

# Diverse voices, safer choices



everyone  
home safe  
every day

Dear all,

We can't ignore risks just because they haven't happened yet. Last week's Network Rail sentencing for the Margam tragedy (which I won't detail out of respect) highlights why decency demands we create a workplace where safety is paramount, everyone is protected, and diverse voices are empowered to raise concerns without fear. Only by embracing diverse perspectives can we truly identify and mitigate all potential dangers. Anything less is unacceptable, and were I not to be relentless about this then I would not consider my efforts worthwhile.



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

I've been thinking a lot about safety this weekend, and whether I'm doing everything I can to promote a strong safety culture, in Wales & Western. This means looking at our recent incidents and how we learn from them. Are we doing enough? One safety leadership concept I struggle with is how our culture influences our response to incidents. How well do we collectively "look around" (attitude), "do what's right" (behaviour), and "sort it out" (control), considering both the causes and the consequences? For example, I always walk around the edge of my hotel bed in the Premier Inn to avoid stubbing my toe on those random toe-snagging blocks. I do this because I've done it before, and it hurts on off-the-graph levels. My behaviour in that instance changed because of a past experience. How do we get people to change their behaviour regarding railway safety *before* something bad happens? Just telling them to be careful isn't enough; they'll likely forget. I know I would.

I've re-read several recent safety incidents reports and near misses whilst reflecting over the weekend, but this time I've read a number of them as a collective to look at what our trends might say about the leadership shadow we are casting. I talk a little bit here about what I see in that shadow. Just because something hasn't happened yet doesn't mean the risk isn't there. I've been thinking about the people involved in these incidents (near misses, irregularities, close calls, and injuries) and see some organisational and cultural factors we need to address.

Firstly, I see repeat instances of managers and leaders misinterpreting reality! Our perception of reality can often be skewed by the illogical leap from absence to presence. The absence of exploration does not guarantee that something is absent. Just because you haven't seen a problem doesn't mean there isn't a risk. This is most likely linked to the fact that we are generally positive beings. For example, in physics, the

absence of friction confirms the presence of inertia. In logic, the absence of a contradiction confirms the presence of truth. In railway signalling the absence of voltage on a 50v detection relay confirms the existence of a system fault. This concept is useful in many areas of life, as identifying what is missing can help us solve problems or prove a point.

Factors in our organisation, and industry which persuade us even further, and therefore are not helpful to us:

- **Hidden Hazards:** Just because we don't see a potential danger doesn't mean it's not there. For instance, if there are no rail defects, or overhead wire issues reported – it doesn't mean our asset isn't without risk of failure. Likewise, if a track trolley isn't moving, it doesn't mean it won't begin to. Always be cautious and aware of what could be present, even if it's not immediately obvious.
- **Social psychology** highlights the powerful influence of our need to belong. We sometimes compromise our own better judgment to align with the group. While I'm often told my views are unconventional—because I prioritize safety and decency, even when it means disagreeing—I still see the internal pull to conform in myself. My willingness to speak out isn't about rebelliousness; it's a conscious effort to uphold my values, a struggle to balance fitting in with doing what I believe is right and perhaps moreover – things in the past I've seen to be right, or worse – things I've seen to be not right, and it's a struggle I don't always win.
- This is the desire to fit in and be accepted by the group. People conform to avoid looking foolish or being rejected and have a belief that the group has some information that the individual doesn't. People conform because they believe the group is right. Have a quick look at the following video, and ask yourself – how often do we see this being played out in the workplace in terms of good ideas, or risks followed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOOsfkM-nGO>

To continue to improve safety in Wales & Western, we need more diverse thinking and hence a more diverse workforce. Leadership activities lacking diversity will likely stick to familiar ideas to avoid conflict, hindering progress. People naturally resist change, and a non-diverse environment makes it easier to avoid uncomfortable truths and self-reflection, which ultimately prevents learning and good decision-making. Insecure individuals may prefer non-diverse settings because it reinforces their existing beliefs and protects their ego, but this also stifles growth.

- **'Insecurity'** Confirmation bias makes us seek out information that confirms our existing beliefs and ignore anything that challenges them. Immaturity and a non-inclusive ego can worsen this, as individuals cling to their beliefs to protect their sense of self and dismiss opposing views. This creates a dangerous echo chamber, blinding them to hazards and shutting down diverse perspectives. It's vital to recognize everyone has biases, but mature, inclusive people are willing to examine their beliefs, even when uncomfortable, and consider challenging information.
- **'Unrealistic'** Optimism bias is when things conspire, and we tend to be overly optimistic about our own futures, a bias where we see good things as more likely for us and bad things as less likely. This isn't just about general happiness; it's about protecting our ego and self-esteem. We want to

believe good things will happen *to us* specifically, boosting our sense of self. This bias is strongest when our self-image is on the line, making us overestimate our chances of success and underestimate potential risks.

- **'In denial'** We often assume things will stay the same (normalcy bias) and hate being wrong. This combination makes us ignore warning signs and be unprepared for the unexpected. To combat this, we need to recognize these biases in ourselves, actively seek different perspectives, think critically about the information we receive, and be comfortable admitting we might be wrong.

For a safer workplace, we need to be open to persuasion and fight our biases. This means increasing diversity (race, gender, and more) and making sure everyone feels safe to share their views. We must avoid situations where people feel their opinions are dismissed because they differ from others. Complacency is dangerous; being proactive prevents accidents. Let's be aware of our behaviours and support each other to create a safe workplace for everyone. Thanks for your commitment to safety! How's your safety attitude this week?

I'd welcome your thoughts on this topic, so please feel free to [reply to me directly](#).

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)