

# Safety has no finish line



everyone  
home safe  
every day

Dear all,

Someone once said to me, “Managing safety is like swimming towards a shoreline that keeps moving further away.”

What they meant is that safety doesn’t have a clear finish line. It’s not about reaching a final destination, but about keeping at it. Constantly working to stay safe, knowing the job is never truly done.

I think most safety leaders, at some point, ask themselves:

“Am I doing enough?”

“Is it making a difference?”

“Could we get better results by doing things differently?”



**Rob Cairns,**  
Regional Managing Director

In moments like that, metaphors like the one above can help us stay focused on the bigger picture.

Leadership casts a long shadow. What we ignore sends a message about what we’re willing to accept. What we tolerate—especially the worst behaviours—shapes the culture we lead. The truth is, we already run a very safe organisation. That is thanks to thousands of people making good, safe decisions every day. That’s what gives us the strong safety performance we see.

But because our system is complex, safety risks don’t always appear in obvious places. Sometimes they show up at the smallest join between different parts of the system—subtle gaps that can be easy to miss.

In last week’s management meeting on Wales and Borders, we talked about one example; a safety process that depends on a single person remembering a long list of actions at the start of a shift. That kind of system, while often well-intentioned, is fragile. It’s not wrong to say so. In fact, it’s responsible and mature to recognise that no person, no matter how good, should carry that risk alone.

Good people don’t take unnecessary safety risks. And we shouldn’t design systems that ask them to.

That is why it’s essential to have a culture where people feel safe to raise issues—especially in the complex areas where the biggest risks often lie.

Another example we discussed was mechanical signal boxes in areas using absolute block signalling. These systems follow strict rules. There are dozens of steps needed to safely manage where trains are, and just as importantly, where they aren't. But we're seeing cases where a mechanical signal box is left managing a section of track that used to be shared with another box—one that's now been shut due to infrastructure changes. That leaves one signaller overseeing much longer sections than originally intended. This stretches the system, and stretches the person. Waiting 15 minutes for a train to pass, instead of 3, adds real risk. Not because the person isn't capable, but because long gaps naturally invite distraction. What's the increase in risk between 3 and 15 minutes? It could be five times higher.

So, the bigger challenge is this; we need to be an organisation that sees itself as a system. Not one that blames individuals when things go wrong, but one that asks, "What part of the system allowed this to happen?"

A good, healthy safety culture understands that many risks start upstream, but don't show up until much later and often in very different places. Blaming someone just because they're the person nearest the problem when it appears, is poor leadership. It's a misunderstanding of how risk works.

Most incidents have their roots long before the event happens. Risks can stay hidden in the system, waiting until just the right conditions bring them to the surface. That's why we all need to see ourselves as part of the system.

We must each take ownership of how our part connects with others, and stop thinking only about our individual roles. Let's lead this with everything we've got.

The point is simple; safety doesn't belong to someone else, it belongs to all of us.

As always, if you have any thoughts or feedback about this message you can email me directly [here](#).

Stay safe,  
Rob