

A PROBLEM shared

Paul Davison explains why safety should make leaders of all of us

Workplace safety is a 'wicked' problem. It's elusive, it never goes away and it's never solved. For anyone familiar with the work of Professor Keith

Grint, this perspective will be known to you. Grint developed the idea of 'critical, tame and wicked' as a way of understanding different types of problems.

A 'tame' problem is known and the solution is within existing expertise and know-how. 'Critical' problems cause a crisis and draw in resources, and need immediate action and decisive leadership. 'Wicked' problems are complex and elusive, and their solutions require leadership that involves everyone.

Safety fits well and truly into that third category. With so many factors at play in a work environment, safety's goalposts are forever moving from one day to the next. The answers to safety are not simply found and adaptability is crucial.

In an ever-changing situation such as this, the answers are to be discovered each day by the people most affected by the 'wicked' problem. With safety, this group is your team or workforce.

For safety to be managed, in all its wickedness, a culture needs to exist that, to paraphrase Grint, "lets a hundred flowers bloom".

Learning from mistakes and from each other, rather than textbooks and

'experts', is the way forward. Responsibility and accountability are shared and collectively owned. Safety must make leaders of us all.

So, how do we achieve this? How do we create a culture in which everyone has a leadership role?

You may have guessed where I'm going with this. To deal with workplace safety effectively, we need psychological safety. This is psychological safety with consequences, because with shared leadership also comes shared accountability.

Our modern working environment so often wants instant answers. Instant answers, however, don't shape a strong culture of safety.

Psychologically safe environments encourage empathy around vulnerability and they give people the time they need to make meaningful contributions to an organisation's safety journey.

To engender psychological safety, there must be mutual respect and inclusivity. Whether you're a CEO or the latest person to be hired, you have a leadership role when it comes to the safety of your workplace and practices.

A culture is then grown that engenders the types of conversation that move you through the levels of learning. Mistakes are seen as an unintended consequence. Learning becomes cultural. People can now speak up, offer ideas and contribute to a safe and healthy workplace.

I've seen it for myself when an organisation strikes that lovely balance between respect

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and permission, so people can open up, thrive and flourish and be their best person as a leader in safety.

To this point, in such organisations, I've seen the positive impact that new hires can have when they enter the workplace.

With fresh eyes and ears, they bring a new perspective that can revitalise your safety performance.

Why can't we recognise and reward this, so that our co-workers approach every day with a fresh outlook? In safety, after all, no two days are the same.

Here are three tips I'd give you:

- **The eight-minute rule:**

The renowned thought leader on the modern workplace, Simon Sinek, spoke this year about the "incredible power of the eight-minute catch-up". From his own personal experience, he realised that you'll only truly achieve the focus you need to make a meaningful connection with someone if you give them time. If someone at work is reaching out to you, then a quick chat won't cut it. You need to find the time, eight minutes at least, for your co-worker to feel at ease to share their problems. When such practice is embedded in a work culture, an employee with serious safety issues on their mind will know that they'll be given time and the active listening ear of a co-worker or manager.

- **Co-led team briefings:** Briefings are a great opportunity to engender collective ownership of the flow of safety information. It's not just the leader who briefs the team. Perhaps a better question is, 'how are we today going to co-create safety in this environment, for this team?'. Everyone has an equal voice.
- **Setting up a learning culture:** At an organisational level, learning must become the default culture. Learning reviews must run through everything we do. Without such a focus, valuable safety lessons become lost opportunities. We need authentic leadership, which is both visible and felt. Those with leadership job titles must role model safety leadership if their teams are to share the safety leadership burden.

Safety may be a 'wicked' problem but it's not insoluble if it's a problem shared and then collectively owned. ■

About the author

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