



Shifting Mindsets To Positively Enhance A Safety Culture

By Jay Shinall



The construction industry has significantly improved safety over the past few decades, primarily through regulatory standards. These standards are meant to act as the basics for safety under the regulations set forth by state and federal governments. Complying with the law has become the benchmark many companies follow. These regulations, however, are decades behind current thinking in safety excellence.

Early in my career, I was fortunate to be surrounded by supervisors who focused their efforts on high-risk operations. They created plans for the worst-case scenario and how to recover in the event those situations actually happened. These high-risk operations include cranes, fall exposures, trenching, electrical, and working around heavy equipment.

Most companies tend to focus on low-risk operations, both because of an over focus on the recordable incident rate, and because low risk exposures are more prevalent and easier to observe and manage. Those supervisors I worked with and learned from, who focused on severity rather than probability, created especially strong safety cultures.

Breaking Batson-Cook free from the industry's focus on low severity incidents was a welcomed challenge to the company. Traditionally, as an industry, workers were trained to be in a culture of compliance. As long as workers did what they needed to do according to the legal definitions and federal regulations, they were "safe." But legal is often not "safe." Safety excellence requires a focus on risk assessment, planning, and follow-up. Batson-Cook needed to move to a proactive approach that permeated into all aspects of the company. It required a culture shift.

This effort to change our approach to safety started with senior management who recognized that change was needed. Leadership initiated a safety culture assessment that was conducted by a highly respected industry consulting company to establish a baseline of the culture and recommendations for improvement. Leaders engaged all workers to not only act in a safe manner, but to be involved in planning and innovating new concepts. Additionally, leadership learned through recognition and reinforcement that we can reinforce the behaviors that we want to see on our projects as opposed to what not to do.



For culture change to become embedded, enhancement of trust is required. Encouraging workers and trade partners to report unsafe practices was a step forward. Initially workers wondered if leadership would truly listen and act on their concerns. To have a free flow of information, a blame-free and fair culture is needed. This approach was counter to their experiences prior to this mindset shift. This was a difficult hurdle to overcome because they needed to see the work in action. When under stress, people tend to revert back to programmed behavior, the behavior set by legal regulations, to get the job done. It's understandable, and also predictable.

Trust starts with sincerity. Actions have to match our words. People have to feel heard and know their safety and wellbeing is paramount to the organization. In order to gain their trust, I spent a lot of time prioritizing tools like active listening, teaching human performance concepts, and systems thinking. By recognizing those who raised safety concerns and opportunities for improvement, the seeds for change were establishing roots. As workers witnessed the company genuinely caring for their well-being, going beyond just legal compliance, they felt more empowered to speak up about safety concerns.

Not only did this cause significant improvement in how we manage high-risk work, but it also has increased feedback on minor injuries. By focusing on minor incidents or near misses with severity potential, they become learning opportunities that might help mitigate future risk. These lessons are then transformed into best practices that are shared across the company. By doing so, we continuously shift our baselines in a positive direction and show incremental progress over time.



We also had to learn the dangers of hindsight bias that can lead us to over focus on worker actions rather than the latent conditions that underlie the decisions workers make. By understanding bias and by involving workers in learning sessions, we usually find many latent conditions within the organization that need to be addressed. We have had to learn to move away from focusing on who messed up, and instead discover what is messed up in our processes.

For example, if a fall from a ladder occurred where the ladder was improperly placed or not suitable for the task, it would be easy to blame the worker. When we move to learning rather than blaming, we may discover that our planning process failed to account for a safe method to reach the work. A stair tower, or a scaffold system may have been a better option. Failure to plan the work, along with a demanding work schedule may shift priorities from performing safe work to completing an objective on time. Competing messaging and project demands can create goal conflicts where a drift away from safe work can occur. By recognizing and managing our initial reactions and choosing to dig deeper, we can reveal new learning opportunities and make the entire company a safer place.

By prioritizing our people, we create better processes and safer outcomes. Our workers, our subject matter experts, thrive in a strong culture. Every supervisor in our organization has an opportunity daily to enhance our strong culture.

For more on HSE culture, please feel free to reach out: jshinall@batson-cook.com.

BATSON-COOK
CONSTRUCTION



[Batson-Cook.com](https://www.batson-cook.com)



[@Batson-Cook Construction](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Batson-Cook%20Construction)



[@BatsonCookConstruction](https://www.facebook.com/BatsonCookConstruction)



[@batsoncook](https://www.instagram.com/batsoncook)