

World class safety management

How far has Hong Kong still got to go?

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Performance in Safety

Hong Kong is one of the great cities of the world, with leading edge performance in many aspects of business and commerce. Yet safety performance in operations has lagged behind. We look at the fundamentals of effective safety management to assure the integrity of operations and improve safety performance.

Figure 1 – Fatality Rate in the Construction Industry



The fatality rate in the Hong Kong construction industry has been generally declining in recent years. Even so, in 2016, which had the lowest rate in the past decade, the construction fatality rate per 1,000 workers (10 fatalities) was over five times that of the United Kingdom, which shares similar legislative and operational frameworks.

Fundamentals of Effective Safety

Leading organisations around the world base their safety management approach on having a simple yet systematic safe system of work (SSOW). This is coupled with a culture that values safety as a top priority at all times.

A SSOW can be applied equally well in large or small organisations. It is the basis to assure the integrity of technical, maintenance, and operations activities, including human and organisational factors. The value of the SSOW is consistent whether the work is related to daily operations and maintenance of plants and facilities or to capital projects and construction. A well designed and implemented SSOW will improve efficiency and reduce incidents.



Fundamentals for Assuring Operations Integrity

Based on the practical experience of how many organisations have developed and implemented their own safe systems of work, there are four fundamental aspects to maintain operational integrity and keep workers safe:

1 Safety Leadership

Having well defined safety performance expectations that are clearly communicated and are properly resourced. This requires real commitment from both management and the workforce, such that the safe work culture is embodied at all levels. Safety needs to be part of every agenda and at the top of the organisations' priorities and focus areas.

2 Risk Identification and Assessment

Defining how to appropriately identify and assess risks to assure integrity and how to identify the necessary control measures for mitigation. This should be supported by an effective approach that enables the capture and sharing of process safety knowledge developed from these risk identification and assessment activities.

3 Risk Management

Being able to effectively implement and manage the control measures identified during risk identification and assessment activities. This includes incorporating the identified risk management needs into efficient work processes and manuals or procedures, covering work control, permitting, management of change, contractors, emergency procedures, safety critical devices, etc.

4 Review and Improvement

Providing the framework to measure and review performance against defined expectations along with mechanisms to extract learnings from the performance. This should include incident reporting and investigations, as well as audit and assurance processes so that organisations can leverage the experience to evolve and improve.

Against these four aspects, any safe system of work should also meet the following criteria:



Be designed and structured in a suitable framework that provides clear guidance and clearly lays out the requirements from the organisation



Be easy to communicate, straightforward to understand for all personnel (internal and external), accessible, as well as efficient and effective to use



Be an integral part of a strong safety culture focused on workforce and community safety, with honesty and openness, which is consistently applied









Effectively support a risk-based approach and drive the right behaviours and attitudes that focus on mitigating actual risk and continuously improving safety



Include effective performance management to reward the right behaviours, attitudes, and leadership along with resolute actions when the safe system of work is compromised

Key Success Factors for an Effective Safe System of Work

 <p>Enshrining a risk-based approach</p>	<p>There is often a perceived dilemma of how prescriptive an organisation should be on safety. It is not uncommon for organisations to provide very clear guidance to frontline teams on what is expected via detailed procedures. However, this can foster a compliance-based approach. Having everyone responsible for evaluating the risks at hand and ensuring they and their teams are doing all they can to mitigate them, ensures personnel are actively engaged even for routine work. Leading organisations blend prescription and engagement with everyone responsible for safety according to their role.</p>
 <p>Creating a positive and open safety culture</p>	<p>Any involved party or individual should feel that they are empowered to raise any safety concern they may have before, during or after engaging in their work. It should be possible to do so in a comfortable way that is culturally sensitive, without the risk of being penalised simply for raising. This engagement should be received positively, regardless of the outcome of evaluating any concern. This is essential in creating a culture of safe working regardless of the system in place.</p>
 <p>Keeping the focus on safe working practices</p>	<p>Nearly every organisation aims to not only meet but exceed the regulatory requirements for safety. This must be done in a balanced way that maintains the focus on effective safety, not only the specifics of the regulations. Leading companies ensure they have first developed appropriate work processes and controls to mitigate operational risks. They then evaluate how best to align and comply with local regulatory needs, adapting if necessary, and recognising there may be alternate ways to interpret specific regulations. They will seek to feedback or work with local authorities to enhance legislation to improve safety.</p>
 <p>Consistently apply the SSOW and performance expectations</p>	<p>Having one over-arching approach that is implemented consistently avoids variances in standards and expectations within an organisation, including any contractors or vendors. Everyone can understand the approach taken for safe working across the organisation, making it easier to work across different work types and locations, whilst making it more efficient to onboard new parties and communicate what is needed. Where necessary, due to local conditions or very specific types of work, adjustments can still be made so long as it is within the overall SSOW, or appropriate review and approval sought to deviate from it.</p>
 <p>Creating simple, effective processes, documentation, and administration</p>	<p>Concise, purpose-built processes, documentation, and administrative procedures support effective safe working. It facilitates qualified personnel applying their skills with focus and rigour. This helps to create a real focus on the key aspects of process safety management. It also avoids placing any unnecessary burden on workers which may not contribute to keeping people safe, or worse, distracting them from safety. Appropriate use of digital technology can further improve the quality of this support with automated data capture and sharing, allowing for speed, and consistency. It can free up time, energy, and focus for conducting safe work and improving performance.</p>
 <p>Having a clear focus on capability development</p>	<p>An effective safe system of work and safety culture requires competent and appropriately qualified personnel to control specific aspects. People must come into the system and the culture, so as to learn, grow, and adapt with it on a constant basis. Leading organisations diligently use their talent, competency development, and succession planning activities to ensure the right people have the right skills and capabilities at the right time. This is a process that can evolve over time to meet emerging safety needs and best practices available.</p>



How to Further Enhance Safety Management

Key overarching steps for enhancing safety

1

Aligning on a vision and set of expectations for safety management. Setting out the leadership aspirations for safety, and how to ensure accountability for delivery.

2

Identify the gaps and challenges today in in meeting the vision. Evaluating where things are going well, which can be further expanded, and where there are the issues to resolve.

3

Designing and subsequently implementing measures to address gaps to meet the vision. Having a coherent set of activities to change any existing safety system, and enhance a safety culture and behaviours.

For most organisations, they will already have implemented all or at least part of a safe system of work. For them, it is more about ensuring that the approach is appropriately enhanced to reflect current leading practice. In other cases, it may be necessary to develop a safe system of work from a fresh start.

Regardless, ensuring the implementation is done in a way that best suits the organisation is a critical success factor. Any safe system of work and safe working culture must be truly reflected in how work is conducted every day, be it routine, or otherwise. A well implemented SSOW can provide clarity, and remove confusion as to how things should be done, as well as reduce incidents and their associated impact on people and cost. It can be a catalyst for positive organisational development. Ultimately the objective is to make sure that everyone stays safe every day whatever activity they are carrying out.

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