

# Why World-Class Safety Starts with Better Conversations

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## 1. Shift from Counting Incidents to Measuring Leadership

- Leading organizations are moving away from legacy metrics like TRIR and compliance checklists. Instead, they are measuring the quality of leadership behaviors and daily planning conversations where safety and operations converge.

## 2. Objectively Define What "Good" Looks Like

- To improve safety culture, companies must establish a shared, objective definition of a high-quality safety conversation. Without a clear framework that emphasizes engagement, care, and hazard identification, feedback remains subjective and progress stalls.

## 3. Use Technology to Amplify Human Connection

- Technology and AI should be used to enhance human interaction, not replace it with complex dashboards or automated noise. Effective tools do the heavy analytical lifting to surface actionable insights, allowing leaders to focus on meaningful dialogue and decision-making.

When was the last time you assessed how your organization manages safety and considered where you were in practice, relative to your peers?

These days, I hear a lot of organizations throwing around the term “world-class”, but I’m convinced many are considerably off the mark. If you are an organization that measures success based on conducting inspections, issuing safety tickets and tracking performance based on counting things, especially recordables (TRIR), I’m telegraphing a message to you. We were doing that 25 years ago and it didn’t work then. People are still losing their lives and being exposed to significant life altering injuries. I’m going to share some keys to pass through the door of redemption.

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**Scott Falkowitz** is a safety leader with more than two decades of experience across construction, telecom, and industrial environments. Scott has led frontline teams and development of operational and safety systems that improve visibility into risk, strengthen work planning, improve execution, and support better decision-making. He is focused on helping companies move beyond compliance-driven activity to a deeper understanding of risk, human performance, and sustainable outcomes.

## Learning From Leaders



Recently, I met with several leading organizations that have moved beyond that legacy model and what they're doing would have sounded like science fiction when I started. These companies aren't just checking boxes; they're measuring leadership and scoring conversations, uniting safety with operations. They've identified daily planning as the critical moment where leadership, safety, and operational performance converge. By capturing those conversations, they can analyze not only risk but also how leadership shows up in real work.

From my talks, three things are clear:

1. Leading organizations objectively define what a "good" safety conversation looks like.
2. The highest performers are measuring leadership behaviors, not just safety outcomes.
3. Tech is only valuable when it strengthens human interaction rather than replacing it.

Organizations that excel don't just measure activity, they measure leadership quality. The challenge isn't getting people to have the conversations, it's agreeing on what good looks like.

“ *It's really hard to tell an adult they need to have a better conversation around risk... because ten people have eleven different opinions about what that conversation should look like.*

- Jacob Connor, Business Unit EH&S Manager, Turner Construction

That subjectivity is the problem. Part of the process, in addition to communication, is having a framework for guiding and then analyzing the conversation. Human organizational performance research shows that effective planning conversations address key attributes of conversation quality, engagement, clarity of work planning, strength of questions, level of care and hazard identification. These indicators do not capture the full complexity of work, but they provide visibility into how risk is being identified, discussed and adapted to in real time. Without a shared definition, feedback becomes inconsistent and improvement stalls. Organizations that have leaned into this shift didn't start by demanding better conversations. First, they defined them and then got to measuring.

This does not mean reducing leadership to a checklist. It creates shared visibility into what strong planning and engagement look like so leaders can learn from one another. These measures are not intended to control behavior or predict outcomes, but to strengthen the organization's capacity to see, discuss and adapt to risk as it unfolds in normal work.

We're often fooled by the title of "leader" due in part, to the leniency we've taken in assigning this responsibility. Don't get me wrong, there are many good leaders, and they're often defined by their ability to set direction, make decisions and set expectations, but it's much more than that.

In fact, when I spoke with Layton Construction's Caleb Modzelewski, he said they created a "PTP of the Week" program ranking conversations based on engagement and planning quality and then shared the highest-scoring examples publicly.

“ We did PTP of the Week based off of the Simple Seven score. When one stood out, their discussion was crazy... everybody was talking. These leaders are actively engaged in high-quality planning through strong discussions about high hazard scenarios. Scoring is not the goal, rather it's a reflection tool and when used correctly, it surfaces examples worth learning from.

- Caleb Modzelewski, Senior EHS Manager, Layton Construction

This highlights where coaching can strengthen capacity as opposed to a mechanism to reward conformity or pressure performance. They are not rewarding the absence of incidents; they are rewarding the presence of strong leadership behaviors. The intent is to strengthen the organization's capacity to anticipate and respond to changing conditions. When reinforcing behaviors, leaders from these organizations are not acting as safety police.

“ You can use it to plan for safety, production and quality — or you can ignore it and we'll never get any better than we were.

- Danny Mahan, Corporate Safety Director, Nabholz Construction

This matters because instead of forcing compliance, they positioned this strategy as operational leverage. They recognize and reward positive action based on trends and coach low performers using clear signals rather than opinion. These are examples of real leadership where buzz words like "zero incidents" and "TRIR" aren't paraded around and success isn't measured based on counting things.

While my discussions raised good talking points around what good looks like and leadership, there is a significant technology component that's worthy of discussion. Contrary to what I've seen as commonplace, none of the organizations just bought safety software, started triggering email notifications or built dashboards and magically arrived at success. Tech should augment the process by increasing efficiency and doing heavy analytical lifting. This paves the way for leaders to focus on quality interaction. Technology is valuable when it amplifies leadership. These tools do not replace judgment or curiosity, they surface patterns and signals, but leaders must still interpret those signals within the realities of dynamic work.

The organizations I spoke with have assistive AI integrated into their daily planning processes centered on what matters to leaders and the decisions they make. Examples of this are establishing clear work expectations, understanding the scope, fatigue and how change, capacity and the quality of questions are managed. AI assists in building stronger plans and analyzing the conversations that follow. It surfaces patterns, summarizes insights and generates simple feedback signals leaders can act on. This is the data engine that fuels the basis for the reinforcement and measurement I mentioned earlier.

It's through this that leaders don't have to spend hours sorting emails and dealing with spreadsheets to figure out what's important from all these leading efforts they're engaged in. The goal is better dialogue while closing the gap between crews in the field and organizational leadership. They do have reports and dashboards, but they are organized cleanly and consistently to help identify what needs to be recognized and corrected as part of the value-added discussions that are occurring.

### **Dangers Along Your Journey**

If some of these methods grabbed your attention, I don't blame you – they did mine as well. But be warned, there are some dangerous neighborhoods that you may need to navigate. In my conversation with Lane Smith, HSE Regional Director from Flintco, he described one of these neighborhoods and the associated tension clearly:



“Organizations continue adding expectations to frontline leaders while expecting more from them. If technology adds complexity without improving clarity, it becomes another burden rather than a solution.”

Reports and dashboards are powerful tools when they are designed with the end user in mind. However, when they are cluttered, sent to the wrong people or misaligned with their intended purpose, they can become overwhelming and time-consuming. The result is often cognitive overload, which leads to confusion, frustration, and ultimately abandonment.

Reports and dashboards need to be part of a well-thought-out data use plan. The plan identifies the intended purpose, and the design follows with clarity. Tables and visualizations should feel intuitive and familiar to users and not require additional research or a background in analytics to interpret. If they require explanation, they missed the mark.

Data should support decision-making, not complicate it. Gaps and trends must be easy to identify, and your source of intelligence should clearly indicate what is performing well, what requires attention, and what demands immediate action. A second potential challenge is technology resistance and slow adoption. In a sidebar conversation, one comment stood out: *“Unless it's going to help our people make better decisions, it needs to be proven to me.”* That perspective is completely viable and common, and the concerns extend beyond AI.

Even now and as far as technology has advanced, many still can't or are uncomfortable with managing passwords, navigating digital tools, or transitioning away from paper-based processes. To have success, you're going to need support, a clear value proposition, and ongoing learning opportunities to build confidence and capability.

While we're on the topic of technology, we can't ignore AI and all that comes with it. There are concerns about data security, accuracy, repeatability, user competence and the risk of automation replacing critical thinking through overly scripted conversations. These are valid concerns. While models continue to improve, AI should be positioned as an assistive tool and not a substitute for judgment. Successful organizations must ensure that technology enhances decision-making while preserving the human element and authenticity of conversations.

These challenges are real and the net effect has the potential to pull organizations in the wrong direction. The real gap is not technology; it's strategic clarity, disciplined thinking, intentional behavior, and ownership. This brings us to expectations and where we landed on a few high-level keys to consider.

### **Three Keys To Success**

1. Making sure each organization defines "good" objectively. This can mean different things to different people, but good doesn't mean a meeting was held, an inspection was completed, or a rate was achieved. It should mean that conversations included care and respect, high hazards were identified, the work plan was discussed and understood, and everyone participated with intent.
2. Technology. Whether you're deciding on a user interface, whether to use AI, the appropriateness and use of language models or the types of charts you want to show, if your system is too complex without truly improving the quality of your conversations, it's just generating noise.
3. Make sure human interaction doesn't become marginalized. The people in your organization were never the problem; it was the misunderstanding or lack of leadership qualities. I'm talking about demonstrated care and a shared understanding of the work, scope, fatigue levels, team capacity and the real hazards in front of them.

The three keys are identified through conversations, and when leaders take time to engage in meaningful dialogue, they uncover and address exposures early before they become failure metrics.

### **In Conclusion**

World-class organizations embed safety in operations not as a compliance overlay, but as part of how work is planned and led. They measure progress through leading indicators that provide repeatable feedback, showing leaders where to engage. Adding more forms, checking more boxes, measuring rates and dictating topics only creates safety performance theater, which masks the absence of real progress.

Risk develops in spaces between planning, communication and execution. If you are unwilling to look specifically at quality of the conversation shaping work, then your definition of an incident may be the system performing exactly as it was designed to. Are you prepared to own that?



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