

Karen J Hewitt FIIRSM, Director of Leaderlike Ltd, asks if better conversations could be an overlooked risk control

POWERFUL RISK

When organisations decide to move beyond compliance to a more culture-led approach to safety and risk management, they often make safety the

first topic on every agenda. From safety briefings, inductions and awareness campaigns to risk assessments, safety alerts and toolbox talks, safety talk is suddenly everywhere – in every meeting and shift handover.

This may be the right thing to do, but it doesn't necessarily make it effective. Communication is not the same as conversation, and not all conversation has a positive impact on risk outcomes. It must be intentional, structured and practised, ensuring it acts as a real risk control. Not so structured, however, that it loses the potential for real human connection and the kind of learning that leads to game-changing innovation.



When done effectively, a good risk conversation makes unseen risks visible. It creates the kind of trust that makes a collective approach to safety and risk management possible, because it gives others a reason to get involved.

As Samantha Holmes, Group Head of Health and Safety at Kingfisher, explains: “In my role, I have conversations with people in different parts of the business about health and safety, and no single conversation is the same. That’s because if I want everyone to take ownership of health and safety, it’s up to me to adapt my

message to the person in front of me, ask the right questions and listen carefully. This allows me to present my argument in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the person (and part of the business) in front of me, with their unique challenges and objectives.”

Conversations about safety and risk are especially important at C-Suite level, where decisions are made every day on the structure, strategy and resources allocated to effective risk management. It also overcomes the daily conflict of safety versus schedule, cost and profit, or any other important strategic driver in an organisation. But how do we realise these benefits?

Effective risk management is rarely black and white. There are shades of grey everywhere we look, and we are forced to double down on the outcomes we are trying to achieve, the blockers, the trade-offs and what needs to change to make the work both safe and effective.

Safety and risk professionals are managing this ambiguity every day and having processes they can count on at scale are key to their wellbeing, confidence and success. Conversations also require such a process.

WHAT A POWERFUL RISK CONVERSATION LOOKS LIKE

1. Start with connection, not competence

Open with a question that solicits and values the other person's perspective before you offer your own. A question like: “What’s your vision for safety?” or “What do you think is the biggest risk around here?” allows the other person to think more deeply about what they feel and believe. It validates their role and importance and shows them instantly that you respect what they have to offer. It pitches you as equals, as humans – no

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matter where you sit on the hierarchy, or the type of work you do.

Julie Westcott, EHS&S Director, Auto EMIA at TE Connectivity, explains: "Whenever I (or my team) have conversations with the workforce to learn from how the work is done, we remember the importance of trust in those conversations. Trust is earned when we listen without judgement, because then we are showing that we really value what the other person says. As health and safety professionals it's far too easy to hear something we don't like and say, "you did what?", and then the trust is instantly broken."

2. Create space for curiosity

In our keenness to manage risks, prevent incidents and get safety done, we rarely pause to get curious about alternative solutions. While we, as risk professionals, know how to manage safety in theory,

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managing in a real-world organisation, with multiple competing priorities and agendas and never-ending change, the obvious answer is rarely the easiest to implement.

Taking time for curiosity is critical to bridging the gap between safety solution and implementation, overcoming potential conflict and building a relationship at the same time.

Sarah Kerr, Head of Health and Safety at Bristol Airport, reminds us: "Effective safety leadership is not about having all the answers. It's about creating the right conversations. When we take the time to understand different perspectives, show genuine curiosity and involve people in finding solutions, we build both trust and ownership. Those conversations engage hearts and minds, make risks more visible and help turn safety from something people must do into something they genuinely believe in. That's how strong safety cultures are built, and it's how we continue to improve both safety performance and business performance."

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3. Encourage others to take a wider perspective

As humans, we narrow our perspective based on prior experiences, as our brain generalises to enable the rules and beliefs that allow us to operate effectively. We do it also so we can focus on what matters, because our brains literally cannot cope with the overwhelming amount of information coming in.

A narrow perspective, however, can limit us, because it prevents us from seeing the very information that might enable us to change and grow. We limit our own possibilities with general statements such as: "We've always done it this way." But what if there were a better way?

COMMON CONVERSATIONAL FAILURE POINTS

If a conversation about safety and risk is a risk control measure, here's where it often fails:

- **Leading the other person:** Asking questions that suggest the answer you want e.g. do you think that the operator was distracted?
- **Starting with judgement or blame:** Starting the conversation with why or who might suggest someone made the wrong decision, or was to blame, triggering a fear response that shuts down learning.
- **Reacting negatively to what you hear:** Julie Westcott, EHS&S Director, Auto EMIA at TE Connectivity, says: "Even if you hear something which violates health and safety rules, showing your disapproval or disappointment erodes trust instantly and stops people from speaking out in the future."

— CONVERSATIONS



- **Overwhelming with technical language:** Too much jargon can overwhelm and confuse others, making them less likely to bring their own valuable perspective.
- **Providing the solution:** The moment we suggest that something is already decided, the other person disengages because they haven't been involved.
- **Failing to follow up:** If a good conversation provides a practical win-win solution, a lack of follow up destroys the trust that was built during that conversation.
- **Equating time spent chatting with results:** Counting time spent talking about safety may be useful for getting a new habit started, but the impact of that conversation is what really shows return on your conversational investment.

“EFFECTIVE SAFETY LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT HAVING ALL THE ANSWERS. IT’S ABOUT CREATING THE RIGHT CONVERSATIONS”

SARAH KERR



A THREE-STEP CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Leaderlike 3C Framework guides every conversation about safety and risk, downstream where the work happens and upstream where the decisions are made. It can be used to engage workers and contractors, uncover invisible risks, keep risk awareness levels high and encourage consideration of safety and risk in organisational design.

- **Care:** Ask the other person's perspective before offering your own.
- **Curiosity:** Allow both of you to explore possibilities together as equals.
- **Commitment:** Activate the other person's thinking, motivation and learning through thoughtful and non-challenging questions.

FIVE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Powerful risk conversations follow five underlying principles:

1. Find every opportunity to ask what someone else thinks.
2. Hold back on your own ideas as long as possible.
3. Use open questions.
4. Precede your own opinion with “and” instead of “but”, so you clearly signal you are conversational equals.
5. Seek and acknowledge the value in someone else's perspective, even if you don't agree with it.

When risk conversations become more powerful downstream, we drive engagement, risk awareness, risk visibility and problem solving. When we make them effective upstream, safety becomes a key part of every single management-level conversation, so it can be designed into the organisation.

Ruth Denyer, Safety Director at Netflix, sums up the challenge: “Effective risk management is about making sure we are having the right conversations at management level. Instead of asking, “What is the cost of compliance?”, we need to ask “What does success look like?” and then “What are you willing to risk achieving it?” This enables a collective approach to safety and risk that delivers value to the business and motivates everyone to be involved.”

When everyone in an organisation applies the five key principles and the 3C formula for powerful risk conversations, the collective safety and risk mindset will visibly start to shift.

“EFFECTIVE RISK MANAGEMENT IS ABOUT MAKING SURE WE ARE HAVING THE RIGHT CONVERSATIONS AT MANAGEMENT LEVEL”

RUTH DENYER

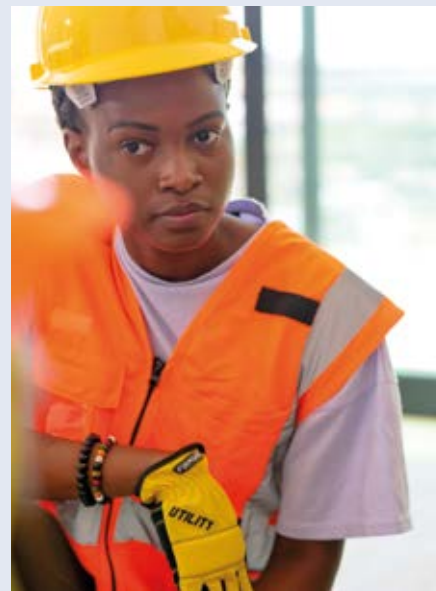


The first move needs to come from those with the most insight and expertise, and arguably the most power, to transform conversations around safety and risk. Safety and risk professionals are already talking about safety and risk every day and have the opportunity not only to make their own conversations more powerful, but to embed the approach into the rest of the organisation.

It requires a subtle change in the way safety and risk professionals see themselves. When they want their organisations to move beyond compliance, their identity needs to move with it. Regardless of job title, the mindset needs to shift from compliance manager to culture creator, where everyone has a stake in safety and risk, not just the experts.

Go into every conversation with open questions that invite others to provide their ideas, rather than the closed ones that take the conversation down rabbit holes and confirm what you already know.

Then listen...long enough for you to see the solution differently. ❤



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