

Your Safety Transformation Starts and Ends with Culture Transformation

When a visionary CEO announced safety as his top priority at leading aluminium producer Alcoa back in 1987, investors rolled their eyes¹. But under his leadership, the company's market value skyrocketed, proving that a safety-first culture can do far more than prevent accidents - it can transform an entire organisation.

But even today, nearly 40 years later, many organisations still struggle to improve their safety performance, despite on the surface demonstrating they are prioritising the wellbeing of their workforce. Why? Because achieving an effective safety transformation also requires a cultural transformation.

The UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE) emphasises that an organisation's culture can impact safety as much as its safety management systems². Indeed one multinational manufacturing company experienced a 30% drop in incidents after enhancing safety-related employee engagement³.

Safety matters - and whilst AI and modern machinery promises enhanced safety by predicting failures, identifying hidden risks, and automating high-hazard tasks, it is even more important for leaders to develop a culture that has people at its core as without a culture of trust, transparency, and shared accountability, even the best tech can fail to prevent accidents.

An effective safety culture starts with leadership and extends to every level of the organisation. It means creating an environment where safety is a core value for leaders, employees feel psychologically safe to speak up, continuous learning drives improvement and technology (including AI) enhances human decision-making - rather than replacing it.

If you're keen to build a culture that drives outstanding safety performance in your organisation, here's are some insights from our experience in how best to approach it.

1. Psych Safety. Paul O'Neill: A Psychological Safety Success Story. Psychsafety.com. <https://psychsafety.com/paul-oneill-a-psychological-safety-success-story/>

2. Health and Safety Executive. Organisational Culture. HSE.gov.uk. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/culture.htm>

3. Psico Smart. Strategies for engaging employees in safety management initiatives. Psico-Smart.com. <https://psico-smart.com/en/blogs/blog-strategies-for-engaging-employees-in-safety-management-initiatives-172730>

Live and breathe safety: start with leadership

We all know that culture transformation starts at the top. Leaders can't simply enforce safety - they need to embody it, and not just or only when talking specifically about safety. As the Alcoa CEO demonstrated, leadership sets the tone by modelling the behaviours they expect, building psychological safety, and holding themselves and their teams accountable for outcomes. Only then will a genuine cultural shift take root.

A strong starting point for leaders is to make safety a core organisational goal, weaving and embedding it into all business activities and treating it as a key performance metric. This reinforces that safety is just as important as profitability and growth.

We recently saw this in action with a multinational oil and gas business where safety performance had plateaued. Taking a 'whole systems' approach, we helped to embed safety in every process and situation. The most critical element? Reshaping leadership expectations to ensure safety became integral to all activities and decisions across the business - not just a set of rules and procedures for high-risk operations.

Alongside rolling out the IOGP Life Saving Rules through multiple engagement touchpoints, our programme focused on integrating safety, psychological safety and continuous improvement into leadership behaviours first and foremost, closely aligned to and leveraging the organisation's existing culture and strategy. This meant that not only the topic of safety, but all of the reinforcing factors that allowed it to flourish, became part of the organisational fabric, leading to a measurable reduction in serious injuries and fatalities.

Empower your people to speak up: build psychological safety

Building a safety-first culture starts with leadership, but it thrives when employees feel safe to speak up about risks or mistakes without fear of blame.

In our experience, a culture in which employees feel comfortable reporting issues leads to overall improvements in safety performance. Creating this culture was central to our strategy when supporting a national petrochemical company to elevate its Process Safety Management (PSM) framework to match the scale and technical demands of its expanding and diversifying operations.

In addition to bringing industry best practices into the process safety framework and anchoring them in human performance principles, we implemented a train-the-trainer programme grounded in psychological safety. As part of this programme's success, one-to-one coaching helped ensure safety became a lived practice, and one that is paid forward across all parts of the organisation - not just a policy on a page.

To support this, we worked closely with organisational leadership to develop a phased, ambitious roadmap to maturity in safety culture. This involved making sure the leadership team all agreed on what safety excellence would look like and simulating how as a team they would show up in all possible scenarios, including, and most importantly, how they would do this when incidents occur. It also involved in depth negotiations and agreement on how they would measure, model and communicate safety performance.

Psychological safety is the prerequisite for a culture where safety drives every decision, from the field to the boardroom. Its benefits go beyond enhanced safety alone - people who feel safe to express themselves without fear are more likely to innovate, adopt a curious growth mindset and drive overall organisational performance.

We recommend some basic principles that help drive this:

- giving everyone a voice in the room and a chance to speak, no matter the topic
- treating all ideas with equal weight and exploration
- adopting a neutral stance on any failure, mistake or missed success - look for the root cause and the learning every time.

In the client example above, together these measures led to the safe and successful start-up and operation of the first petrochemical plant in the country.



Continuously evolve your approach: learn from every incident

Every incident or near miss is an opportunity to strengthen safety processes and enhance organisational resilience, putting the prioritisation of safety into action.

Organisations that constantly refine their safety culture based on new experiences and changing circumstances are more likely to stay ahead of emerging risks. In an era of rapid change, characterised by accelerating regulatory shifts and exponentially occurring novel risks such as pandemics and global conflict, this agility is not only a strategic advantage but a veritable superpower.

It is particularly relevant during mergers and acquisitions. No two workplace cultures are the same, and attempting to impose one safety strategy on another is a risky shortcut that can lead to safety lapses. To ensure safety performance isn't impacted, a new safety governance model, operating rhythm and organisational structure should be defined that serves the specific purposes of the combined enterprise, and time spent aligning the new leadership on the same.

Following an acquisition in 2023, we supported an international renewable energy support services provider, managing around £35 billion of assets, to develop an effective company-wide safety culture across 23 countries.

We started by identifying the strengths of each legacy culture to celebrate and preserve. From there, we defined a 'best of all' culture - combining the strongest parts from both firms into a cohesive framework.

To drive adoption, we aligned cultural goals with key business objectives and established a network of culture ambassadors to foster buy-in across the organisation. This integration made culture, safety and success indivisible - each as critical as the other. In a complex environment, these foundations have proved a robust base for an effective and resilient integration.

Prioritise people: balance AI and human insight

Once a strong people-centred safety culture is in place, technology becomes a powerful tool to enhance, power and sustain it.

AI and predictive technology can now significantly improve safety by identifying risks and predicting failures from multiple data sources, as well as generative, point of need access to safety guidelines via LLMs. But technology alone isn't enough - people provide the context, experience, and decision-making needed to respond effectively. AI-powered tools can process vast amounts of data and alert teams to potential issues, but it's your trained, engaged people who interpret these signals, prioritise actions, and ensure safe interventions on the ground.

We supported a major oil and gas company to embed their safety culture when introducing industry-standard life-saving rules, and training over 100,000 people in just three months. The combination of data automation, analysis and human expertise allowed the company to predict and prevent risks more effectively, improving safety performance and reducing incidents.

It is vital that human perspectives and experience remain at the forefront as technology advances, and in particular whilst it is emerging, rather than proven. When organisations strike the right balance between human-centred culture and augmented, generative intelligence in partnership, this becomes a powerful enabler of safety and resilience.

Leading your firm's safety transformation

Your safety transformation starts and ends with a culture transformation. When leaders model the right behaviours, empower their teams to speak up, and integrate technology thoughtfully and appropriately, then safety becomes embedded in your organisational DNA - driving not just safer outcomes and preservation of life, but stronger business performance too.

How might a culture transformation create sustainable safety performance in your organisation?

Get in touch with the team to discuss how we can support your safety transformation.

About the authors



Helen Kewell is a Client Partner at Muuto, specialising in global people, behaviour and culture transformations. She partners with senior leaders and teams to tackle transformation challenges and create tailored solutions to drive meaningful change.

Verity Hart is a Programme Manager at Muuto with expertise in complex, business and technology-driven transformation. She is an expert in psychological safety and in building innovative cultural, change management and learning solutions to drive business outcomes.



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www.muuto.co.uk / info@muuto.co.uk