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# Speaker Spotlight

Top-rated presenters from the NSC Congress & Expo share their insights



## Is your culture out of balance? 3 clues

By Rodney Grieve

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Every year, the National Safety Council Congress & Expo features some of the top thought leaders and motivators in the occupational safety and health community. Safety+Health has invited the most highly rated presenters to contribute to this monthly column. For more on the event, visit [congress.nsc.org](http://congress.nsc.org).

**TRUST IS NECESSARY** for a culture of success: a balance of productivity, quality and safety. It's often a lack of trust that keeps employees from reporting safety incidents – regardless of severity. The following are three clues that a culture is out of balance, and how leaders can restore the balance and deliver results.

### 1. "Management won't do anything until someone gets hurt."

The perception that leaders only really get involved in the safety conversation after someone gets hurt isn't created because leaders don't care or aren't proactive in addressing concerns. It results from leaders not communicating their safety expectations based on the organization's values.

Value-based expectations must be thoughtful, purposeful and consistently communicated. Each leader must articulate how he or she will demonstrate the organization's values and how those behaviors drive safety results. Through defining values and sharing, a leader establishes clear performance expectations and permits employees the opportunity to hold the leader accountable to those expectations. Open and honest feedback allows teams to build two-way trust – a necessity for a culture of success.

### 2. "I can't believe someone would do something so stupid."

The most important role of leaders is to create and maintain the culture. When we hear this clue, something in the organization has allowed them to abdicate their responsibility for creating a balanced work environment. As leaders, we're challenged to produce results (e.g., productivity, quality, safety, customer satisfaction, etc.). Safety results are particularly difficult because a leader must produce them through others.

Effective leaders influence employee behaviors. Too often with safety, that influence is absent or exclusively prescriptive (i.e., the rules). Properly focused frontline leaders understand that they must balance the amount of directive and supportive leadership behaviors based on the employee and the situation.

### 3. "I just knew someone was going to get hurt doing that."

This statement is indicative of a "be safe" mentality (e.g., "Get it done, just don't get hurt."). This mentality is driven by the ways we track and reward safety success: OSHA recordable injury rate and incentive programs. To change to a "be successful" mentality, both formal and informal leaders at all levels must consistently evaluate the culture they have created.

#### Be aware

Every organization has written rules and cultural rules. Leaders need to know what rules are consistently followed and what rules are flexible. Before looking at the employee's decision-making after an incident, the first question leaders should ask is: "What have I done or not done and said or not said that justified that employee to believe that rule is flexible?"

#### Be present

Leaders often claim they have little time to have constructive contact with employees. Therefore, that contact had better be purposeful, useful and relevant. Effective communication is based on listening and providing high-impact feedback, which takes many forms. The two most useful forms are:

**Developing feedback:** Offering a suggestion for improvement when an employee is already performing above expectations

**Redirecting behavior:** Demanding change when an employee's behavior is below the line of acceptability

#### Be balanced

Expected results come from a leader's balanced communication. A simple, seemingly innocuous statement (e.g., "Since we are behind ...") can push someone out of balance and result in an incident. Employees make decisions based on the information they have and the culture in which they exist. It's imperative that frontline leaders clearly understand the influence they have in creating outstanding safety results through others. ⊕

*This article represents the independent views of the author and should not be construed as a National Safety Council endorsement.*



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