

Truth blindness = emotional guarding + self-awareness



everyone
home safe
every day

Dear all,

The multifaceted nature of truth blindness only serves to highlight the interplay of emotional guarding and social factors. Organisational, system & workforce safety is compromised by the interplay of emotional self-preservation (Emotional Guarding) and social pressures, leading to 'truth blindness.' This obscures objective risk assessment and creates systemic vulnerabilities.

Put simply, people see what they *want* to see.

Feelings and fitting in are more important than facts. If you tell people they're wrong, or something's dangerous, they'll ignore you.



Rob Cairns,
Regional Managing Director

This is why safety rules don't always work. People lie to themselves and each other to avoid feeling bad or being left out. And that's how accidents happen.

- We are all social creatures, and our desire to belong is powerful - we often conform to group norms, even if those norms don't feel right. I know I feel this each day.
- We naturally want to protect other people's emotional well-being. Facing danger or admitting mistakes can be stressful or painful - we unconsciously block out information that threatens their peace of mind.
- Groupthink can occur, where a group prioritises harmony over critical thinking.

So what can I do to make our organisation more safe? Nothing. All I can do, are things that make safety outcomes more likely, and unwanted safety outcomes less likely. To kid myself otherwise, would be lowering my chance of success. Therefore the safety leadership mantle gives me both immense levels of power, whilst at the same time giving me no real power at all. We are dealing here with a situation of influence, and not a situation of control.

But hang on, my message last week was about how vital diversity and decency are when it comes to

ensuring biases don't interrupt our safety outcomes. They are all connected. A diverse team encourages decency, which in turn helps people speak up about safety. But even with good intentions, we all have biases to contend with, to summarise those from last week:

- **Confirmation Bias:** A manager's potential closed-mindedness leads them to ignore contradictory information.
- **Unrealistic Optimism:** A Manager's possible naivety or desire to impress leads to unrealistic predictions.
- **Normalcy Bias:** The risk of a manager's inflexibility and lack of foresight makes them unprepared for change.

Developing these further, it's critical then that we master these features which ultimately determine how we behave towards safety outcomes.

Specific "watch outs" are the disempowering behaviours which lower the likelihood of safety outcomes being prioritised, and represent areas where we need to develop our leadership towards more empowering safety outcomes.

What is isn't	What it can't become
Big ego	Overly confident
Self-focused	Focused on own needs
Needs praise	Likes to be told they're great
Sensitive	Gets defensive easily
Talks too much	Dominates conversations

What it is	What it has to be
Humility	Modest, acknowledges others
Others-focused	Considers others' perspectives
Self-assured	Finds confidence within
Open to feedback	Accepts constructive criticism
Listens actively	Listens attentively

If we look at how these qualities link to each other it becomes a formula:

$$(X + Y) \times \frac{(A + B + C)}{(D + E)} = \text{likelihood of safer outcomes} \uparrow$$

Key.

X = diversity

Y = decency

A = proactive adaptability and preparing for change

B = objective reasoning

C = unbiased analysis

D = reflective self-awareness and managing biases

E = intellectual humility and open to new information

Our [Regional Health & Safety Strategy](#) emphasises the crucial link between safety and diversity. To me, true diversity goes beyond surface-level representation. It means recognizing the inherent limitations of our individual viewpoints and acknowledging how our ingrained thinking can negatively influence our decision-making culture.

Personally, I understand that my perspective is shaped by my experiences, which, while valuable, are inherently limited. This awareness is vital for safety, as we often overlook subtle warning signs until they escalate. Our strategy highlights that both success and failure stem from the same source. We must reflect on both, using intuition alongside compliance systems. Proactive planning, recognising our tendency to overlook routine issues, and paying attention to subtle anomalies are key.

Furthermore, we must challenge the misconception that safety, performance, and cost are perpetually at odds. This false dichotomy can lead to harmful justifications for cost-cutting or poor performance. A truly safe decision can also be efficient and cost-effective. During incidents, safety decisions must be made holistically, considering all potential consequences, not just immediate risks. We must prioritize passenger needs and the overall safety of the system above the convenience of any one party, like a supplier.

It's precisely because of these considerations that I remain steadfast in my commitment to a few key principles, which I believe are fundamental to achieving positive safety outcomes. Our approach, therefore, centres on these areas of consistent focus:

- **Leadership as the driving force:** We emphasize leadership as the primary means to define both the 'what' and the 'how' of safety, and to set clear expectations for proactive management.
- **The inherent link between safety and diversity:** We are actively building a diverse organisation where all viewpoints are not only welcomed, but valued and respected, even when there is disagreement or when action is not possible.
- **Avoiding unnecessary bureaucracy and embracing clear communication:** We commit to speaking plainly about our responsibilities, ensuring we fulfil our duties without excessive red tape.
- **Creating a truly safe workplace:** By 'safe,' I mean a place where individuals feel empowered to speak openly, share their feelings and perspectives, and raise concerns without fear of reprisal.

Achieving true workplace safety is not merely a matter of adhering to regulations, nor is it a question of generating mathematical formulas. It is fundamentally about our collective mindset and emotional awareness. We all experience the inclination to conform, to avoid disrupting the norm – but admitting it is a completely different matter. Even when we know safety is a paramount concern, our internal voice may suggest acquiescence. However, silence can have devastating consequences. It is imperative that we actively listen to one another, particularly to those who hold differing perspectives. Homogeneity of thought can lead to critical oversights.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that we all possess inherent biases; we tend to perceive what we wish to perceive and disregard that which causes us discomfort. **To cultivate a truly safe environment within our region, a paradigm shift is necessary.**

We must value all viewpoints, especially those that challenge our own. It requires courage – the courage to articulate concerns and the courage to listen attentively. Disregarding another's apprehension is not only discourteous, it is also potentially dangerous. Let us strive to establish a workplace where all

individuals feel secure in expressing their views and where we collectively ensure the well-being of one another.

As always, I encourage you to share your thoughts and experiences. Please feel free to [reply directly](#) to me; I look forward to hearing from you.

This week, I wanted to take a moment to specifically recognize the outstanding work of Dan Collins and Chantelle Van Leer. They've been consistently dedicated to maintaining and reinforcing our key safety messages, and I truly appreciate their commitment.

Stay safe,
Rob

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