



WHITE PAPER

# Five Steps for Creating an Injury-Free Culture: Practical Steps Toward Safety's Highest Goal

Organisations serious about safety performance often talk about creating the injury-free culture. They know from experience that good systems are necessary but not sufficient for improvement; for sustained excellence, safety needs to be in an organisation's DNA. Practically speaking, an injury-free culture doesn't mean "zero injuries"; it means creating an environment where injuries are not acceptable and where we do everything possible to prevent them. The injury-free culture is a radically ambitious undertaking. It requires rethinking how we approach safety activities, the measures we use to monitor progress and define success, and the way we approach engagement of employees at all levels. This article suggests five steps that, in our experience, characterise the progression toward injury-free performance.

## 1. Establish Alignment & Ownership

The injury-free culture starts with alignment around what we mean by injury-free and what we mean by "injury". The focus is not going forever injury free, which for most people is too hard a concept to support or stand behind. The focus is continuous, sustainable improvement. The term "injury" could mean lost-times for one organisation or medical cases for another. Regardless of the definition, our goal is to go increasingly longer periods injury free. Leaders must drive the development of this culture and take ownership for safety outcomes as well as the systems, conditions, climate and culture that influence those outcomes.

## 2. Challenge Helplessness

Culture is as much about what we hear as what we see. Listen to how people describe performance issues and problems in your organisation. Do they express optimism about safety and their ability to influence it, even if they are not in charge? Or do they define safety as something "outside their control" or as "someone else's job"? Helplessness directly counters the ownership required from employees throughout the organisation for continuous improvement. Challenging helplessness starts with being aware of its currents among employees and consciously articulating messages that counter them.

### 3. Focus on Exposures

Traditional safety management tends to use injuries as the driver for change and the measure of improvement. This approach is somewhat like trying to drive forward by looking in the rearview mirror; it only tells us where we've been, not where we're going. Injury-free cultures work on seeing and understanding the potentials for injuries that exist in the organisational landscape. They use this information to identify patterns, inform the design of safety mechanisms and controls, respond appropriately to the potentials each exposure represents, and understand the relationship between non-safety systems and processes and safety performance.

### 4. Expand Your Metrics Set

Injury-free performance requires a broad and diverse set of indicators that help us understand and address increases in exposure. No single number, leading or lagging, can do this. We can rely even less on traditional indicators as safety performance improves; there is no "-1" in injury rate. Standard lagging indicators (such as recordable rates), are still valuable, but companies aiming for injury-free performance will add to these such measures as: the nature and severity of exposures, analysis of systems and practices contributing to exposures, the alignment of organisational goals with goals in safety, and **measures of climate, culture**, and leadership practices linked to safety outcomes. As a guide, look for metrics that singly or in combination correlate to injury rates across many organisations.

### 5. Engage Employees

At the end of the day, leadership is limited in its ability to provide coverage and even with the best safety programs are only as effective as the level to which they have employee buy-in and support. Injury-free cultures work at passing the "2 AM test". That is, what happens at 2 o'clock in the morning when no one is around, the consultants are long gone, and the managers have all gone home? Even if no one will know, does the employee follow procedures and guidelines because it is the right thing to do? Organisations can develop this level of commitment by providing employees with opportunities for meaningful engagement, for example asking them to provide information and feedback about the organisation's efforts, help in measuring and managing exposures, or help identifying solutions to safety problems.

### Getting Started

The injury-free culture is characterised by increasingly longer periods without injury. The real proof, however, is employees at all levels saying and doing things that suggest no injury is okay. Achieving this type of a **culture of care** is not a sprint but a marathon made up of continuous improvement and small significant steps. In this way, organisations move from aspiring to injury-free performance, to achieving it.

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