What the Best Safety Leaders Do

As the railways in Great Britain undergo significant change, strong safety leadership has never been more important. Dr Stephen Fletcher, joint CEO at the Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC), explores eight characteristics of the most effective safety leaders and the role they play in shaping safety culture

The rail industry is entering a new era of public ownership and significant change. As the future shape of GB Rail evolves, organisations are managing transformation while continuing to deliver safe, reliable and efficient services every day. The UK rail industry is recognised as one of the safest in the world, but that is not a reason for complacency. Maintaining high safety performance requires continued learning and improvement.

For Dr Stephen Fletcher, strong safety leadership is a key part of that picture. His experience of working with safety-critical organisations has shown him that the way leaders behave and the priorities they set can have a significant influence on safety culture – and, ultimately, on safety performance.

'Safety leadership is increasingly important at a time when the industry is going through such significant change' he says. 'The basic essentials of safety performance are absolutely critical, and that safety performance is strongly influenced by good, effective safety leadership.'

Dr Fletcher describes it as the capacity of leaders to mobilise people around safety challenges and influence behaviour.

'Leaders have a key role to play because they are in a position of authority' he explains. 'They can mobilise their people to be safe, or, if safety leadership is weak, they can have the opposite effect.'



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Be authentic

The first pillar is authenticity – essentially, walking the talk. A strong safety leader does not promote safety only when it is convenient. Safety remains a priority even when there are competing demands, and leaders consistently demonstrate through their own behaviour that safety matters.

'Good safety leaders walk the talk on safety constantly' says Dr Fletcher. 'They demonstrate integrity and honesty around safety, and they encourage the people who work for them to demonstrate that authenticity too.'

Employees notice what leaders do, not simply what they say. Consistency builds credibility and reinforces safety as part of everyday behaviour.

Prioritise safety

Leaders inevitably have competing priorities. The challenge is ensuring that safety does not become diluted by them. For Dr Fletcher, effective safety leaders make safety a constant part of the organisational agenda and a key priority. In rail and other safety-critical industries, commercial and operational pressures can all compete for attention. Effective safety leaders ensure these pressures never drown out safety messages or override safe decision-making.

'Safety should remain an important priority, even when there are pressures to focus on speed, cost, or other demands from work or people around you. That commitment can be demonstrated in simple but powerful actions, like putting safety first on meeting agendas or talking about it consistently and visibly recognising good safety practice in team meetings. When leaders demonstrate that safety really matters to them, it is much more likely it will remain a priority throughout the organisation.'

Create psychological safety

For people to raise safety concerns, report mistakes and share what is really happening, they need to feel safe doing so. Psychological safety means creating an environment where people can speak openly about worries, near misses, their own errors and difficult issues

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without fear of reprisal. It is closely linked to effective safety leadership.

‘If employees don’t feel safe to speak to their senior leader or line manager about an issue, or a mistake they’ve made, then we are failing in terms of safety’ says Dr Fletcher.

‘Because at that point, we are not just losing vital learning information, we may also lose the opportunity to prevent something far more serious happening. In a safety-critical industry like rail, silence is never neutral; it is a risk in itself.’

People are unlikely to provide honest feedback if they do not feel safe enough to do so. Good safety leaders make themselves approachable and encourage people to speak up, even when the subject is difficult.

Demonstrate servant leadership

The fourth pillar challenges a more traditional view of leadership, seeing it as a responsibility to enable and support others rather than simply directing them.

For Dr Fletcher, servant leadership is a mindset: ‘I’m here to serve my people, to enable them to do their jobs as safely and effectively as possible. My role as a safety leader is to facilitate that.

‘Servant leadership actually turns the organisation on its head’ he says. ‘It gives power to frontline operational roles. Some managers find that deeply uncomfortable; others see it as very liberating.’

The principle is simple: look after your people, and they are better placed to look after each other, the organisation, and its safety performance.

In practice, this means listening, understanding the pressures people face and giving them the support and autonomy to work safely and effectively. It requires courage, authenticity and compassion, and it represents a significant loosening of the traditional grip of authority.

In Dr Fletcher’s experience, leaders who genuinely adopt this mindset can bring about significant organisational change.

Seek out feedback

Effective safety leadership also requires leaders to actively seek feedback – particularly from those closest to the operational ‘frontline’.

Leaders need to understand what frontline employees think and feel and the safety issues they are experiencing, as well as any improvement opportunities they see. This requires more than a communication channel; leaders need to spend time with frontline teams, listening and observing.

‘One of the challenges as you become more senior in an organisation is that you can develop a distorted view about what is really going on’ says Dr Fletcher. ‘People around you may tell you what they think you want to hear.’

The OPC’s experience of working with safety-critical organisations has highlighted the importance of communication in both directions. While communication down an organisation can often be well established, upward communication can be much less effective. As one Asian client memorably put it, communication in their organisation was ‘flood downwards but trickle up’.

This is something organisations can test. One of the twelve blocks of the OPC’s Safety Culture Questionnaire (SafeQ) explores how well employees feel their views are heard on safety matters, providing insight into whether communication is really flowing upwards.

Act and deliver

Gathering feedback is only part of the process. In Dr Fletcher’s experience, rail organisations are often good at listening to their people and acting on the issues raised. Where there can be a missed opportunity is in closing the feedback loop and communicating what has happened as a result.

‘We often implement changes and improvements, but we may not necessarily go back and communicate that, or share it more widely across teams’ says Dr Fletcher. ‘It’s about showing our employees that we’ve listened; we’ve heard and we value their contribution, and, importantly, that we’ve acted.’

Communicating changes and learning more widely helps people see the impact of their contribution and ensures useful learning is shared across teams. Where immediate action isn’t possible, a prompt update can still keep people informed.

For Dr Fletcher, this follow-through supports both employee engagement

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and organisational learning: ‘If people can see that you’ve listened, acted and then communicated what you’ve done, it reinforces the value of speaking up. Without action, employees can sometimes become disengaged assuming there is little point in raising concerns.’

Be courageous

Safety leadership sometimes requires the courage to challenge decisions or ‘push back’ when things don’t feel right, including questioning those who may be more senior. It means being prepared to say: ‘No, I believe this is wrong’ or ‘I disagree with this.’

‘Without that courage’ says Dr Fletcher, ‘we could create an organisation where people see things being implemented that they know are wrong, but they don’t feel able to challenge it.’

Courage also means acknowledging your own mistakes. Leaders who are willing to admit when they have got something wrong show they do not expect perfection from themselves or others.

‘Saying you’ve made a mistake or done something wrong takes real courage, particularly if you are in a position of authority’ says Dr Fletcher. ‘But it can also be one of the most powerful ways to encourage others to acknowledge and report their mistakes. It shows that you are human and fallible, and that it is OK for others to take the same path.’



IMAGE CREDIT: ISTOCK

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Seek continuous improvement

The final pillar is continuous improvement, always seeking a better way of doing things.

'This is about leaders constantly looking for creative or new ways to do things better' says Dr Fletcher. 'Never accepting the status quo and always encouraging their people to look for continuous improvement in what they do, too.'

This does not have to mean major organisation-wide programmes. It can be small, practical changes that improve safety, informed by everyday experience, mistakes or near misses.

But learning needs to be shared. Good safety leaders create ways for teams to capture, share and embed what has been learned. That means asking: What happened? What did we learn? Who else needs to know? And what do we need to do differently as a result? This helps valuable insights reach beyond those who experienced them and become part of wider organisational learning.

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For safety leaders, this means having the curiosity and courage to look honestly at what has happened and turn mistakes and near misses into opportunities to improve, rather than simply moving on.

A great safety leader is not simply a custodian of existing safety practices. They are a pioneer and an innovator – continually looking ahead, challenging the status quo and helping their people find safer and better ways of working.

Safety leadership belongs to everyone

Safety leadership is not confined to senior managers, HSE specialists or those with direct operational responsibility. 'Everyone is responsible as a safety leader' says Dr Fletcher. 'Whether you are working in operations, HR, audit or finance, there is a role to play in making our operations safer.'

The OPC has helped many non-operational leaders recognise how their decisions can affect frontline safety, sometimes years later on. The safety impact of an architect's choice of flooring for a depot, for example, or a financial decision affecting staffing or workload, may not be realised within the business until many years later.

The challenge is recognising those connections. For organisations to develop a mature safety culture, everyone needs to understand the part they can play.

Leadership that shapes safety

The eight pillars are not new leadership concepts. What matters is how deliberately they are applied to safety, every day. Many rail professionals will recognise some of these behaviours in others, and perhaps themselves. Giving them a name and a framework helps us recognise what good safety leadership looks like and where we could each do more.

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As railways in Great Britain undergoes significant change, maintaining that focus will be essential. For Dr Fletcher, safety leadership needs to be visible in everyday decisions, conversations and behaviours – from the boardroom, across every function and on to the frontline.

'Excellent safety leaders don't treat safety as something separate from the business. They embed it in how the organisation thinks, decides and acts every day. When safety leadership is done well, it lifts the whole organisation, and that in turn drives better safety culture and performance.'

In an industry where the consequences of getting safety wrong can be so significant, safety leadership is a responsibility we all share.

If you would like to explore how the OPC can support stronger safety leadership or safety culture in your organisation, get in touch with our friendly team.

the occupational psychology centre

Tel: 01923 234646
Visit: www.theopc.co.uk
Email: admin@theopc.co.uk



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