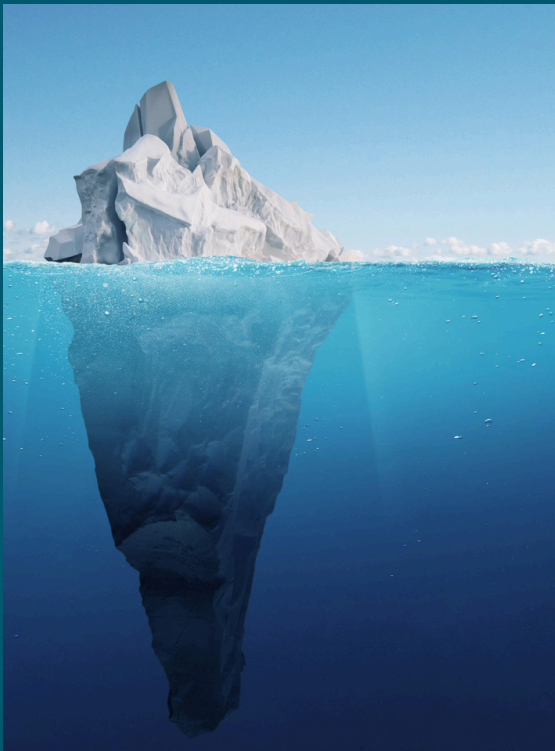


## SAFETY LEADERSHIP VS COMPLIANCE: WHAT BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE ACTUALLY SHOWS



Most organisations don't set out to build a compliance-led safety culture. But over time, many drift there.

**More procedures are added.**  
**More checks are introduced.**  
**More reminders are issued.**

On the surface, this can look like progress because activity increases, documentation improves, and audit scores often follow. But behaviour on the ground doesn't always shift in the same way.

**So what's going on?**

### Compliance and safety are not the same thing

Compliance has a clear role. In safety-critical environments, it's non-negotiable. But behavioural science shows that people don't consistently act based on rules alone, especially under pressure.

Instead, behaviour is shaped by a combination of:

- **The environment people are working in**
- **What others around them are doing**
- **What feels possible in the moment**
- **What gets noticed, reinforced, or ignored**

This means it's entirely possible for procedures to be understood, training to be completed, and audits to be passed... and still see unsafe behaviours occurring in practice



## WHY MORE RULES DON'T ALWAYS SOLVE THE PROBLEM

A common response to incidents or near misses is to tighten control. But over time, this can create unintended effects:

- Procedures become harder to follow in real conditions
- Workarounds increase
- People focus on “passing the check” rather than managing risk
- Reporting becomes more cautious if consequences feel punitive

From a behavioural perspective, this is predictable.

When systems become harder to operate within, people adapt so they can get the job done

## WHAT SAFETY SCIENCE TELLS US INSTEAD

Several well-established perspectives in safety and behavioural science point us in a helpful direction.

### 1. Safety-I and Safety-II (Hollnagel)

Traditional approaches (Safety-I) focus on failure – identifying and correcting what went wrong. More recent thinking (Safety-II) emphasises understanding how work succeeds most of the time, despite variability, pressure, and complexity.

#### **Practical implication:**

**Look beyond incidents. Understand how people are making work happen safely day to day, and build from that.**

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Shifting from a compliance-led approach to a behaviour-led one doesn't mean lowering standards, just expanding the focus.

Alongside clear procedures and expectations, effective safety leadership also involves:

- **Understanding real work conditions**
- **Observing how tasks are actually carried out, not just how they are intended to be done**
- **Exploring behaviour, not just enforcing rules**
- **Asking what's influencing decisions in the moment**
- **Reinforcing the right behaviours consistently**
- **Noticing and naming good practice when it happens**
- **Creating conditions for openness**
- **Making it easier for people to raise concerns and share what's really going on**

Following through over time, Ensuring expectations remain consistent beyond initial interventions

## A SAFETY REFLECTION TOOL

For leaders looking to apply this in practice, a useful starting point is to ask:

- **Where are we relying on rules alone to drive behaviour?**
- **What pressures or constraints might be shaping how work is actually done?**
- **What behaviours are currently normalised within teams?**
- **How easy is it for people to raise concerns or challenge decisions?**
- **Where are we reinforcing the right behaviours and where are we not?**

### Final thought

Compliance is essential because it provides the foundation. But behaviour is what ultimately determines whether work is carried out safely. Organisations that recognise this, and design their safety approach accordingly, tend to see more consistent, sustainable outcomes over time.

**Keystone Training Ltd supports organisations to strengthen safety leadership by focusing on behaviour in real work settings, helping leaders understand what's driving actions on the ground, and how to influence it effectively**

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