaders will want to ask about:

- **Safety Leadership's Value** — Does senior leadership believe safety competence is important to the organization? How is the value for safety expressed in organizational priorities? How is safety weighed in key business discussions?
- **Expectations** — Has the organization defined what good safety leadership looks like? What behaviors do effective safety leaders practice?
- **Vision** — What is the organization's vision for safety? How is this vision aligned with other aspects of the business? How are conflicts between the safety vision and other business goals resolved?

4. Identify and Address the Safety Risks that Rise from an Organization's Talent

Talent management plays an important role in aligning organizational priorities around safety. Decisions about staffing levels, supervisory development, promotions, budgets, and new projects all introduce changes in the organization that affect how people behave. When consequences are separated from declared performance targets, leaders reinforce old ways of doing things and, in some cases, undermine the change they are trying to create. For example, leaders send mixed signals when they require employees to report all injuries while simultaneously providing attractive incentives to workgroups without injuries. Critical focus areas here include:

- **Organizational Structure** — How does the structure of the organization align with safety objectives?
- **Performance Management** — How do leaders set performance expectations? What do they evaluate? How is safety included?
- **Rewards and Recognition** — What behaviors and practices are recognized or compensated?

5. Foster a Partnership between the Talent and Safety Management Groups

Collaboration between safety and talent management leaders is critical to supporting current and future safety objectives. Key areas to focus on include:

- **Common Touch Points** — Leaders must understand and foster the many ways talent and safety intersect. Is safety performance included in regular talent reviews? Are training and development activities for safety professionals coordinated with the talent management team?
- **Executive Coaching** — Talent leaders can provide invaluable guidance in the development of safety leaders. Is the organization taking advantage of expertise in safety mentoring, including coaching both leadership behaviors and tactical safety management practices?

- **Strength of Safety Leadership** — The goal of the partnership between talent and safety is to support the organization's highest safety objectives. Do senior leaders recognize the quality of their safety leadership and work to strengthen the talent within it? Does the organization ensure it has passionate champions in critical safety leadership roles? Are there high expectations for safety competency and capability?

A Promising Partnership

An effective safety talent strategy draws on good talent management practice to support safety objectives. A good strategy also optimizes individual contribution and growth—and retention. In this way, talent strategy facilitates and strengthens the natural partnership between safety and the business.