

WHITE PAPER

HR's Role in Safety Transformation



A Blueprint for HR-EHS Collaboration

Using a process blueprint is one of the critical success factors for transformative change. This article places special emphasis on human resources' stake in safety transformation.

As the organization's owner, champion, guide, and monitor of the people side of the business, HR naturally plays a role in protecting and furthering the most basic of all human needs: the need to feel safe and to truly be safe. This is HR's arena as much as EHS's, and HR gets to make a difference. HR's vested

contribution to safety outcomes can impact its own targets for employee engagement; equity, inclusion, and belonging; talent retention; and time to fill open positions, as well as the overall employment brand and the organization's standing as an employer of choice.

Safety transformation is both a cultural and systems shift, requiring significant change management. This includes all the typical attributes of effective change management: from executive buy-in and tone-at-the-top support to enabling sustainable systems to ongoing communication and reinforcement. It also requires physical changes and support in facilities and equipment, as well as the processes for how work gets done.

In our consulting work at DEKRA, we are encouraged when EHS and HR each take a seat at the table to bring these changes to life. Working together moves an organization to the right in DEKRA's safety maturity continuum toward world-class safety. World-class status is when organizations earn the employer-of-choice brand identity.

If this is what your company strives to be — an employer of choice with world-class safety — here are some of the whys and ways HR is a key player in realizing that ambition.

Why safety transformation is so complex — and so important for HR

Safety depends on several factors working in sync: leadership; organizational culture; safety-enabling and organizational sustaining systems, facilities and equipment, processes, and workers themselves. Most of all, safety has to be part of the organization's value system.

Are there leaders out there who would say their organizations don't value safety? It's doubtful. But the proof points of what we value are found in what we prioritize and the way we measure success. These, in turn, influence leaders' actions and organizational culture.

Fig 1. The Safety Maturity Continuum





Exchanges like these that have a negative effect on culture and safety come in many forms:

- Promoting workers for high production or most tenure instead of for best leadership aptitude
- Absence of a knowledge-transfer program to upskill and reskill our multigenerational workforce
- Decrease of standards and an increase of appetite for risk to bolster profit margins
- Growth by acquisition without guided integration and effective change management
- Applying Band-Aids to equipment and facilities
- Work locations outside reasonable commuting distance for our talent pool when gas prices are skyrocketing and dependent care options are limited
- Job aids posted in one dialect without language and literacy inclusivity
- Company-issued PPE sized on anthropometric averages of military personnel from the 1950s

Along with these comes another emergent threat, one grounded in perception. More than ever, workers are putting their own stamp on culture, behaving like customers to be attracted and retained and expecting employers to take a stand on social and political issues. Either leaders behave in a

DEKRA's Blueprint for Safety Transformation depicts the influences on culture and predictive impacts on safety outcomes.

Consider, for example, the difference between slowing down production to keep workers safe and speeding up work, despite the increased likelihood of injury. Either practice tells workers what we value and garners a response from them. This exchange — leader action and worker response — pollinates the culture for better or worse.



manner they find relatable and motivational or workers disengage. This disengagement equals decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, poorer quality work, and most frighteningly, increase in safety incidents. The codependence between leadership behaviors and engagement introduces a new level of risk: “psychological safety.” Workers need to not only be safe but also feel safe.

Together, these factors are part of an ocean of inputs that make safety transformation among the most complex undertakings in the world of work. HR feels every wave in that ocean, and it can't be calmed without their active participation.

HR Ambitions Mirror Safety Ambitions

▶ **With both physical safety and psychological safety at stake for workers, HR's involvement at the table, along with EHS's, is essential. And it's a natural fit.**

In our review of the HR ambitions of 20 Fortune 500 companies, all espouse the following:

- Employer of Choice Brand Recognition
- Leader and Manager Effectiveness

- Employee Engagement and Experience
 - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (where belonging equals psychological safety)
 - The Future of Work (including hybrid teams and a multigenerational workforce)
- Change Management and Organizational Resilience

DEKRA's research and third-party validation proves that as HR and EHS work toward these ambitions (in keeping with the “One Organization, One Journey, One Team” movement), HR's KPIs (key performance indicators) reveal themselves as the leading indicators of safety outcomes. HR and EHS have a vested interest in working together for not only their own benefit but also for the benefit of employees and the organization as a whole.

Let's take a closer look at how these typical HR ambitions and corresponding KPIs align with the EHS strategy.

CHRO Ambition: Employer of Choice Brand Recognition

The number one ambition on top CHROs' radars is employer of choice status — being seen as “the place to be.” That happens when workers want to be at the company and tell others it's desirable and safe to come there. World-class safety is essential to employer of choice branding. DEKRA defines world-class safety as when:

▶ **Safety is internalized and part of the identity of the organization. The organization is highly sensitive to subtle changes in exposure.**

Sensitivity to subtlety means you can predict something is about to happen. You're looking for leading indicators so that you can pull levers in advance of an outcome. Arriving and remaining here come from progressive thinking and behavior. Measuring the number of coaching hours leaders receive and your count of potential serious injury and fatality preventive actions are progressive leading indicators. In contrast, focusing on total recordable incident rate (TRIR) or workers' compensation costs is a game of deflection — a sort of performance-based gaslighting.

Measuring individuals within their span of influence creates urgency and a sense that goals are attainable. It further builds trust. Metrics that matter to me are metrics that I can personally move. Missing TRIR in May begets apathy and defeat until December. Focusing on actionable, leading measures improves psychological safety, belonging, and net promoter scores. And, with workers demanding employer alignment to their value system, safety-centric objectives jibe with employer of choice.

HR Action Tip: In performance planning and the rewards-recognition process, consider what metrics are proven to influence human behavior. Focus on actionable leading indicators, such as connected leader hours, human performance reliability-focused



training modules delivered, and in-field coaching time. The progressive approach is to reward leaders who reduce the potential for injury, particularly potential serious injuries and fatalities, and measure their time invested in transformative work. At lower levels in the org chart, pay-for-performance or published incident ranking is extremely dangerous and should be carefully considered. It can derail the efforts HR has invested in inclusion and belonging, causing net promoter scores and brand image to plummet. Work with your EHS partners to create synergetic score cards and communications around safety.

CHRO Ambition: Leader and Manager Effectiveness

In the ideal workforce development model, we assess competency-based alignment to roles, measure for gaps in individuals and teams, develop for fit, and season the recipe with succession planning. The first step can give HR professionals the most trouble: developing a competency model aligned to safety.

The good news is, DEKRA's research has shown that the leadership interdependencies that impact culture, including the best practices of leaders that grow into moments of safety transformation, align to other mission-critical outcomes

likely already considered in many organizations' leader success models. In fact, our research shows that demonstrating proficiency in these best practices relates to a higher-functioning culture, which in turn relates to improved safety performance and attaining business objectives.

HR generally owns leadership development, and introducing, developing, and sustaining these skills are the heart of it. Developing transformational leaders can't be attained or sustained with an annual workshop or an online training; sustained performance and situational adoption require field application and coaching. This is also important to HR metrics for time-to-fill executive openings, because coaching as a benefit of employment has become table stakes in attracting and retaining premier senior leadership talent and is key to leaders being able to adopt and apply skills learned academically. Leaders deserve our support in making the connection between quality,

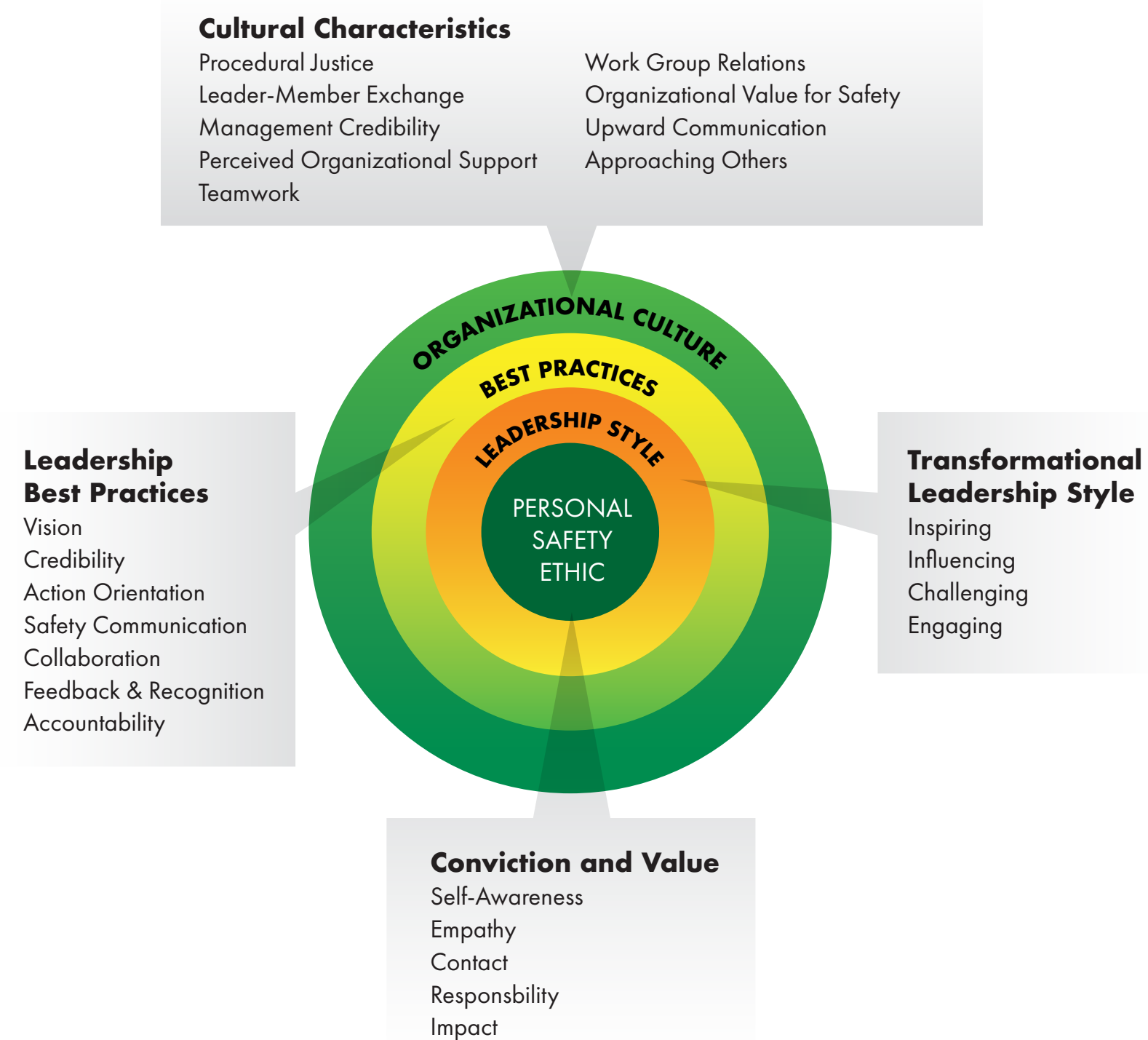
productivity, and safe outcomes. Some consider these competing priorities, but statistically, they are correlated.

HR Action Tip: Work with your EHS team to design leadership development programs beyond workshops and reading lists, with teaching and in-field coaching through the lens of safety. Safety is irrefutable. It will create a very easy, very human connection between a leader and a front-line worker. These connections say that it's OK to take a moment and pause work to save a life today.

Taking Leader Effectiveness to Another Level

Most organizations have about 30 internal contenders for each vice president opening, based on structure and tenure. They invest in directors and senior managers for succession planning and to demonstrate commitment to potential flight risks. Out of this intention comes the tendency to make a lighter investment in front-line supervisors. But this is a mistake as old as work itself. The number one reason for turnover is the worker-direct supervisor relationship. And 60 percent of hybrid employees say their manager is their most direct connection to company culture. For non-remote workers, this connection intensifies.

The perfect storm begins when we don't adequately prepare front-line supervisors for the most influential role in the talent ecosystem. Remember Step 1 in an ideal workforce development model? Assess competency. A leadership competency profile includes communication, collaboration, and vision. But





organizations generally promote front-line workers into supervisor roles because they were heads-down, fast producers, rarely made waves, and seemed affable. A supervisor’s job is different. When we promote from the front line, it sends a positive message to our workforce, and internal promotions might even be a KPI for HR. SHRM reports that 57% of American workers say managers in their workplace could benefit from training on how to be a better people manager and 50% feel their own performance would improve if their direct supervisor received additional training in people management.

In an environment where Operations has established the working-lead model or increased the worker-to-supervisor ratio toward cost preservation, HR’s hands can feel tied. DEKRA recommends a front-line leader development program beyond classroom or online training with in-the-line-of-work application. Teach skills as applied in the most important everyday conversations about worker well-being, brain-centric hazards, and physical safety. These extend from your worker’s value system and drive psychological safety. A bonus: When supervisors talk about issues through the lens of safety, they also develop the muscles to talk engagingly about attendance, productivity, and attitude.

HR Action Tip: Approach your EHS and Operations leaders about collaborating on field-based, applied training that drives retention, career development, engagement, and increased psychological and physical safety. Front-line leaders want coaches too!

CHRO Ambition: Employee Engagement and Experience

Employee engagement directly affects what business needs in order to survive: production, quality, and cost preservation. Organizations measure engagement as an HR KPI and usually put it on dashboards and score cards for leaders. Humans innately desire engagement, or purposeful belonging. Accordingly, adding the “B” to DE&I (DEI&B) underscores belonging as a sort of applied inclusivity. For example, inviting your sister to cook dinner and then scolding her for not following your recipe demonstrates inclusivity but not belonging. This diminishes engagement and dampens psychological safety.

A key challenge that organizations face today is how to engage the multigenerational workforce and foster belonging. Some people need upskilling, some need reskilling, and in the midst of hybrid teams, unionization, and quiet-quitting, we struggle to harness the power of peer-to-peer engagement.

▶ **Teaching workers to engage with one another on a peer-to-peer level is like a shot of vitamin B to HR and EHS initiatives, where B equals belonging.**

An easy step in building these connections is to show workers what they have in common. Think about the last time you met someone new. The conversation generally begins with the exchange of name, job title, home city or geography, familial

details, and generally seeking some common thread that connects us. Once that has been established, we gradually get deeper with where and why we use our personal time or vulnerable components of our belief system. It takes a bit of time to get to the sharing of ideas and visionary plans.

In enabling peer-to-peer engagement, it’s important to give your front-line workers two things: (1) an irrefutable thread of connectedness (like why we should be and feel safe at work), and (2) the forum to communicate on this topic. When my colleague trusts my genuine intention toward her safety, peer engagement soars.

The derailer in this otherwise simple concept is when the opener to connection feels litigious: “Hey, Jack, you need to put on your PPE or we’re going to get docked as a team on our next review.”

In contrast: “Jack, I noticed you coming in late and putting your PPE on while you were walking out to the line. Is everything OK?”

The latter opens the door for Jack’s candor about a brain-centered hazard (fatigue, stress, distraction) that could hurt someone. Most importantly, Jack softens toward the notion that it might be safe to be a whole person at work today. This creates belonging, which begets a more highly actualized workforce.

In practice, front-line workers exercise the same muscles with their supervisors. In this scenario, Jack becomes equipped to



go to his supervisor and say, “Jordan, I was up all night with my aging mom who’s suffering from dementia. Being at work today is good for me, but it might be best for the team if I stay out of the red zones on the floor.”

HR Action Tip: Teach your front-line workers about their brain-centered hazards. These are the hazards at play when an incident report reveals that the facility was pristine, the equipment in compliance, the procedure followed, but someone still got hurt. Everyone has a brain, and everyone’s brain can trip over the same hazards. It will start with safety conversations and naturally drift into the way they talk about quality and production. Watch out for the dynamic between generations, tenure levels, and union/nonunion workers. A 30-year veteran might fear being replaced and avoid telling the five-month newcomer he’s no longer strong enough for a task. An onboarding millennial might be embarrassed because she’s never used a power drill before. Boomers aren’t used to two-way feedback loops in the workplace. Most importantly, once you’ve taught the skills, reinforce the concepts in field-based application.

CHRO Ambition: Change Management and Organizational Resilience

HR leaders get pulled into many conversations about organizational construct and the organization’s change management approach. Sometimes, Operations needs advice on restructuring, which is generally about making or saving the most money. Other times, Safety needs advice about saving the most lives. A common question is whether centralization or decentralization



SEVEN BRAIN-CENTERED HAZARDS™



of Safety is most effective. The DEKRA point of view includes establishing Safety as subject-matter experts serving as a center of excellence to Operations. Ideally, this COE would equip Operations with leading applied innovations in safety.

Each organization has different levels of skill and maturity within its Safety and Operations groups, and this determines how far to pull the centralization lever. Different companies have different norms on matrix or linear-based constructs to consider. Another factor is level of internal influence: politically

and financially. Desires for internal influence can incite rogue behavior among regionalized operations, diminishing sustainability of programs. This situation makes it difficult for HR to develop competency models, performance metrics, and career path models. Safety and Human Resources both need to be consistent.

When it comes to HR’s stake in safety, it’s paramount that insights gathered about the organization’s people and culture align with actionable, predictable safety outcomes. Subjective



interpretation of, and leader-to-leader variability in HR's people survey data, is being met with a C-suite expectation that HR has an action plan for each red flag from a people survey. Consensus on bias for action can be difficult to gain. Good organizational construct and focus on the physical and psychological safety of your people benefit all stakeholders.

When building an organizational construct that incites action and resilience, don't lose sight of sustainability. Continuous improvement means goals are a moving target, and there's never a "safe enough" state of being. Work in this space, like laundry, will never be done. Safety improvement is not Sisyphean in nature. Though you can keep moving upward without starting over. World-class organizations have a clear road map for setting tactical goals and leveraging innovative partners and leading-edge tools and methods. Sustainable organizations don't prioritize safety initiatives against anything else. Safety is a value, not a goal.

Investment in safety initiatives, when aligned with predictive, culturally aligned factors, is the fertilizer for every other business objective.

HR Action Tip: Effective, innovative change requires a clear road map aligned with a unified strategy. Safety unites stakeholders, and organizational change through the lens of safety is a launchpad for cultural change. With any journey, the first step is a diagnostic inventory. Where are you? Benchmark your current state. Data is useless without comparison. Consider where

your stakeholders sit on the change-adoption curve before embarking. Now you are prepared to add the tactical elements with sensitivity toward trust and sustainability.

Be transparent in calling out your own risks. Learn about brain-centered hazards and how HR adds risk with candidate selection, scheduling, overtime, commute time and distance traveled, break-period dynamics, what we measure, and how we communicate. Review the organizational sustaining systems from the blueprint diagram, as you consider your leverage.

The Chair Is Yours, HR

Human Resources is responsible for the most volatile, unpredictable resource in any organization. It's the fulcrum point in the balancing act between people and profit. Never before has the job been more challenging, and it seems to be getting more so — the same can be said about EHS's job. It's only by working together that both can rise to the challenge.

So please, take a seat, HR. You've earned it. And we need you at the table.

What can HR do right away?

Know where your organization sits on the change curve. We sometimes feel like we shouldn't implement a new program that coincides with the adoption of another.

Investing resources in safety initiatives does not compete with other priorities. Safety is a value, not a goal. Your investment in safety initiatives, if they are clearly aligned with cultural factors that predict safety outcomes, are the fertilizer for every other business objective. Initiatives that drive human connection are not a distraction from your facilities upgrade or your people survey. They are the fertilizer for them!

Make safety learning part of your brand. Putting the annual safety training on an LMS and calling it compliance training is a fear-based, transactional exchange. Safety is more than that. If employees don't understand how to apply these concepts, someone could lose their loved one. Advocate for meaningful training.

Support in-field safety and line-of-work coaching — and equip leaders and managers accordingly. Increase training effectiveness by promoting on-the-job coaching to augment safety learning and apply safety principles and practices in the field. Doing so could up your Kirkpatrick-esque training effectiveness metric to Level Three, where you see behavioral adoption of learning concepts in day-to-day work.³

Participate in safety team meetings. Join the incident investigations and event learning sessions. Be the voice at the table representing the human factors (i.e., fatigue, stress, and social-think) behind an incident.



Learn More

Email us: osr.info.us@dekra.com

Call us: [+1-805-646-0166](tel:+1-805-646-0166)

Website: dekra.us/consulting

[CONTACT US](#)

1 Emily Rose McRae, Peter Aykens, Kaelyn Lowmaster, and Jonah Shepp, "9 Trends That Will Shape Work in 2023 and Beyond," Harvard Business Review, January 18, 2023.

2 "Survey: 84 Percent of U.S. Workers Blame Bad Managers for Creating Unnecessary Stress," SHRM Press Release, August 12, 2020.

3 Donald L. and James D. Kirkpatrick, Evaluating Training Programs-The Four Levels, 3rd edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, January 15, 2006.