

WHY COMPLIANT ORGANISATIONS STILL HAVE SERIOUS INCIDENTS



Introduction

In many high-risk industries, organisations invest significant time and resources into developing safety management systems designed to control operational risk. These systems typically include documented procedures, risk assessments, training programmes, and compliance monitoring processes intended to ensure work is carried out safely.

Despite these efforts, serious incidents and major accidents continue to occur in organisations that appear to have strong safety management systems in place. In many cases, post-incident investigations reveal that the organisation involved was technically compliant with regulatory requirements and had established safety procedures.

This raises an important question for leaders:

Why do serious incidents still occur in organisations that appear compliant?

The answer often lies not in the absence of safety systems, but in the cultural and behavioural factors that influence how work is actually carried out in practice.

Compliance Does Not Always Reflect Reality

Safety management systems are designed to establish rules, procedures, and controls intended to reduce risk. These systems provide an essential foundation for managing workplace safety and ensuring organisations meet legal and regulatory obligations.

However, compliance with procedures does not always reflect how work is carried out in real operational environments.

In practice, individuals make decisions within complex and dynamic situations. Operational pressures, production targets, time constraints, and organisational priorities can influence how tasks are performed. When these pressures increase, employees may begin to adapt procedures in order to complete work more efficiently.

These adaptations are often small and appear reasonable at the time. A shortcut may be taken to save time, a step within a procedure may be skipped, or a risk may be tolerated because it appears manageable. Over time, these small behavioural changes can gradually alter the way work is performed.

This phenomenon is commonly referred to as cultural drift.

Cultural drift occurs when the way work is actually carried out slowly moves away from the way it was originally designed to be performed safely.

Importantly, this process can occur even when formal safety systems remain in place.

The Influence of Operational Pressure

One of the most significant drivers of cultural drift is operational pressure.

In most organisations, work is carried out within environments that involve competing priorities such as productivity targets, delivery deadlines, cost pressures, and customer expectations. These pressures can influence how individuals interpret procedures and make decisions about risk.

When operational pressure increases, safety standards may gradually weaken. This does not necessarily occur through deliberate rule breaking. Instead, it often happens through a series of small decisions that appear reasonable at the time but collectively increase risk.

Examples of this can include:

- shortcuts being taken to meet deadlines
- procedures being interpreted more flexibly
- unsafe behaviours going unchallenged
- risks being tolerated because work must continue

Over time, these behaviours can become normalised within the organisation.

The ProGuard Pressure vs Safety Standards Model illustrates this dynamic. As operational pressure increases and adherence to safety standards weakens, organisations can enter a high-risk zone where the likelihood of incidents increases significantly.

Understanding this relationship between pressure and standards is critical for leaders seeking to maintain safe operations.

Leadership Signals and Cultural Influence

Safety culture is heavily influenced by the behaviour and decisions of leaders.

Employees closely observe how leaders respond to competing priorities. If leaders consistently reinforce safety standards, challenge unsafe behaviour, and demonstrate that safety expectations are non-negotiable, this sends a clear signal throughout the organisation.

However, if employees observe that productivity is prioritised over safety during periods of pressure, different signals may be received.

Even subtle leadership behaviours can influence culture. For example:

- continuing work despite safety concerns
- rewarding productivity while overlooking unsafe behaviour

- failing to address deviations from procedures

These signals shape how employees interpret organisational priorities.

Over time, leadership behaviour becomes one of the most powerful drivers of safety culture.

The Executive Risk Blind Spot

Another factor that contributes to incidents in compliant organisations is the gap between leadership perception and operational reality.

Senior leaders often receive safety information through reports, dashboards, and performance metrics. While these indicators provide valuable insight, they may not always capture how work is experienced by frontline teams.

Frontline workers are typically closest to operational risks and may observe hazards or unsafe practices long before they become visible within formal reporting systems.

This can create what is sometimes referred to as an executive risk blind spot- where leaders believe safety performance is stronger than it actually is within operational environments.

Closing this perception gap requires leaders to actively engage with frontline teams, seek open feedback, and understand how work is carried out in practice.



Moving Beyond Compliance

Improving safety performance requires organisations to move beyond a narrow focus on compliance and develop a deeper understanding of the cultural factors that influence behaviour.

Organisations that consistently achieve strong safety performance often demonstrate several common characteristics:

- visible leadership commitment to safety
- open communication about risk and safety concerns
- workforce engagement in identifying hazards
- consistent reinforcement of safety standards
- willingness to stop work when conditions are unsafe

These behaviours help strengthen safety culture and support consistent decision-making across the organisation.

Understanding Safety Culture

Because safety culture plays such a significant role in influencing behaviour, many organisations are now focusing on understanding how culture operates within their business.

Safety culture diagnostics provide organisations with valuable insight into factors such as:

- workforce perceptions of safety leadership
- levels of trust in reporting concerns
- leadership alignment on safety expectations
- operational pressures influencing decision-making

These insights allow organisations to identify early warning signs of cultural drift and implement targeted improvements.

At ProGuard Consulting, we support organisations in understanding and strengthening their safety culture through structured cultural assessments and leadership engagement programmes. These initiatives help organisations identify cultural risks, reinforce leadership behaviours, and maintain safety standards even during periods of operational pressure.

Conclusion

Serious incidents rarely occur solely because procedures are missing. More often, they occur because the way work is carried out in practice gradually changes over time.

Operational pressures, leadership signals, and workforce behaviours all influence how safety standards are applied within real working environments.

Understanding these cultural dynamics provides leaders with a powerful opportunity to strengthen safety performance and reduce operational risk.

Organisations that actively understand and manage their safety culture are better equipped to maintain high safety standards, even when operational pressures increase.

<https://proguardconsulting.co.uk/safety-culture-change>

Produced By: Sean Rintoul CMIOSH

Mar 7, 2026

[The ProGuard Safety Culture Framework](#)

e: info@proguardconsulting.co.uk - M: 07595893659

