

# Building a better railway: Speak up when "It's not ok"



**everyone  
home safe  
every day**

Dear all,

This week's message touches on a few things I've been considering lately sparked by International Women's Day.

I listened to podcasts featuring Harriet Harman and Rachel Reeves over the weekend. The positive aspect was hearing about their significant achievements. The negative aspect was understanding the increased challenges they've faced compared to men. Rachel Reeves mentioned being dismissively referred to as "Rachel from Accounts."



**Rob Cairns,**  
**Regional Managing Director**

To me, this reveals a reluctance to accept diverse viewpoints, likely stemming from the other person's insecurity. Historically, we've avoided directly addressing the business disadvantages of a lack of diversity, as it can threaten established leadership. Consequently, we've experienced recurring failures, where the same problems resurface within the organisation.

It highlights the issue of **equality**; it's not that women can't succeed, but they often encounter greater obstacles and I'm calling for men in our region to reflect on the role we play and how aware we are of our influence and impact.

To do that, we need to consider our own **self-awareness**. This definitely varies from person to person. Those with the least self-awareness may overlook a significant portion of their interactions with others, while even the most self-aware individuals likely miss some things. I've talked about this in relation to a safe organisational culture, a place where people feel comfortable speaking up when things aren't right, and it's relevant here too. I strongly believe that, at its core, an organisation should prioritise a culture where people say when things are "not ok" above any other single thing.

It seems to me that **diversity and polarisation** are increasing simultaneously. We have the first female Chancellor in 800 years, a female Chair of Shadow Great British Railways, and a female Secretary of State for Transport. Women are also increasingly holding positions of influence in our region, and having a greater say in our progress. However, as we advance towards greater diversity, we must acknowledge the risk of inadvertently diminishing the power and representation of other groups. These groups may

perceive a rebalancing of underrepresentation as a reduction in their own influence.

When I started in the region some 14 months ago, I was told my presence could be seen as a step back for gender diversity, and that this would be used against me. I considered that a form of weaponisation. Similarly, more recent comments about my "over-hiring" women reflect underlying anxieties of those making the remarks. In both cases, to surrender to those trying to pull you from your course of values is to diminish the decency you try to live out.

I believe my role as a leader is to demonstrate decency by my own lived values, as best I understand them, and avoid the temptation to seek praise or validation.



I've talked about my daughter in my safety messaging before and how she experienced severe online bullying during 2022 to 2024. She received cruel comments about her appearance and social skills, and everything in between. This was a million miles from just "kids being kids"; it was a deliberate attempt to cause maximum harm. She experienced panic attacks and difficulty sleeping, and eventually serious self harm, and life changing injuries.

My other daughter experienced bullying related to her appearance. She was repeatedly mocked for her clothing and hairstyle, and physically attacked in an incident that was filmed and posted online. This

wasn't just teasing; it was a deliberate attempt to make her feel worthless. This had a significant impact on her confidence and mental health. My expectation is that she will recover, albeit slowly.

**Decent behaviour is essential to address the growing polarisation that is arising and we must create environments, both in our workplaces and schools, where everyone feels safe, respected, and valued.**

We must actively challenge bullying behaviours, whether subtle or overt, and create a culture where everyone feels able to speak up when things are wrong. We must acknowledge that bullying is one of many forms of diminishing others in pursuit of self-gain, none of which are trivial. Nor is any subtle normalisation of them tolerable; its impact on mental health can be devastating.

In closing, we must continually encourage people to say "**it's not ok**", which in turn builds decency and avoids risk blindness. Straightforwardness becomes the norm, allowing problems to be fixed quickly. For example, if a team member notices a potentially unsafe work practice within a possession, they feel comfortable raising the alarm, preventing accidents. Or, if a project is veering off course because the design is late and risk of rework is growing, honest feedback allows for adjustments before it's too late.

This culture of open communication not only fosters a more ethical and decent workplace, but will also allow for better decision-making, leading to stronger results and a more resilient integrated railway.

Stay safe,  
Rob

This update is provided by the Wales and Western Communications team. For any queries, please contact [walesandwesterncomms@networkrail.co.uk](mailto:walesandwesterncomms@networkrail.co.uk)