



THE UNSPOKEN TRUTH ABOUT HEALTH AND SAFETY

Here are six uncomfortable watch-outs for leaders when it comes to health and safety. By Neil McGregor.



hen leaders hear “health and safety,” most either glaze over or delegate it. It’s usually someone else’s job – a checklist, a manual, an audit. But here’s the uncomfortable truth: Health and safety isn’t about rules. It’s about leadership.

If you’re a leader, you set the tone. And whether you realise it or not, your behaviour – your urgency, your attention, your values – shapes how seriously people take safety. Not what’s written in a policy.

So, if you’re brave enough to challenge the traditional view, here are six uncomfortable watch-outs for leaders when it comes to health and safety:

1. Health & safety is a reflection of what (and who) you value: Let’s not pretend otherwise – if you don’t prioritise safety, you don’t prioritise people. That’s the message your team hears, no matter what the policy says.

Leadership is visible. If your actions suggest speed is more important than safety, don’t be surprised when people start cutting corners. People won’t do what you say – they’ll do what you tolerate.

2. Your culture is your safety system: You can install the best safety systems money can buy – but if your team works in fear, if speaking up is punished, or if mistakes are weaponised, someone will get hurt.

Culture eats process for breakfast. A safe environment isn’t built by compliance, it’s built by trust. Want fewer incidents? Build psychological safety first.

3. People don’t die in spreadsheets: Too many leaders fall in love with reporting: near misses, risk registers, lag indicators. But you can’t audit your way to safety.

Data doesn’t save lives. Conversations do. If your safety performance only lives in monthly dashboards, you’re too late. Be present. Be visible. Ask questions. Listen to discomfort.

4. Your ego might be the biggest risk factor: This one stings a little. But pressure from leadership – unreasonable deadlines, aggressive targets, hero worship – creates risk faster than any faulty machinery. When people are scared to push back, scared to say ‘no’, or feel like failure isn’t an option, they’ll compromise. And that’s when things go

wrong. Fast. Leadership isn’t about being right. It’s about being open.

5. If you wouldn’t die for it, don’t let others risk it: Here’s a litmus test: is there any task in your organisation worth someone’s life? Probably not. Then why do we accept unspoken risks, tolerate unsafe conditions, or let a high-performing team member ‘bend the rules a little’? Nobody should be a martyr for a KPI.

6. Recognition matters more than reminders: Most safety cultures are built on warnings and punishments. But real behaviour change is driven by reinforcement.

When was the last time you thanked someone for stopping a job they didn’t feel was safe? Or celebrated a team for spotting a hazard before it became a statistic? Safe behaviours are worth recognising – not just correcting.

FINAL THOUGHT: DON’T OUTSOURCE THIS

Health and safety isn’t the HSE team’s job. It’s not your contractor’s job. It’s yours.

Because nothing kills culture – or people – faster than a leader who talks safety but walks urgency, ego, and inattention.

The real question isn’t “Is our workplace safe?” It’s “What am I doing that makes people feel unsafe?” ■



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As your trusted leadership and culture advisor, Human Synergistics offers solutions to help your business thrive. With extensive experience in creating sustainable individual, team, and organisational performance, contact Neil and the consulting team at neil@hsnz.co.nz to transform your culture and leadership. www.hsnz.co.nz