

Risk doesn't discriminate



everyone
home safe
every day

Dear all,

Last week, I talked about my visit to North Wales and how it reminded me that the railway's success comes from all the things that don't go wrong.

We get funding in big chunks every five years, but the real work happens every day. That means we don't just think about what needs doing, but also how to do it, and what happens if we don't act. Risk isn't just about things going wrong, it's also about missing chances or letting small problems grow.

A critical part of our regional risk management culture has to be making sure we don't dismiss certain views.

When dominant experiences and voices shape what we see, we tend to focus too much on familiar risks and miss others that don't fit that experience. Humans naturally notice patterns and often ignore what doesn't fit their own view. When dominant views cancel out different perspectives, it leads to risk blindness and bias which is the main cause of a poor safety culture.

Take sexual harassment in the workplace as an example. People who have never experienced it or witnessed it, may imagine a world where such incidents are very rare. Their brains naturally find comfort in believing these things don't happen often. This can lead them to respond to allegations with doubt, surprise, or questions that unintentionally discourage victims from speaking up.

A more balanced culture, with diverse representation, is more likely to include people who understand that such incidents do unfortunately happen, but often remain invisible because perpetrators work to hide them. This shows how risk blindness and dominant viewpoints can combine to undermine the possibility of future harm.

As leaders, it's not about being constantly shocked by these realities. Instead, our role is to recognize these patterns and actively work to shift the culture—creating an environment that properly addresses and reduces these risks. At the heart of this is a simple idea about decency; we have to accept that people have their own reasons and motives. We don't have to agree with them or see things their way, but what we owe each other is respect and understanding of where they're coming from. When we try to understand other people's views, we're more likely to find answers that work for everyone.



Rob Cairns,
Regional Managing Director

Our experiences shape how we see risks, whether it's about assets, timetables, people, or contracts. These experiences are personal and can't be changed. So, trying to tear down someone else's view just because it's different from ours is not only weak but also unfair and indecent. Instead, we should respect that everyone's perspective is shaped by how they have lived and worked.

Think about when our teams decide between fixing an old, broken culvert near Newport or fixing a leaky canopy at Paddington Station. The way people see those problems depends on their background, culture, and even personal habits. Some might resist change and not notice the risk of doing nothing. Others, used to limited resources, might be more okay with some uncertainty.

If a team doesn't have different viewpoints, they might only see the cost of fixing something—like money or effort—and miss the cost of not fixing it, like bigger problems later or low staff morale. Also, some decisions affect certain groups more than others. For example, not improving a station's accessibility might seem like a small saving, but for people with disabilities or carers, it can make a huge difference. Diverse teams help spot these impacts. Bringing different people together helps challenge our blind spots and shows risks we might miss on our own. Everyone values things differently, some focus on safety and others on fairness or long-term impact. When everyone thinks the same way, it's easy to miss important points. Diversity helps us see the full picture.

Also, our brains naturally notice new things and ignore what repeats. That means we might miss risks or issues that seem normal to us but are clear to others. We need to be aware of this bias and try to see what we might be missing.

Decency also means we shouldn't try to damage someone else's reputation just because we disagree with them. Sometimes, when we hear negative things about a colleague, we should ask ourselves if it's fair or if it's meant to discredit them. We spoke last week about how important it is to say thank you. Building on that, how often do we actually speak kindly about people behind their backs? And how often do we spread negative comments or information that can only cause harm? One thing that worries me deeply is having an organisation where large chunks of people's efforts go unseen. When work happens quietly behind the scenes, thanks may never reach those who deserve it. I can't fully influence this risk of under-recognition or over-recognition, but I know this is a basic matter of decency. Everyone deserves to have their contributions noticed and valued.

When we understand and respect different views, we make better decisions that work for everyone. Our frontline teams bring amazing diversity to our work, and when we ignore their views, we miss important insights. We're committed to breaking down barriers and recognising people's efforts, even when they're quiet. Let's keep making room for everyone, knowing that respect and understanding lead to better outcomes for all.

How is all this shaping up in your area? As always, I'd welcome your thoughts - feel free to [email me directly](#).

Stay safe,
Rob