

## To improve safety culture, managers must know what is happening in the field

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Damien Santa-Maria  
Icsi, consultancy team

### Damien Santa-Maria

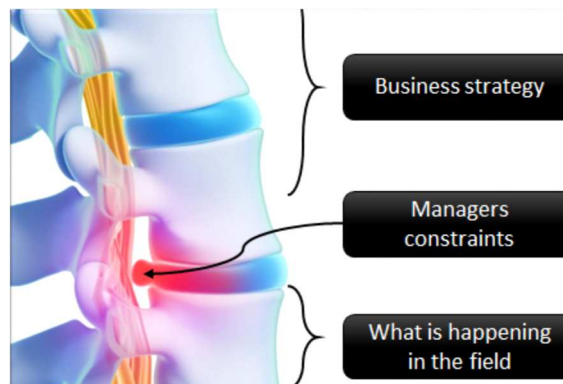
Damien is the holder of not one, but two Masters' degrees: one in Industrial Risk Management, the other ICSI's own degree in the Management of Technological and Environmental Risks. He has a wide-ranging experience of risk management and analysis in the aeronautic industry, notably related to cooperation with external companies. His role at ICSI is to carry out safety culture diagnoses and co-facilitate the discussion group on the Prevention of serious and fatal accidents.



For a manager, understanding their teams and the reality of daily work is a vital way to improve safety. They must know the technical practices of operators, understand what works (or doesn't), evaluate whether rules are appropriate, be aware of the human cost of getting a result, observe interactions between actors, etc. To achieve this, the manager must be present in the field.

### The manager articulates business strategy and practice in the field

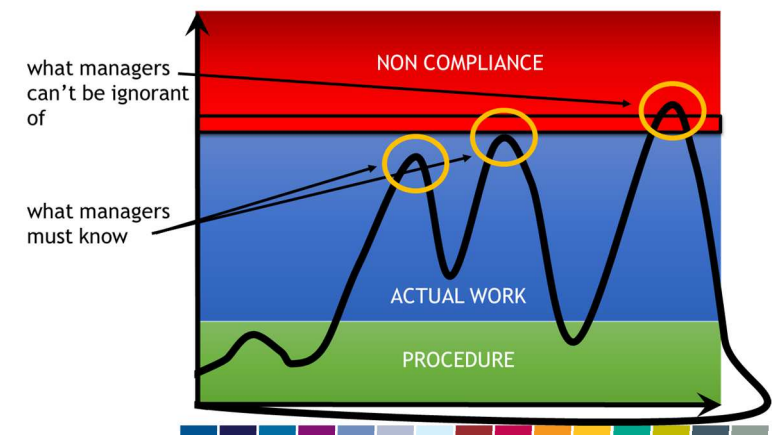
When people run, the downward flow of information (e.g. direction and balance) is continuous and easily received. At the same time, upward flows (e.g. slides or



shocks) are equally important and require prompt processing. However, in companies, upward flows are not systematically processed. But vigilance, awareness of variations and the continuous exchange of information are needed in order to anticipate and prevent damage. This is the role of managers. They are at the intersection between top management and workers in the field and they must facilitate the flow of information in both directions. They must also cushion its effects, filter, and transmit information. Finally, they must make sure it is coherent with the decisions taken. To fulfil this role, they must know what is actually happening.

### Messy as usual

The concept of 'messy as usual' refers to situations that fluctuate between what is anticipated by procedures and what is identified as an anomaly. In the diagram below, the black line represents the actual work of an operator who adapts to their situation and takes initiatives to carry out a task. Their primary goal is to do a good job. To achieve this, they must adapt to the resources, constraints and hurdles they encounter. This is the key goal of the manager in the field: to be aware of the situation, address anomalies and focus on cases where good performance is difficult to achieve (i.e. where human cost is high).



## Day-to-day presence in the field

To know what is really happening, managers field visit should not be an exceptional event that requires a change to operators' schedule or production flows. Unremarkable, mundane visits are more efficient: regular visits to teams to observe what is happening, listening, communicating, being part of the life of the site, the factory, the teams.

Often attention is focused on knowledge about tools and technology but it is also important to know about interactions between groups and individuals in order to:

1. Recognize and encourage good practice: employees react positively to being listened to and improvements to their working conditions;
2. Take just and pragmatic decisions: this increases the credibility of managers and creates confidence.

## But how?

Training and books meet the need for theoretical, technical and managerial knowledge. But this is not enough. There are several other tools available to managers:

- Technical discussions with teams: to understand their tools, job, practices and room for manoeuvre;
  - Safety visits: to work together to find solutions and promote good practice;
  - Informal discussions: to humanize relationships, understand and obtain commitment;
  - Feedback from experience, immersion.
- There are many opportunities to take an interest and listen. Availability and curiosity are the hallmarks of this potentially daily mode of teaching.

## It's not easy

Obstacles remain: conflicts, fear of sanctions, turnover, believing everything can be understood from emails, meetings, indicators, etc. It therefore takes a genuine commitment and trade-offs. There are various solutions. Some managers allocate a fixed time slot in their schedule; others record indicators in the workshop; others hold technical meetings in the logistics area, etc. Whether a new graduate from a reputable university or a gold-medallist in the world of work, visits to the field must be approached with humility and a willingness to learn.

## Support from the broad: a real driver

The organization should promote present and visible leadership with qualitative objectives. Directors should identify the needs of managers (time, resources, supports, etc.) who want to demonstrate their commitment in the field. Some low-value ancillary tasks can be delayed to make time for talking to employees. In directive-participative management, participative is not Plan B. The successful organization encourages people on the ground to become involved in reporting information that is used to modify rules and procedures.

## The outcome

It is not possible to improve safety based on approximate information or trends. Knowledge of human and technical practices in the field, discussions and pragmatic actions increase the credibility of the manager and the construction of genuine trust within teams.

"The thickness of a wall is less important than the will to breach it". (Thucydides)