

SAFETY CONVERSATIONS THAT ACTUALLY CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

How leaders create safe, high-trust environments (without more rules)

MOST ORGANISATIONS WE WORK WITH DON'T HAVE A KNOWLEDGE PROBLEM WHEN IT COMES TO SAFETY.

People know the procedures.
They've completed the training.
They understand what "good" looks like.

And yet, in real work situations, behaviour doesn't always follow.

The typical response is to add more: more rules, more reminders, more toolbox talks.

But the gap isn't usually about knowing what to do, because behaviour under pressure isn't driven by knowledge. The COM-B model shows that behaviour is shaped by **three** interacting factors:

- **Capability** – Do I know what to do?
- **Opportunity** – Does the environment make it possible?
- **Motivation** – Do I feel able and willing to do it, right now?

Most safety interventions focus heavily on capability.

But when someone is working under time pressure, balancing competing priorities, or following what others around them are doing, opportunity and motivation often take over.

This is where safety conversations matter – they're a way to understand what's actually driving behaviour on the ground

Why many safety conversations don't change anything. In practice, many conversations still focus on correcting deviation:

"That's not the correct procedure."
"You need to follow the process."
"Why didn't you do it the right way?"

This reflects a traditional Safety-I approach – focusing on what went wrong.



An alternative, drawn from Safety-II thinking, is to focus on how work is actually being done day to day, including the adjustments people make to get the job done.

That shift changes the conversation.

Instead of asking “Why didn’t you follow the procedure?”

Leaders might ask:

“Talk me through what was happening at that moment.”

“What were you having to balance or deal with?”

This isn’t about lowering standards. It’s about understanding the conditions that shape behaviour so they can be addressed.

BEHAVIOUR IS SOCIAL, AND OFTEN AUTOMATIC

Two further patterns show up consistently in safety-critical environments:

- 1. People tend to follow what others around them are doing, especially under pressure**
- 2. Repeated behaviours become habitual, requiring little conscious thought**

Over time, this can normalise risk because the behaviour becomes part of “how things are done here”.

Effective safety conversations bring these patterns into the open.

For example:

“What do most people tend to do in this situation?”

“Is this something that’s become the norm over time?”

They also reinforce the right behaviours in real time:

“That approach you took there – talk me through your thinking.”

“That’s exactly the standard we’re aiming for. Keep doing that.”

IF PEOPLE DON’T FEEL SAFE TO SPEAK, RISK STAYS HIDDEN

Research on psychological safety shows that people are far more likely to raise concerns, admit uncertainty, or challenge unsafe behaviour when they feel safe to do so.

In environments where people expect blame, embarrassment, or dismissal, the opposite happens. You’ll find issues go unspoken and shortcuts go unchallenged.

The tone of a safety conversation matters.

Leaders who ask open questions, listen properly, and respond constructively to what they hear are more likely to surface what’s really going on.



WHAT EFFECTIVE SAFETY CONVERSATIONS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE

A simple structure that works well in operational settings is:

Pause

Avoid reacting immediately. Create space to understand.

Explore

Understand the situation, pressures, and decisions.

“What was happening just before this?”

“What factors were you working with?”

Align

Reconnect to what “good” looks like and why it matters.

“Given that, what would the safest approach look like here?”

“What are we trying to achieve overall?”

Reinforce

Agree next steps and recognise the right behaviours.

“What will you do next time in a similar situation?”

“That’s the standard we need – keep applying that.”



This kind of conversation identifies challenges, strengthens shared expectations, and helps to build individual judgement.

Where this often goes wrong

Even well-intentioned leaders can unintentionally limit impact by:

- Relying on telling and reminding, rather than exploring
- Treating unsafe behaviour as an individual issue, rather than a response to context
- Ignoring operational pressures that make safe behaviour harder
- Following up inconsistently, so expectations drift over time



SUMMARY

Policies don't create a safety culture. Culture is shaped in everyday interactions, especially the conversations leaders have when something doesn't go to plan.

Handled well, those conversations can:

- **Reveal what's really driving behaviour**
- **Strengthen trust and openness**
- **Reinforce clear, consistent standards**
- **Support better decisions under pressure**

Handled poorly, they can do the opposite.

Keystone Training Ltd works with organisations to strengthen safety leadership in real operational contexts, helping leaders understand behaviour, have better conversations, and embed safer ways of working over time.

ENQUIRE NOW

WWW.KEYSTONETRAININGLTD.CO.UK

JOSEPH RAISHBROOK: 0330 133 8190