

Repay the Debt – Pay Safety Forward



everyone
home safe
every day

Dear all,

We are living in a time where the risks we face are not only physical but deeply human. We're seeing more loneliness, more young people struggling to find their way, more division and more of that "them and us" thinking. The same patterns can often creep into our industry. Frontline and office workers can feel like they're worlds apart, there's unnecessary focus on blame for failure rather than learning after incidents, and the people who carry the strain day after day do not always get seen.



Rob Cairns,
Regional managing director

Real leadership today in Network Rail is not about piling on pressure or handing out punishment. It is about unlearning some old habits and relearning how to be human. Think back to the leaders who shaped you most. They were not the ones chasing numbers or shouting across the depot.

They were the ones who stood with you in the rain on a long night shift, a difficult investment panel or client meeting, or who steadied you when a possession overrun shook everyone's confidence, who reminded you what mattered when you felt drained. They did not try to punish when things went wrong. They tried to understand. They noticed when you were struggling, they gave you space to recover, and they carried the weight so you did not have to. That is the kind of leadership we remember. Not titles or job grades, but how someone chose to stand with us when it really counted.

Leadership in safety is shown in the ordinary things that add up. It is shown when we plan work properly and do not rush the risk register because the clock is ticking. It is shown when we bring suppliers into the conversation as partners, not as people to blame when something slips. It is shown when we look for risks early and fix small issues before they grow into big ones. And it is shown most when things do not go to plan. When an overrun happens, when a road rail shift is missed, when a fault is overlooked, when a budget transfer is delayed, when a hurtful comment is brushed past rather than acted on - the worst thing a leader can do is go looking for someone to punish.

The best leaders ask instead, what in the system allowed this to happen. Because most safety problems do not start in the moment, they start way upstream, often hidden, until the right conditions bring them out.

A missing resource, a rushed possession, a timescale that never quite added up. To blame the person nearest to the problem is not leadership; it is missing the real cause. The best leaders steady the load, look deeper, and give people the safety to raise concerns without fear. That is how pressure gets turned into learning and mistakes into strength.

And here is the truth we all know. Every one of us carries a debt. Each of us was shaped by leaders who showed us care, courage and honesty when we needed it most. Their actions steadied us when the job was hard, and their lessons still guide us now. That debt cannot be paid back to them, but it can be paid forward to others. We pay it forward when we plan our work with care. We pay it forward when we invite suppliers to share openly about risks. We pay it forward when we protect those who raise concerns and when we refuse to let blame rule our culture.

Above all, we pay it forward when, in the hardest moments, we give others the same promise once given to us: I have got your back. **The way we lead shapes not just the work in front of us but the lives of the people who follow us.** So remember the leaders who showed you the way when you needed it most, and let their example guide you now.

Repay the debt. Pay safety forward.

How have you been repaying the debt and paying safety forward? Feel free to [email me your thoughts directly](#).

Stay safe,
Rob

This update is provided by the Wales and Western Communications team. For any queries, please contact walesandwesterncomms@networkrail.co.uk