



# Why No One is **World-Class** in Safety

White Paper

If you want to start a ruckus, tell someone who believes that his or her organization is world-class in safety that they are probably wrong. As one senior safety manager said, "Those would be fighting words in our organization."

With world-class safety, the measures that must be achieved are yet to be defined. So how can people state they are world-class when there is a no agreed-upon benchmark.

Despite years of pontificating on this topic, no one can answer what is required to be labeled world-class in safety. No doubt, there are a lot of opinions. But at this point, what it takes to be world-class is mere speculation.

If you are a runner and you want to compete in the 1500M event in the Olympic Games, you know that as a man, you must run about 3:35 to qualify. A woman would have to run about 3:53. Yet just hitting that time isn't enough. You have to prove that you can run that time in high-pressure events. Hitting the time doesn't make you eligible. Hitting the time in the right situation — and consistently — makes you eligible. When you meet all the requirements, you are classified as an Olympian.

The biggest mistake people make is to point to injury rates as a way to classify their organization as being world-class. The injury rate they point to is, typically, a

country-specific measure. There is no doubt that trying to use injury rates as proof of world-class status is the most flawed measure an organization can use to self-declare a world-class ranking. Outstanding injury rates are an outcome of world-class safety; injury rates by themselves are not the measure of world-class safety.

The primary issue preventing anyone from proclaiming world-class safety is that there is a lack of data on the following:

- How the employees are experiencing the workplace, especially as it relates to how their experience is influencing their ability to control exposure.
- The efforts and, most importantly, the metrics that show the organization is undertaking actions to align the employees' experience with the desired cultural state.

Regarding how the employees are experiencing the workplace this is multifaceted. Some of the factors that influence their experience include the level of production pressure, level of workplace stress, the team environment, safety climate, equipment reliability, physical conditions, to mention a few. Some of these influences change daily. Because of this variation, to be world-class, an organization would require measurement tools sensitive enough to measure these influences daily. More importantly they would need to have the capability to record how they responded to the variation in near real time.

Having this information will be the hallmark of a world-class safety organization. Yet today we don't have the capability or technology to measure these items in real time. Advancements are happening that move us closer — and we will get there.

We predict that organizations that have this capability will focus little attention on their injuries rates and instead focus much more on what makes them a high reliability organization. As with the Olympian, it isn't about hitting the required time once. What matters is long-term, consistent performance in varied situations.

So, if it is true that no benchmark exists, is it a good thing for organizations to label themselves as such? We say definitely no.

### **Risks to declaring your organization as world-class**

There are some inherent dangers to declaring an organization as world-class.

First, overconfidence is a real danger. Believing that we have won the race is risky, considering that the race is never over. It allows people to be tempted to take their foot off the gas even though they aren't at the finish line.

Second, we also know it is very easy to get to a low total recordable incident rate and to declare ourselves a winner without doing the work. This creates a false and potentially demotivating situation, especially if something occurs that proves we are not as good as we thought or announced.

There's also a false notion that getting recognition for being world-class means excellence. Organizations are highly motivated by accolades, which is a natural reason to pursue them. But wanting the title of world-class for the sake of the title or the accolades is dangerous. It could also indicate lazy leadership. Checking the box for the recognition is not the same as doing the deep work of developing the framework, structure, systems, leadership, and culture necessary for true safety excellence. Validation comes from hard work, not from external awards.

Ironically, overconfidence in leadership can lead to the loss of confidence from the workforce. The danger of pursuing external awards for the sake of proving your organization is world-class is that the workforce really knows whether the commitment is there. Because supervisors and other managers know there isn't a robust enough effort or a clear road map to validate those claims. Declaring your organization as world-class when the artifacts and visible commitment are not there will only destroy the credibility of the leadership.

### **How safety excellence really happens**

Leaders who truly exhibit world-class excellence are those who are not interested in the accolades.

These are leaders who commit to getting in front of injuries before they happen. And this requires understanding both the role of exposure in safety and the sources of that exposure. It also requires a passion for mitigating or eliminating that exposure.

A truly world-class organization is constantly looking for new and important changes that need to be factored into its system. One new area of emphasis is how the brain impacts safety and how workers can be trained to recognize routines that create blind spots to exposure. Closely behind this is the influence of technology on the worker experience. Proclaiming that your organization world-class could make convincing leadership to do more difficult. However, it is exactly this that makes an organization world-class: to not accept the status quo.

### **Creating a passion for people.**

Leaders must see it as their personal responsibility to keep people safe every day. For companies that truly excel in safety, the passion for safety must come from a deeper place, from the heart and mind. We refer to this as a personal safety ethic. When safety derives from a personal safety ethic, leaders are committed to the safety of people because the right thing to do is embedded within their personal values system.

**Focusing on exposure control.**

A focus on exposures is a radical departure from a focus on hazards or unsafe actions. It requires probing into the factors causing vulnerability to address them before incidents and injuries occur. 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. Organizations that excel in safety never lose sight of their dedication to eliminating all injuries, but they are proportionate in their allocation of resources and response.

**Focusing on leadership-systems alignment and governance.**

This means having enough trained workers and equipment, as well as supportive safety and performance- management systems, to ensure that tasks are done safely and on schedule. Organizations that want to consider themselves world-class emphasize safety in employee selection, compensation, training and development, and organizational structure. They encourage actions and motivate behaviors that build and sustain a culture of safety excellence.

**Embracing change.**

Organizations that consider themselves world-class recognize that science, technology, and generational change are inevitable and positive. Change is viewed as a chance to further control and reduce exposure. It's a given that improvement must be never-ending and that where there are breakthroughs or better ways, they must be welcomed and mastered.

---

World-class is not determined by metrics.  
It is determined by the consistent effort  
of leadership in pursuing safety  
excellence in their culture.

---

## Conclusion

Is it a good thing for organizations to label themselves world-class?

No. If a pandemic, like COVID-19, hits and you have dozens of cases in your workforce, the injury rate you once relied on as a benchmark will no longer work as a measure of performance.

Preparing for an emergency, such as a pandemic, earthquake, or any kind of natural disaster, makes your organization more resilient should a disaster strike. The key is maintaining that forward-looking consistency of safety over time through a commitment of resources, effort, and passion. Working on safety in a way that convinces the organization that its well-being and ability to succeed without negative events demands a relentless focus. Only then can leadership create sustainability.

Being world-class is not about a number. It's not about a preconceived benchmark. Being world-class is about making safety the lifeblood of an organization. Only then can it be validated by its workers — and the industry — will see the organization as being in a class of its own.

**Ready to take the next steps to transforming your organization into world-class? Connect with us**



### **Connect with us:**

Email us: [osr.info.us@dekra.com](mailto:osr.info.us@dekra.com)

Call us: [+1 805-646-0166](tel:+18056460166)

Website: [www.dekra.us/en/consulting](http://www.dekra.us/en/consulting)

