# The Top 5 Myths About
# Transportation Safety, Debunked

White Paper

DEKRA On the safe side

> You have seen how believing these myths led to organizational paralysis because: (1) they were focused on the wrong concerns, and (2) the root cause of these concerns was very different from what the leader perceived it to be.

Imagine this scenario: You are sitting with a senior leader discussing their organization's safety performance and what's keeping them up at night. During the conversation, the leader says, "I just wish we could get employees to stop making careless mistakes. We train them, and they know the job, but they still do things wrong."

After the meeting, you think about what transportation leaders have said to you about safety over the years. Some of these comments have turned out to be true, and some are myths based on a leader's mindset and how they viewed safety. You have seen how believing these myths led to organizational paralysis because: (1) they were focused on the wrong concerns, and (2) the root cause of these concerns was very different from what the leader perceived it to be.

How would your organization fare in this scenario? Are any of these five common recurring themes in the transportation industry inhibiting your safety strategy? Let's debunk some myths.

### Myth 1: Our people will be safe if they follow our rules and meet regulatory requirements.

"Just follow the rules! We trained our people on the rules, so they know them. Why would they not follow them?" That is the mantra we typically hear in the transportation sector. We also hear, "The rules are written in blood," meaning the rules were developed as a result of an injury.

It is essential to have a robust rules-based Safety Management System (SMS) that establishes the standard operating procedures (SOPs) to be followed when completing tasks. At a minimum, these SOPs must include and meet all regulatory requirements. This provides the organization with the license to operate and the steps to follow when completing a task.

In short, SOPs provide the foundation for creating an environment necessary to function. However, what SOPs cannot address are the variable system elements that are present in the moment or may change during the completion of the task. These changes in risk exposure levels are what need to be recognized, and actions taken to control them, in order to work safely. An SOP cannot identify every possible change that may occur. The person(s) doing the tasks must be able to:

- Recognize all hazards associated with the tasks
- Implement actions to control the associated exposure to the hazards
- Pause work when that level of exposure changes
- Take action to control the new level of exposure

Also, just because someone is meeting the regulatory requirement does not necessarily mean they will be safe completing a task. We have often been told in the field that it is safe to do that task because it is within the FRA/FAA/OSHA rules. The issue is that the person has used the regulatory standards as the go/no-go measure for the work, rather than making a complete assessment of all exposures at the moment.

## LAYERS OF DEFENSE

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EDUCATION
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**Memory**

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Another issue is that regulatory standards vary. Consider a working at height. For some regulatory agencies, you must use fall restraint when working above 4 feet. For others, it is 3 meters. Which is right? How has that height been determined to be the point at which different PPE must be used? How has the standard considered all potential hazards in the moment? The bottom line is that it cannot be everything in every situation. There is research, history, and experience behind all regulatory requirements. But they are the minimum standard and starting point, not the be-all and end-all for protecting against exposure to injury.

### The Challenge

Organizations must fully embrace both regulatory expectations and static risk assessment processes. However, what is most critical to safety is ensuring that employees know, understand, and can recognize exposures in the moment and have the confidence to take action to control those exposures to prevent incidents from occurring.

### Myth 2: Assigning blame and strongly disciplining negligent employees drive our culture of compliance.

When we start talking with a new client, we learn that discipline is often the primary tool in a leader's toolkit. Discipline is used as an outcome of fault finding, exceptions to the SOP, and investigation against employees for some infraction, all to drive compliance. The mistaken belief is that if an organization can get everyone to comply with the rules, everyone will be safe. It is often viewed as a "do as I say" culture, and if you do not, then I will discipline you into compliance.

Compliance is important and must be achieved, but compliance alone is not good enough. In cultures of compliance, employees tend to comply when management is present, when they think the risk is high, and with what their team believes is important. If achieving safety excellence is the goal, it is essential to create a culture of safety commitment beyond a culture of safety compliance.

Is discipline a tool for creating a culture of commitment? Yes, discipline is a tool. But how and when you use it is the differentiator. Rather than jumping straight to assigning blame and applying discipline, the better approach is to review systems/processes first; then assess the leader's actions to determine to what extent they are enabling "safe work. Only then should employee action/inaction be considered.

Also, there are two key concepts to know and apply in your safety journey. First, an organization cannot discipline its employees into a culture of commitment. As a leader, you must build a culture of commitment. Employees must want to be safe and not cut corners, even when you, as a leader, are not present. Employees must be willing to look out for each other — all the time — and be willing to step in to stop coworkers from putting themselves in harm's way.

Second, when you use discipline as a consequence of behavior, it will stop the behavior for that employee, but it will not change the behavior to the desired safe behavior for the employee or others. Safe behavior must be taught through training, coaching, and positive feedback. The impact of reinforcing safe work, especially during an announced observation, is that it creates psychological safety. We find that in most organizations, positive feedback isn't given nearly enough. Yet, when positive feedback is given in a transformational way, it builds a positive climate, reinforces the need to continue safe behavior, and establishes a culture of care and commitment.

### The Challenge
It's important to remember that safe behavior does not happen by itself. Organizations must work at creating a culture of commitment to safety. They must define the behaviors that everyone, at all levels, must know, understand, and demonstrate consistently.

Discipline is just one tool in the toolbox. Leaders should use this tool as a last resort, when creating safety excellence within their organization.

Focus first on improving and removing system barriers. Then, assess the leader's action to determine to what extent they are ensuring employees' understanding

and abilities. Only now should the focus be on employee behavior. By taking these steps, in this order, organizations will advance their culture and, as a result, safety performance more quickly.

## Myth 3: Our organization is unique, and unless you work here, you can't understand our challenges.

Another common scenario occurred when we met with a group of employees in the aviation industry. They mentioned the mergers that had taken place and their negative impact as the reason for where they are as an organization. They all longed to go back to the way it was, and they believed we could not understand because we had not lived through those changes. They were right on that point: We had not lived their experiences. But what we could do was help them see what was possible and show them how to move from their current state to a new state — if they would come along!

The need to keep pace day to day compels leaders to be constantly looking inward, within their organization. They tend to get so wrapped up in today's agenda that they fail to look at what others are doing. There is a specific grind to moving trains day in and day out, dispatching trucks across the nations, and ensuring that planes leave on time every day.

Sometimes, this internal focus leads leaders to think of themselves as an island, with unique issues, problems, and approaches. It can also lead them to thinking and believing that they are the only ones to have this problem in this unique way. And unless you walk in their shoes, you cannot help them.

Yes, every organization is unique. Each one has developed a culture that has led it to success. Organizations do need to remember what got them to the current state and to celebrate the work and effort they and others put in along the way. But they also need to recognize that what got them here may not be what gets them to becoming a world-class safety organization.

To understand and address challenges, leaders should accept the need for input, often from outside the organization or team, so they can receive unbiased feedback on their opportunities. Anything short of this mindset will hold them back from achieving their safety goals.

**The Challenge**

For any organization, the one thing that is constant is change. Change will (and needs to) occur. The challenge is to recognize the need for change, create a vision for best-in-class safety performance, and then operate in control through the change. It is not uncommon, and is often wise, to seek out and use external expertise to help guide that process.

Answering these two questions is the critical first step: (1) "Where am I today compared to where I want to be?" and (2) "Who can help me get there?" This will go a long way to eliminating the unnecessary barriers that can be associated with thinking "We are unique."

## Myth 4: Accidents and injuries are unavoidable in our business.

"This industry is dangerous! If we do something wrong, people get hurt." We have heard this comment in rail, trucking, and aviation. And it is a true statement. However, the underlying message is important. The meaning is that people do get hurt, equipment gets damaged, and there is nothing the organization can do about it. It is just the nature of the business, and the price to pay. The organization doesn't want it to happen, but sometimes it does.

Unfortunately, this mindset indicates that a belief and a certainty that injuries and accidents will happen. When an organization tracks a fatality rate, it sends a message to the organization that leaders believe it will happen.

When we hear this statement or see this mindset in people, we push back — hard. If this mindset exists, an organization can be certain that injuries and accidents will happen. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The first step in eliminating injuries and accidents is having a mindset and a determination that all injuries and accidents can be prevented. Once you make that mindset shift, opportunities to control exposure and improve outcomes will reveal themselves. Leaders, and all employees, must become firmly embedded in thinking:
- We can prevent all injuries and accidents from happening
- I work in an inherently safe but unforgiving environment
- I want my children to work at this company, and I feel secure they will not get hurt
- We can control exposure for myself and for others
- We can operate reliably, despite the risks and work complexities
- We learn ways to get better and work safer every day
- It will not happen on my watch

**The Challenge**

Leadership needs to create the mindset in every person throughout the organization that injuries and accidents do not, and will not, occur. The stronger this mindset is, the more likely that errors and mistakes will be reduced, reliability and repeatability will be increased, resulting in less injuries and accidents.

## Myth 5: We can have safety or productivity, but not both.

You have heard it said before: You measure what you treasure. What is important to you is measured. You cannot change or improve it unless you measure it. The transportation industry measures many things to understand their business and how they are performing.

One way to quickly understand the relationship between safety and productivity in an organization is to look at what they measure and what they talk about routinely.

This leads to understanding their culture and beliefs. Many organizations will say that safety is their No. 1 priority, but do they genuinely demonstrate it? And do they, themselves, believe it?

Many believe that the company's turning a profit takes precedence. Without a doubt, profitability is essential. Without profit, a company ceases to exist. But how is profitability achieved?

We tend to notice the relationship between safety and productivity expressed in one of two ways:
1. Productivity then safety (if we have the time or money)
2. Safety then productivity (but productivity is what is measured and most often talked about)

When the belief is the first, "productivity then safety," we see daily operations meetings, daily tracking dashboards, and daily discussions around such key metrics as on time performance, dwell time, and miles traveled per day by train or truck—all centered around productivity. The safety metric tends to be expressed as "Did anyone get hurt in the last 24 hours?" If no: "Great!. Move on." And if yes: "What did the person do wrong?"

When the belief is the second, "safety then productivity," we see meetings starting with a safety briefing or moment, followed by a discussion of safety, typically in the form of injuries in the last 24 hours. Then comes the transition to the work that needs to be done. There is no more discussion about safety until the end, when you hear, "And be safe out there today!" Discussing safety first is intended to send the message about the relative importance of safety over productivity.

Both scenarios fall short of achieving the desired culture and long-term objective. The objective should be safe operations. It is not a matter of first this, then that. It is not an either-or" or an and. It is one integrated approach to having safe operations every day.

Consider the following example of safe operations:

A team is having their pre-shift briefing, during which employees lead the discussion of the exposures they have to control during the day. As they brief, they challenge each other and their leader on ways to protect each other. After these exposure-control discussions, they also validate and agree on actions to ensure on-time delivery for all departures and how they will help each other during the day. The team role is to control exposure, the leader's role is to ensure that trained resources are available, and the result is all departures occur as planned. During the next day's briefing, the team discusses why the previous day was successful and they attribute it to their culture of open dialogue, helping each other, having necessary resources, and knowing how to safely achieve the day's objectives.

When you operate under the mantra of safe operations, you create the following outcomes:
- Safety improves because every decision includes understanding the impact on safe operations
- Productivity improves because the employee is at work and available
- Profitability improves because costs associated with training, turnover, absenteeism, and human errors decrease and reliability increases
- Culture improves because everyone is valued
- Engagement increases because people want to participate
- Innovation improves because ideas flow freely without hesitation

### The Challenge

Organizations must embed the mantra of safe operations within their DNA. An organization can have both safety and productivity, once they believe it is possible, and implement strategies and approaches that enable the safe operations approach to thrive.

## *Next Steps: Move Past the Myths and Toward Excellence*

Transportation industries, like other industries, have developed approaches, beliefs, and operational methodologies over time that have helped them become what they are today. For the most part, these have been positive and have supported continuous improvement. But some of these attributes have slowed progress and the rate of improvement. These are the myths — the self-inflicted, self-perpetuating beliefs that hinder safety progress.

When an organization recognizes these beliefs as myths, it can move past them to achieve safety excellence and achieve it faster. Every organization has the ability to get there. Visualizing what is possible is the first step.

> But seeing the bigger picture, learning from other industries and others' experiences, and being up to date on best practices is how organizations continuously progress.

Take that step and keep going.

- **State your goal for organizational safety and productivity.** Where are you today, compared to where you want to be?
- **Consider the five myths that could be holding you back.** Which ones are you holding onto? Do you have other beliefs that affect how you think about and approach safety? If so, how do they stand up to scrutiny when examined and challenged?
- **Widen your view.** Look more broadly at others in your industry and at companies outside your industry. How do their challenges compare to your own? What are they doing better or worse (realizing that doing "better" than another company may still leave significant room for improvement)?
- **Seek impartial expertise.** It's easy to become locked into long-held beliefs (such as these myths) and to focus on your own company's situation and practices. But seeing the bigger picture, learning from other industries and others' experiences, and being up to date on best practices is how organizations continuously progress. Consulting outside experts can provide these essential perspectives and reveal new insights into how you can achieve safety excellence. Those you engage to help you in your journey should:
  - Live in your shoes to fully understand your culture
  - Show you where you are, compared with other organizations in your industry
  - Provide you with leading and lagging metrics for best-in-class organizations
  - Provide a blueprint for change that guides you from where you are today to where you can be within your industry
  - Stand shoulder to shoulder with you, as you work through the changes necessary to embrace and achieve safe operations

7

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