Creating a
Culture of Caring:
Leveraging the Power "We"

White Paper

DEKRA On the safe side

When we think about a safe workday, it takes a well-choreographed series of activities and many people influencing each other to make such a day happen. Whether it's a surgical team completing a medical operation or an airline crew landing the plane safely, we have become skilled at doing important things well.

However, what often gets overlooked is how such acts show that we care for others and offer an opportunity to bring people together with a focus on leveraging the power of "we."

When things don't go the way we envision, typical culprits often play a role, such as planning errors, mechanical failures, gaps in maintenance or task training, risk misalignment, and other systemic issues. These gaps within the work system that often get less attention, yet very often contribute to errors, incidents, and unplanned events, many times are found within the interactions among work teams and their leaders.

At DEKRA, the focus is on how a safe workday comes together. To do this, we must look to the social influences within the organization and among the team that keeps work in control and occurring as planned. We call these interactions social safety.

Social Safety is defined as "the agreed-upon or implied conveyance of risk perceptions, risk acceptance, and risk tolerance levels through words, actions and nonverbals, where agreement or disharmony triggers social group implications (that influence safe decision-making and actions)."

While the saying "Safety Starts With Me" is very true, "Safety Starts With We" seems more correct in the context of taking control of —and creating high levels of — social safety for sustainable performance. When we take action to keep exposure low, we show respect and care for others, and we should highlight times when others do the same. Every time we point these acts out, we build our culture of care.

"Go Along and Get Along": Social Safety, Social Contagion, and Mirroring

As we discuss social safety and building a culture of caring, we should also discuss social contagion.

People are skilled at noticing what others are doing, especially people they respect and who they may emulate. With social safety, people often conform to how peers and others perceive risk, address exposure, speak up in disagreement to voice concerns, and effectively complete hazard identification activities, etc. This all feeds into shaping the worksite and organizational culture.

We are social creatures, and we often mimic the actions of others without deliberative thought. This is what social contagion is. We are influenced by what others around us are doing, so it is common for either helpful or hindering actions to spread among teams. We do the same in critical safety and operational situations as well. For example, when a new work procedure is put in place and a respected individual in the organization gets onboard with using it, others tend to follow, even if it is not explicitly discussed. People just notice and are influenced by team cues.

We are hardwired to keep the peace and conform with the group. Our brains even keep track of when we go against the group so that we can avoid social clashes.[1] Therefore, people often stay quiet in large or unfamiliar groups, don't challenge the status quo, including the way work is set up for safety, or pause work when exposure is too high.

Of course, there are many examples of people intervening as they take control of their biological tendency to avoid potential conflicts.

We also see the implications of social safety in the response to COVID-19 exposure reduction when it comes to mask-wearing and other safety protocols.

For example, imagine that you are wearing a mask during a customer interaction, yet your customer is not. Immediately, your social brain (which runs temple-to-temple across the outer surface of the brain) notifies you, perceiving a lack of social alignment with the other person, which is a big no-no for the brain, as it violates its go-along-and-get-along rule.

We often subconsciously mirror what others are doing, as part of the social brain. In the example above, we may think that we don't need the PPE, since no one else is wearing it, or that we are wrong and that it must be safe without it. To see this mirroring phenomenon in action, just notice in a conversation how your colleague will touch his or her face after you deliberately touch your face. We are social beings and social comes before policies and rules, if we are not actively taking control of social safety as an organization, an individual, and team level. When social safety is not addressed, the brain-centered hazard, called social-think, (going along to get along and group-think) can lead to incidents or costly errors.

Consider another example in which an employee breaks company policy to help a customer in need. A decision may feel socially correct but puts us in a situation in which we are bypassing a safety policy and increasing exposure to injury or error. Helping our customers feels right because they are asking for help. And if we decline, we might jeopardize our relationship with that person. The messages that we hear around customer experience and community engagement may also foster the social brain to win over keeping exposure low and within levels set by the company.

Our social brain is motivated by our external environment and is driven by our staying with our pack and not splitting from what others are doing. During a more primitive era, this trait helped our species survive. Today it comes in handy during emergencies or public health crises. Yet, when our default response is to not intervene and speak up, even when doing so could make work safer, our social brain creates huge social-think safety implications.

Overriding this default can — and does — occur. However, understanding, training, and creating an environment of psychological safety (speaking up without fear of adverse perceptions by others and consequences, impacting work team status or career) are critical in order to take control of social safety in an aligned way.

How to Strengthen and Power Social Safety in Your Organization

If specific individuals are not engaged in safety activities or safe ways of working, determine where your organization, site, or department is, in terms of social safety (see Figure 1).

One strategy is to invite others to play a lead role within the group and have them practice executing safety with support or have them work more closely with others who culturally show care among themselves. Often, they will enjoy their success, as well as the praise of their peers, which will suggest that they are a valued part of the group when it comes to safety and living that as a core value.

Skill development and practice are commonly needed in key exposure-reduction and safety-leadership activities. So offer opportunities to help any "outgroup" of people get involved in what others are doing in safety. Recognize their good work, and let them become part of "we," even if it's for the first time. We have seen many leaders and teams move from disengaged, and even anti-safety, to becoming great safety champions and even safety influencers (broad influence inside and outside their company without formal authority) when the power of social safety is harnessed.

People do particularly well when a focus is intentionally set on working to protect others from harm, as the social brain and emotional centers of the brain come together to make safe decisions in support of others.[2]

When groups invest in building social safety with a focus on "we," they are often successful because teams and leaders learn skills to help them show that they care for one other. For some people, discussions of teams as a social group may strike them as different. But with support and some defined activities, a culture of caring can emerge and grow — with team engagement and reliably safe workdays to follow.

FIGURE 1:
Values-Driven Cultures High in Social Safety

It's Too Quiet Among Teams	We Talk to Align on Required Actions	Individuals Pause Work to Address Social Safety Drift	We Show That We Care by Recognizing Positive Influence Within the Team
	SAFE	SAFER	RELIABLY SAFEST

References

1. Gorin A., Klucharev V., Ossadtchi A., Zubarev I., Moiseeva V., Shestakova A. MEG signatures of long-term effects of agreement and disagreement with the majority. Scientific Reports. 2021;11(1):3297.

2. Lukas L. Lengersdorff, Isabella C. Wagner, Patricia L. Lockwood, and Claus Lamm; Journal of Neuroscience, 16 September 2020, 40 (38) 7286-7299.

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Connect with us:

Email us: OSR.Info.us@dekra.com

Call us: +1-805-646-0166

Website: www.dekra.us

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