

## ACHIEVING SAFETY EXCELLENCE, A BEST PRACTICE CONTINUUM

**Profitable construction firms understand the value that construction safety professionals bring to the organization. These values include:**

- Differentiating your company from others during prequalification processes; resulting in a higher award-to-bid ratio
- Improving safety and health management on projects
- Improving worker, public and client confidence in your construction safety and health programs
- Managing local, state and federal agency safety compliance
- Driving and leading continuous safety improvement
- Creating a competitive advantage through profitability and quality by reducing construction accidents, illnesses and insurance claims
- Lowering the overall cost of risk
- Driving project certainty

In this issue, we examine characteristics of construction safety professionals and where they fit in a five-level safety-management effectiveness continuum (see list below). Do they exhibit a reactive management approach, or are they proactive, helping your organization achieve world-class safety excellence and leadership? We also address how a construction firm's culture can contribute to, or undermine, the effectiveness of a safety professional.

Historically, the value of a safety professional has been based on lagging indicators, such as frequency and severity rates or low cost. If these indicators were low, companies concluded that their safety professional must have done a good job. The more modern approach to assessing effectiveness is to use a combination of leading and lagging measurements.

Willis Construction Safety has identified five safety management stages that construction firms go through:

1. Reactive
2. Compliance Driven
3. Employee Focused
4. Management Accountability
5. Safety Excellence and Leadership



Effective safety professionals can determine in what stage your company currently operates and develop strategies to continuously improve your safety management process with the ultimate goal of safety excellence.

A safety professional's success is highly dependent on how well all levels of management support and lead the safety management process. When Willis Construction safety professionals complete safety program management and risk assessments for our clients, we often find that the safety manager owns and drives the safety program. This stems from weak leadership support and direction within the company. Nevertheless, when the safety program fails, the safety professional fails; when the program is successful, the safety professional is successful.

Your safety professional and your operations management team must work hand in hand. Companies on the road to safety excellence understand that, if the safety program is not effective, then the operations management team's leadership as a whole is not effective, which includes the safety professional.

Safety professionals who simply communicate compliance issues, or what's wrong with a company's safety program,

are not going to be as successful as those who engage all levels of the operations management team – from the front-line supervisor all the way up to senior management. But to do this, the company in which the safety professional works must have a “no fear” management environment. *We estimate that less than 20% of construction firms operate in a true “no fear” management environment!*

Let's examine the characteristics of the five-stage continuum:

## THE SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM CONTINUUM



- Production driven
- Disciplinary culture
- Job intimidation
- Authority
- Visibility
- Unsafe conditions
- Spotty documentation
- Band-aid fixes
- *Safety Cop* enforcement

- It's the law
- Minimum compliance levels
- Policies and procedures "cookie cutter"
- Safety manual
- Safety manager with minimal enforcement authority
- *Hector the Inspector*

- Management reactive
- Finger pointing
- Safety committees
- Incentive programs
- Static safety training
- Suggestion box
- Unsafe acts
- Why did that happen again?

- Management commitment
- Management mentoring
- Scheduling assessments
- Communication technology
- Marketing Safety (internal & external)
- Cost allocation
- Data analysis
- Issues report
- Near miss procedure
- Risk measurement

- Management passion and focus
- Shared values at all levels of management
- Safety integrated into management systems
- Contribution at all levels
- Safe behavior reflects management systems
- Continual process of evaluation and improvement
- No fear environment
- Employee retention
- Leadership mentoring
- Networking
- Competitive advantage



## 1. REACTIVE MANAGEMENT

In this group, the safety professional, if there even is one, may own the safety program or have no authority to enforce anything. This is a culture of discipline where workers are fired and management is not involved. This stage routinely sacrifices safety controls for production output. Focus is on unsafe conditions rather than weaknesses in the management system that allows unsafe conditions to exist. Usual fixes to problems are of the shallow “band-aid” variety, rather than sustainable management system controls. The best description of the safety professional in this stage is the “Safety Cop.”

## 2. COMPLIANCE-DRIVEN MANAGEMENT

The safety professional in this group still owns the program and has minimal enforcement authority. It is a step above reactive because company leadership has decided that they will be in compliance with state and federal safety laws. It’s the law! The highest focus is on being in compliance with the bare minimum safety requirements the law allows. Company leadership decides a safety manual or handbook is in order, but usually employs a cookie cutter template. As new safety issues and losses arise, new cookie cutter procedures and controls are sent down to the field by the safety professional. Senior management does not allocate enough money or management time to carry out the safety program even though it is in writing. Workers know this and act accordingly. The clearest picture of the safety professional in this group is “Hector the Inspector.”

## 3. EMPLOYEE-FOCUSED MANAGEMENT

Taking elements of 1 and 2 above, the safety professional still usually owns the program, but management wants to invest more time and money on the workers. Workers are still solely blamed for accidents. Safety committees are formed, and low level lagging indicator incentive programs come on the scene. The safety training is usually static and poorly delivered with the main objective of documenting it

in the employee file for compliance purposes. This is where you usually hear, “I don’t know why he did what he did, because he was trained and it is in his file.” This stage still focuses on unsafe acts by workers and not the management system that promotes taking shortcuts. Management in this stage keeps asking, “We are doing all of these safety programs and meetings, why do accidents still happen?”

## 4. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

A large majority of contractors who “get it” are in this phase and some are knocking on the door of Safety Excellence. The safety professional in this phase does not own the safety program, management does. Management commitment is demonstrated by allocating significant resources toward improving people skills, providing good equipment, pre-work planning and describing safe work methods that workers should use. Supervisors are viewed more as leaders and developed to be better on each project. Management understands that when unsafe acts or conditions occur, it is not the worker’s fault, but a breakdown in their management system. Leading indicators also take a high priority, and creative ways of analyzing data and allocating costs back to poorer performing projects is the norm. A tremendous amount of planning and communication takes place and this is reflected in better-than-average safety results. However, a few people still drive the program and safety is not fully integrated into all management systems.

## 5. SAFETY EXCELLENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Characteristics of the highest level on the continuum are:

### SENIOR MANAGEMENT ENGAGEMENT

Only about 15% of contractors have direct engagement of senior leaders in the process of delivering safety every day on every job. When senior managers are passionate, focused, make it personal and get involved, they set the proper example for everyone else in the organization. There is no “insulation” from the field staff, and they come to know, not just the conditions in which their personnel are working, but also who their employees are. Top organizational leaders seeing and being seen on project sites, talking and asking about safety performance make up the most significant factor in exemplary programs. Project certainty gives this group a clear competitive advantage over their peers.

Senior leadership’s direct engagement with all personnel encourages and drives a high level of commitment to safety throughout the entire organization. Passion for everyone going home at the end of the day intact permeates the culture of high performance organizations. This passion comes through senior managers’ direct participation in promoting programs and processes and taking an active role in demonstrating the expected behaviors for both workers and management. When senior management gets to know who their program is protecting by routinely getting out to sites, walking around and speaking with workers, they also become known by those who work for them and send the message throughout the organization that safety matters. “If management cares that much, maybe I should care more about it too,” is how those in the field interpret such levels of participation which, in turn, increases the degree of participation by people throughout the entire organization. As one company president said to a Willis Construction Safety Professional, “It really doesn’t count if it isn’t face-to-face, at all levels of the organization.”

While this level of involvement is easier to achieve in smaller organizations, it has been shown to be possible even in large organizations when a concerted effort is made. This goal can be reached by senior management engaging in periodic site visits dedicated to safety, involvement in reviews of all accident investigations, participation in annual or semi-annual safety training of field management (one of our clients requires each senior manager to teach at least one safety course for field staff annually), occasionally sitting in on new employee orientations, observing safety committee meetings and other efforts that field personnel become aware of. Simply handing out safety recognition awards at the annual meeting is a meaningless act for both the award recipient and the manager. Hold managers accountable at the project level and above is more difficult if senior management’s only level of involvement is in reviewing periodic safety reports.

If the organization attempts to substitute an auditing process, with extensive and frequent assessments, in lieu of senior manager involvement, results suffer. Even when this includes audits by various levels of management below the senior staff, the company safety programs are not nearly as effective. Those companies that choose to place a heavy emphasis on auditing,

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Another best practice is to require the active engagement of all the partners in the building process. Those contractors who do best with preparing their own staff to execute safe construction on a project site carry over the same approach to all the subcontractors who work for them. The subcontractors are viewed as contributors to the overall effectiveness of the safety practices on the project and thus are incorporated into the planning and management process.

accelerating either the data collection or analysis through the use of electronic means, expend much more effort and expense with results that are not nearly as positive as those organizations in which the top leaders are personally involved in their programs. If the senior leaders do not have direct personal knowledge of their program or what is actually happening in the field, vast amounts of data and/or inspections are not particularly useful in directing efforts.

### **LINE MANAGERS LEAD, SAFETY PROFESSIONALS SUPPORT**

A complementary element, running parallel to the engagement of senior leadership, is the recognition that safety performance requires that line management throughout the organization must take the lead in safety efforts. As the individuals making the decisions throughout the day on means, methods and approaches, line management is ultimately responsible for the project's outcomes and must believe that they own the results. Regardless of the level of energy or competency of safety personnel, they cannot deliver safety results for an organization on their own. Winning organizations use their safety staff to support the safe execution of construction work by using their expertise and knowledge to ensure that the work managed by line leaders is completed in a safe manner.

### **FEEDBACK AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING**

Another factor that distinguishes those who achieve safety excellence is a willingness to be open to suggestions from wherever they might come and to adapt their organization and its procedures to accommodate this feedback. The practices that work are learned through exploring and experimenting, watching what works for others and modifying existing procedures.

Those contractors whose programs are seeing the best results are also heavily engaged in a continuous learning process throughout the organization. They understand that they must plan, perform, measure and improve if they are to get better. They recognize that, with the "churn" of staff, having a formalized process to capture the lessons learned and to feed that information back into modifications in the next cycle is the route to improvement. Through the analysis of injuries and near misses as well as recognition of those who raise concerns or make

suggestions, successful contractors enhance their programs and prevent injuries. Near miss incidents are reported at this level because there is a “No Fear” management environment. Through the process of reviewing and planning work in advance of performance, problems can be anticipated and addressed with controls or avoided entirely. By conducting pre-job orientations with subcontractors, they ensure that their partners in the construction process are ready to execute their portion of the work without injury or incident. By performing post-project evaluations, they have the opportunity to obtain feedback and learn how to improve while the project is still fresh in the minds of its participants.

## ONGOING EDUCATION

Training is the best way to introduce basic skills to employees, but ongoing education reinforces the learning cycle and integrates knowledge derived from feedback into the workforce. This education better equips the workforce to deal with the dynamic issues and risks that they face during the construction process. High performance organizations have a structured process to bring in new employees and orient them adequately to prepare them for work. Over time these organizations support their employees as they grow in experience and convert skill into high levels of knowledge. To accomplish this, they have evolved their education process from a training-only focus to a commitment to indoctrinate their employees into the corporate culture of safety. Once an employee understands and embraces that culture, they will be an active part of the company’s success. This education is also

structured to provide the different levels of capability needed for each individual to properly fulfill his safety responsibilities, depending upon his role on the project or within the organization.

## INVOLVEMENT OF ALL PARTIES

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High performance organizations are also heavily engaged in peer-to-peer networking. They invest the time and money to share their own best practices and to hear what their peers are doing. Working together toward the ultimate goal of keeping exposures to loss minimal is the true value of networking.

If safety becomes a consistent shared value throughout the organization, you will likely find your company more successful in all aspects of your operations.

As W. Edwards Deming said:

“Management must feel pain and dissatisfaction with past performance and must have the courage to change. They must break out of the line, even to the point of exile among their peers. There must be a burning desire to transform their style of management.”  
(1982, W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis*)

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## CONTACTS

To find out more about how Willis Construction Safety Management Professionals can help you move toward world class safety performance, please contact your local Willis Client Advocate®, Construction Safety Professional or:

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