

The Soul of Safety

From a Principled Profession to a Commercialized Industry, and Back Again.



A Fundamental Shift Has Occurred in How We Approach Safety.

We have moved from a profession to an industry. This transition has changed our language, our priorities, and our purpose.

1990s: A Profession



The focus was on preventing injuries and illnesses, driven by regulators, insurers, and researchers exploring culture.

Today: An Industry



The focus is often on revenue generation, with a multi-billion dollar market for safety programs, products, and ideologies.

Today, We Are Selling Safety in a Cereal Aisle.

The modern safety marketplace is crowded with endless options, each with loud claims and bright branding. But beneath the marketing, there is often more sugar than substance.



Focus on marketing and branding over efficacy.

Too much money is at stake for the industry to self-correct.

For new professionals, this commercialization feels normal, even inevitable.

Our Language Has Been Co-opted by Commerce.

The shift from profession to industry has changed how we talk about safety, often obscuring responsibility rather than clarifying it.

LEADERSHIP
AUTHORITY

The term “leadership” is frequently used as a euphemism for “authority.” This allows those at the top to avoid meaningful accountability for safety outcomes, prioritizing board appeasement over the well-being of their people.

This Isn't Just Poor Management. It's a Form of Violence.

The Norwegian researcher Johan Galtung provided a more accurate term for what happens when people with authority dismiss, silence, or punish those without it.

“Psychological Violence”

This connects to the American cultural context, where access to basic human rights is often contingent on employment, making the workplace a critical arena for dignity or harm.

We Are Mistaking Branded Programs for Genuine Culture.



Commodification stops at selling programs. But real safety, like raising a family, isn't about binders, logos, or signed forms. It's about daily habits, expectations, and how we treat each other. You can't raise a child by having them sign off on the lawn mower's operating manual.

At home, health and safety are cultural, not programmatic. The same is true in any organization.

Culture emerges from how people with authority treat people without authority.

Based on decades of research by organizational psychologists since the 1930s.

Under this lens, 'safety culture' is not a separate category. It is simply one expression of human culture.

To Move Forward, We Must Reconnect With Our Past

The solution isn't another branded program. It is a return to the foundational principles that once defined safety as a profession. We need to build a future on a foundation of ethics, courage, and human dignity.



The path forward is built
on three pillars...

A Framework for a Renewed Profession



A Philosophy

We need a clear set of principles about people, work, and harm that goes beyond compliance. Safety must be redefined as an **ethical pursuit**.



A Social Movement

We must recover the mindset of courageous workers who challenged power to improve conditions. Progress comes from **challenging the status quo**, not from rolling out a new program.



A Multicultural Perspective

We must break free from national isolation and learn from the philosophies and standards of other countries that have faced these challenges before.

A Small Sign Can Reveal a Large Blind Spot.



For decades, much of the world has used the green “running man” pictogram—an intuitive, language-free symbol for egress. The U.S. has been slow to change, largely holding onto text-based, red “EXIT” signs.

This is a small but telling example of how isolating ourselves from global lessons and standards can hinder progress.

The Future Isn't 'Safety.' It's Well-being.

To move from an industry back toward a profession, we must put human dignity at the center of our work. The mechanism for this is a humanistic focus on well-being.

Workplace Health and Safety becomes **Well-being, Health, and Safety**.



Because where well-being leads,
health and safety tend to follow.