

Behavioural Safety Beyond the Front Line

A joint programme from the South Rail Systems Alliance and the Occupational Psychology Centre is helping teams better understand how behaviour, communication and change influence operational safety



Joint workshop – York team delegates
Image Credit South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA)

For years, behavioural safety initiatives in rail have tended to focus on the front line. Drivers, signallers, track teams and maintenance staff have often been the primary audience for discussions around human factors, Non-Technical Skills (NTS) and operational risk.

But what happens when an organisation decides that behavioural safety is not simply a frontline issue, but a whole-system challenge?

That was the challenge taken on by the South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA), an integrated alliance between Colas Rail UK, AECOM and Network Rail, supported by psychologists from the OPC.

The result was a large-scale programme of behavioural safety workshops designed not for one operational discipline, but for a complex multi-organisation rail delivery environment, involving directors, senior leaders, project managers, designers, engineers, supervisors and frontline operatives alike.

At the centre of the programme was a growing recognition that modern rail risk is not shaped only by major hazards. Smaller operational changes, psychological pressures and the cumulative impact of routine adaptations can also gradually influence safety performance over time.

For the SRSA, that challenge is amplified by the complexity of alliance working, where infrastructure delivery relies on close collaboration between multiple organisations, suppliers and disciplines.

Nick Matthews, Head of Transformation at the SRSA, explains: 'We wanted people to recognise that safety is not static. Conditions change constantly in our business: Locations move, worksite conditions change, plans evolve and priorities shift. We need people at every level to feel empowered to stop, reassess, challenge and speak up if something doesn't feel right.'

Moving beyond traditional safety training

SRSA initially approached the OPC to support behavioural safety discussions within the alliance's regular 'boot-camp' programme. However, early conversations quickly identified the opportunity for something much broader and more operationally focused.

Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services at the OPC, who led much of the delivery work for the programme, explains: 'The more we discussed the operational realities the alliance is dealing with, the clearer it became that this needed to be much more than a one-hour awareness session. The planning quickly shifted towards building a wider behavioural safety programme that tied psychological safety with operational change, behavioural risk and decision-making in a way that was highly relevant and practical to the railway operational environment.'

The programme was ultimately delivered across more than 20 sessions between late 2025 and spring 2026, involving mixed groups of approximately 15–18 employees per session.

Directors sat alongside frontline operatives. Designers worked alongside supervisors. Senior leaders shared workshop space with engineers and track teams.

Unusually, the programme also extended beyond directly employed staff to include alliance partners, suppliers and contingent labour, reinforcing the principle that behavioural safety expectations applied consistently across the wider delivery environment.

David Anderson, Competence Manager – Colas Rail – SRSA says: 'It was important that everyone heard the same message, regardless of role, employer or seniority. Whether somebody was a track operative, a designer, a surveyor or a contract director, they all have an influence on safety outcomes.'

A central aim of the programme was creating a shared behavioural safety culture

'The workshops reinforced that behavioural safety is not separate from operational delivery. It is part of it. In complex operational environments where plans, conditions and pressures constantly change, helping people recognise how those changes can quietly influence behaviour and decision-making is incredibly important.'

*Laura Hedley
Occupational Psychologist, the OPC*

across the alliance, rather than treating safety as a frontline-only responsibility.

Nick Matthews explains: 'We wanted to build on the strong safety cultures already established within the SRSA's parent organisations, while creating a genuinely alliance-wide approach shared by everyone working across SRSA.'

David Anderson added: 'The workshop mix was very deliberate. Bringing different disciplines and seniority levels together helped break down traditional hierarchy barriers and created far greater understanding of how decisions and pressures flow across different parts of the delivery environment. It created real permission for people to challenge unsafe practices and reinforced that safety is shaped long before anyone arrives on site, with decisions made throughout the delivery chain ultimately influencing the safety of people working trackside.'

Why change became a central theme

One of the most distinctive elements of the programme was its focus on change.

Rather than treating risk as something static or linked only to major operational hazards, the workshops explored how everyday changes, particularly small or cumulative changes, can influence safety performance over time.

This reflected a challenge the SRSA believed was increasingly relevant across projects, where teams frequently adapt to changing site conditions, revised schedules, altered work arrangements or modified designs.

Importantly, the programme did not suggest that railway teams fail to manage change appropriately. Dynamic risk assessments are already a well-established part of railway operations, and teams routinely reassess work when plans or conditions alter.

However, drawing on learning from Post-Incident Assessments (PIAs) across the industry, the OPC understands that when changes occur, focus can naturally shift towards technical delivery considerations such as possessions, tooling, sequencing or communications. The workshops therefore encouraged participants to also consider the behavioural and psychological impact of change, particularly how factors such as pressure, assumptions, familiarity or overconfidence can influence the way people recognise, or importantly fail to recognise, changing risk.

Iffath Ahmed, Lead Business Psychologist at the OPC, who delivered several of the workshops, explains: 'In rail, people deal with operational change all the time. A big part of the workshops was about translating psychological and behavioural concepts into practical operational situations that people immediately recognised in their own work environments. It wasn't about telling people how to work safely. It was about helping people recognise how routine, pressure and assumptions can quietly influence safety decisions when conditions change.'

The workshops also explored how multiple small changes, particularly in fast-moving operational environments, can gradually increase exposure to risk over time. Where continual adaptation becomes routine and no immediate negative outcome or incident occurs, those subtle shifts in behaviour can slowly move organisations away from original safe systems towards what simply becomes accepted as 'normal'. This concept is known as 'normalisation of deviance'.

Laura explains: 'You unintentionally do something differently to the normal way of working once, then again and again, until eventually that small change becomes invisible. Organisationally and psychologically, people stop noticing the risk because the behaviour has become normalised. The important thing is recognising when to stop and consciously reassess the situation again.'

Understanding risk differently

The programme also reinforced that behavioural safety applies far earlier in the project lifecycle than many people assume. Discussions highlighted how planning decisions, design activity, surveying arrangements and operational pressures can all influence frontline safety performance later during delivery.

Nick Matthews shared: 'Good safety starts long before anybody goes trackside. Designers, planners and surveyors all influence the environment people eventually work in. We wanted to reinforce that



A typical track renewal project being delivered.
Image Credit South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA)

no deadline or delivery pressure should compromise safe decision-making at any stage.'

The workshops encouraged participants to think more intentionally about how behaviour, decision-making and operational pressures can influence safety performance.

Laura continued: 'Most people already do many of these things well. The focus was about becoming more conscious and intentional in how they reassess situations, and for them to understand why those behaviours matter.'

Psychological safety and speaking up

Psychological safety formed another major component of the programme. Workshop discussions reflected a familiar dynamic across many safety-critical industries: while employees generally felt comfortable questioning peers or raising operational concerns, confidence was sometimes lower when concerns involved more senior colleagues. The programme therefore placed strong emphasis on ensuring employees felt empowered to stop work, challenge unsafe decisions and speak up when conditions changed.

Will Bryant, Operations Director at Colas Rail – SRSA, says: 'The real test comes on a Sunday night when pressure is building, and everyone wants the railway handed back on time. That's when the teams need to know they genuinely have the backing of senior leadership to stop, reassess and say: 'I'm free to be safe.'

Senior leaders participated in the same workshops as operational staff, helping

reinforce that behavioural safety and communication expectations applied across all levels of the alliance.

Laura continued: 'If you only target the frontline, people can sometimes feel like safety is being positioned as their responsibility alone. Involving senior colleagues in the same discussions reinforced that everybody has a role to play in shaping SRSA's safety culture.'

'What stood out with SRSA was the openness across the alliance to bring together cross-functional teams and suppliers to have honest conversations about operational reality. That shared ownership and openness to challenge is what helps strengthen safety culture over time.'

*Laura Hedley
Occupational Psychologist, the OPC*

Feedback from the programme has been very positive

According to the OPC's evaluation data, 91 per cent of participants rated the workshops as good, very good or excellent, and 91 per cent agreed the sessions would help further improve workforce safety.

Participants described the workshops as informative, engaging and practical, with discussions continuing beyond the sessions themselves. Steve Bodham, Rail Services Director – Readypower Group said: 'I was grateful for the opportunity to attend the behavioural safety workshop. It was a valuable reminder of how easy it is to lose focus on certain behaviours over time; while reinforcing the positive impact we can all have through our actions and approach.'

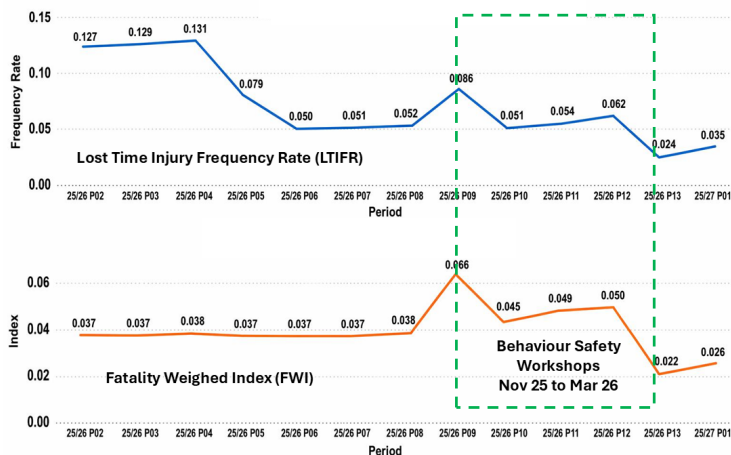
Paul Taylor, Safety and Sustainability Director at Colas Rail UK, says: 'SRSA is clearly setting the benchmark as we continue to evolve our safety culture. Safety can sometimes be perceived as a culture of compliance, but with these workshops fostering and expanding our 'Free to be Safe' messaging, our teams are empowered to speak up, challenge and stop work if they feel it is necessary to do so.'

'Accidents generally don't occur because people don't know the risk controls, they happen when events or routine focus our minds elsewhere. The results from this training programme shows its effectiveness, I'm delighted to see so much engagement and the key messages taken away from those who have taken part.'



Track renewal project in a station.
Image Credit South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA)

SRSA Safety Performance Trends Following the Behavioural Safety Programme



Will Bryant says: ‘While it’s still early days, we are encouraged by the initial safety performance trends and the level of engagement the programme has generated across the alliance.’

Wider organisational development

The Behavioural Safety programme has already led to further initiatives, with SRSA commissioning an additional Non-Technical Skills (NTS) programme within its signalling division. The approach will also extend beyond frontline operational roles to include wider supporting functions involved in delivery.

Nick Matthews reflects: ‘Our technical safety performance is already strong, but we recognise there was an opportunity to focus more deeply on behaviours,

decision-making and NTS. This programme reflects our commitment to continuous improvement and ensuring safety evolves alongside the complexity of modern rail delivery.’

Beyond the alliance

For the SRSA, the programme was not about replacing technical standards or operational discipline but strengthening the behavioural and cultural factors that support safe decision-making in increasingly complex delivery environments.

The workshops reinforced that behavioural safety depends not only on technical controls and procedures, but also on how effectively people recognise change, communicate openly and challenge unsafe situations together.

To find out more about behavioural safety and Non-Technical Skills programmes for complex operational environments, get in touch with the friendly team at the OPC. [IP](http://www.theopc.co.uk)



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