



Don't Forget the Human Element of Your Safety Program

Apply these five manageable yet impactful steps to reevaluate your work environment and bring the concept of human-centered safety to life at your company.

Environmental, health, and safety (EHS) professionals, listen up: It's time to discuss workplace safety in a way that goes beyond the hierarchy of controls. No machine guarding, hazard identification, or compliance talk here.

Comprehensive, whole-person safety is the name of the game for construction, manufacturing, and utility companies that want to reduce injuries, decrease costs, and nurture quality and efficiency — all while ensuring that employees are comfortable with and proud of their work.

According to Todd W. Loushine, Ph.D., PE, CSP, CIH, a former Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) compliance officer, who is currently working part-time as an EHS manager while still teaching and advising as an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, there are many signs that change is coming.

For example:

- Associated Builders and Contractors added whole-person safety as a key component of its safety best practices.
- The Center for Construction Research and Training discussed the concept in a call it released this year.
- The National Institutes of Health prioritized it as an emerging issue.
- The University of Massachusetts Lowell created a degree program focused exclusively on whole-person safety.

The world is a different place today. Construction, manufacturing, and utility are different industries from a decade ago, and these changes are driven by unique dynamics. Dr. Loushine explained: "In construction, after receiving excellent training in the trades, workers are then placed into a constantly changing environment. They must adapt to weather and physical conditions and interact with other groups, and there has been very little training on how to communicate. They make decisions in the field much more often than workers in other industries, such as manufacturing. These complexities lead to a natural focus on whole-person safety."



What human-centered safety really means

While it's called many things — human-centered safety, whole-person safety, Total Worker Health® (a term trademarked by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health), or holistic safety — the concept is the same.

Human-centered safety approaches health and safety from the employees' perspective, viewing them not only as a worker but also as an individual:

- Do employees feel their physical and emotional health is protected?
- Do employees know how much their contributions matter?
- Do employees trust that you do everything possible to reduce the physical and mental toll of physical work on their bodies?
- When they speak up, do employees know they'll be taken seriously?

Think of it as a form of upskilling, empowering workers with new skills and knowledge to help them do better at work and life.

Human-centered safety goes beyond physical wellness and professional development to help workers at all levels develop skills to better communicate and listen. Leaders and employees need to understand how to conduct difficult conversations, build relationships, practice empathy, and demonstrate resilience amid change.

"Whole-person safety puts workers in a position to utilize their skill sets to make decisions that will not only protect themselves physically and emotionally but also protect their coworkers," said Jill James, chief safety officer at HSI (Health & Safety Institute). "Happiness, confidence, and having a sense of purpose and belonging matter just as much as being physically safe and healthy."



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- **JILL JAMES**, chief safety officer at HSI



Why human-centered safety is important right now

From inflation and an unpredictable economy to concerns about discrimination and inequality, more internal and external stressors are placed on workers than ever before.

As a result, industries are hungry for change and new ideas. “We’ve survived too long thinking that behavioral-based safety would save all,” Dr. Loushine said. “But our results do not show improvement. We’ve hit a plateau, and it’s time to shake things up.”

Twice this year, he and James partnered to lead an HSI workshop called “[Stop Yelling at Me](#).” It showed EHS professionals in all industries how to approach healthy conversations, recognize the feelings associated with frustration and anger, and turn adversarial interactions into collaborative, common-goal conversations.

“Hundreds of industry professionals attended the live presentation and webinar, which is very telling in terms of how much this kind of education is needed,” James said. For instance, at job sites where stress and tensions can run high, it is not uncommon for supervisors to press hard on employees, but that can turn into yelling at, demeaning, and belittling employees. No matter the results they may achieve, supervisors, managers, foremen, and others in these types of positions need to learn skills to manage stress and emotions so they treat people differently.

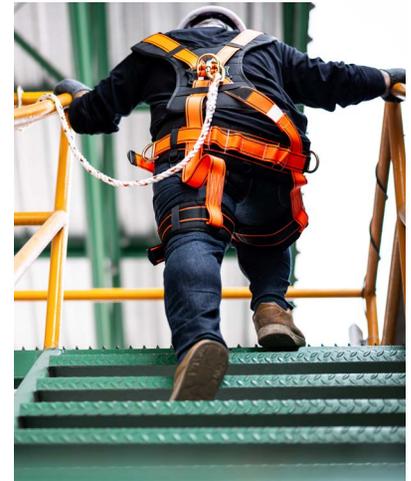
The ongoing labor challenge is also driving the move toward human-centered safety. For every 100 applications received, Dr. Loushine estimated his company may only find two viable candidates.

“Companies that do health and safety right can definitely use it to attract and recruit,” he explained. “Especially for Gen Z workers. We’ve added more diversity, equity, and inclusion in our degree curriculums so they understand the value and will expect it from their employers more than previous generations.”

Once you get employees through the door, your human-centered safety program can continue to bring value by reducing absenteeism, decreasing workers’ compensation claims, spurring innovation and idea-sharing among workers, and nurturing productivity and motivation.

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- **DR. TODD W. LOUSHINE**, a former OSHA compliance officer, part-time EHS manager, and associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater





Creating an environment of human-centered safety

An unsafe, unhealthy work environment isn't limited to slips, trips and falls, defective equipment, electrical hazards, or a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), among other things. It may be an area where employees face hostility and harassment. An environment where workers fear making mistakes or being reprimanded. A workplace that thrives on conflict and drama instead of collaboration and open conversation.

To evaluate your work environment and bring the concept of human-centered safety and health to life in your organization, start with these five impactful steps.

1. Rethink topics for toolbox talks

How often do you hold toolbox talks, safety briefings, or tailgate meetings? A 2020 report led by Associated Builders and Contractors found that construction companies that conducted daily toolbox talks vs. monthly reduced total recordable incident rates by 82%. If they can make that much of a difference in construction, they can positively affect manufacturing and utility environments.

What do these short meetings typically focus on? For most companies, common topics include fall protection, asbestos awareness, hazardous substances, heat stress, confined spaces, and fire safety. But toolbox talks are ideal for focusing more on human-centered safety in addition to physical safety.

“Don’t just continue to pull that dusty, three-ring binder off the shelf and recycle information on ladder safety and first aid,” James said. “Talk about being human. Talk about and educate on the soft skills we need in order to work better together. This will improve everyone’s lives.”



2. Get managers, leaders and supervisors involved

Asking management to commit to human-centered safety is one thing. Educating them on it is another. A commitment doesn’t always promise change — but education and training can.

To create environments that support human-centered safety, EHS professionals can’t work in silos. People at all levels need to learn about and actively champion the initiative. Real change only happens when everyone is on board, is committed to the cause, and works together to raise awareness and let employees know that their employer cares about them not just as a worker but also as a person.

“EHS does all the nitty-gritty work, keeping the compliance pots simmering on the stove plus so much more,” James explained. “The real work, as all EHS professionals know, happens when supervisors, managers and leaders are involved, and leading, as well. Leaders at all levels need soft skills to create an environment that makes people feel valued and cared for.”

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3. Demonstrate caring through small actions

As temperatures soared this summer, and outside crews were doing everything they could to avoid the sweltering heat while maintaining productivity, Dr. Loushine said simple things such as supervisors' sharing electrolyte pops, setting up water and Gatorade stations close by, and passing out towels soaked in ice would be simple ways to show compassion and take care of the human beings who work for you every day.

These acts of kindness can be carried out in other ways, too. As your pool of workers continues to expand, for example, language barriers may develop. An American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) report found that 40% of construction contractors already do not share a common language on their job sites, which will only continue to widen. In manufacturing, 32% of respondents reported a language gap.

Whether you offer immersive language training for workers, hire interpreters to translate, or use visuals and diagrams whenever possible, make it a priority to convey information in a way everyone understands. This is critical and required by OSHA to have training conducted in a language the employee understands. Additionally, offering language learning for employees shows another level of commitment to their success at work.



Workforce expansion may lead to language barriers.

- **40%** of construction contractors face language diversity on job sites
- **32%** of those in manufacturing experience language gaps on job sites

Source: ACTFL



4. Dedicate time to on-site wellness

Workers may be so busy that they aren't monitoring their well-being or considering preventive care. But you can help them make sure it's a priority.

Bringing everyone together for an on-site health and wellness event can be an important reminder to employees that their health matters — and that you offer the time, resources, and support they need to ensure they can focus on wellness without leaving work.

Whether it's led by your local occupational health provider or health insurance company, or it's a health fair you plan and coordinate, you can give employees a one-stop shop for vaccinations and screenings such as blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and even mental health to watch for signs of anxiety, burnout, stress, and depression.



5. Create a feedback-friendly atmosphere

If workers feel that they can't share what's really going on, safety will never improve. Inspire lower-level leaders to encourage their employees to report early and often — without fear of punishment or consequences.

"When I was a health and safety specialist, I gathered everyone together and talked about the importance of caring for people," James said. "I let them know they could call me anytime — whether it's about shoulder pain or a speck of dust in their eye. If they have questions or need care, I'll be there. By talking about these things early and often, we can get small issues taken care of before they turn into bigger problems."



In this case, her approach helped employees feel cared for and reduced the cost of workers' compensation claims by nearly half. The number dropped from \$1.5 million to \$850,000 in less than a year.

Dr. Loushine has taken a similar open-door approach in his EHS roles. When someone reports a first aid injury, he talks to them directly and apologizes. "I want to make sure they're being cared for, ask them what we can do, and encourage them to keep me in the loop. I never blame. I trained supervisors to do this as well."

To re-create this in your own company, meet with your laborers and safety team members regularly to find out what they need help with, where they feel stuck, and what blind spots they see that you may not know about.

Ask questions to determine whether they feel comfortable talking to a supervisor, are confident they can report injuries without punishment, and feel pride in their work.

One company noticed an increase in eye injuries and found out the PPE safety glasses the company had purchased weren't comfortable. Employees stopped wearing them but also weren't speaking up, which caused injuries. These situations are caught sooner if you foster the right environment.

Once you gather this information, Dr. Loushine said, share it with everyone you speak to. "Let them know that you're working on these things and that they can come see you anytime about progress along the way."





It's time to lead the charge

How can you lead the charge toward creating a safe work environment where everyone values continuous learning, the blame game isn't tolerated, and discussions about opportunities for improvement are always welcomed?

Taking these five steps toward human-centered safety will make your company a better place for your employees — and for you. "It may be a long game," Dr. Loushine said, "but it's worth it."



About HSI

HSI is a single-source partner for EHS, training, compliance, and professional-development solutions, providing integrated e-learning content, training solutions, and cloud-based software that enables your business to improve safety, operations, and employee development.

HSI helps safety and technical managers, human resources, and operational leaders train and develop their workforce, keep workers safe, and meet regulatory and operational compliance requirements. Through a suite of cloud-based software solutions — including learning management, safety management, chemical/SDS management, and more — integrated with content and training, businesses can not only monitor and manage multiple workflows in one system but also train employees with one partner.

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