

EXPERT PERSPECTIVES ON SAFETY EXCELLENCE

# Eight-Armed Safety: Why EHS Leaders Must Think Like an Octopus, Not a Tin Man

*The eight arms framework provides a structured approach to transforming safety culture and practices for complex, unpredictable environments.*

By Shawn M. Galloway

**S**afety leaders often seek agility, learning and engagement. However, many safety departments still behave like the Tin Man from “The Wizard of Oz”—mechanical, rigid and slow to change. While organizations aim for transformation through polished policies and programs, the environment where employees work is becoming more complex and dynamic, calling for a rethink of traditional safety frameworks.

In the November-December 2025 *Harvard Business Review* article “Become an Octopus Organization: How Your Company Can Adapt in a Complex World,” Jana Werner and Phil Le-Brun argue that many companies mistakenly treat complex challenges as simply complicated problems. In simpler terms, organizations that were built around rigid machine metaphors fail to respond effectively to the unpredictability of today’s work environments.

## FROM TIN MAN TO OCTOPUS

The authors suggest that, instead of designing organizations like machines where cause and effect can be mapped and expectations set, leaders should adopt an octopus model. An octopus operates adaptively, with distributed intelligence among its arms that can sense, decide and act based on local conditions. This model provides a flexible, innovative approach to operations, emphasizing learning and adaptation.

When we apply the octopus analogy to environmental, health and safety (EHS) functions, clear differences emerge. Most safety operations remain stuck in outdated practices, reminiscent of the Tin Man ethos, and characterized by three main patterns.

**Foggy Clarity:** Safety strategies often boil down to the vague slogan of “zero harm,” obscuring a disorganized collection of programs and goals. This absence of a clear strategy weakens decision-making when safety conflicts with production and cost.

**Ownership Mostly on Posters:** While the phrase “safety is everyone’s responsibility” is common, in practice, responsibility is centralized, often relegating frontline workers to just carry out top-down orders. This fosters a compliance mindset rather than one of real engagement.

**Curiosity Squeezed Out:** Many current safety procedures focus on documentation and strict adherence to established rules, which suppresses opportunities for learning and



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adapting. Investigations focus on compliance rather than understanding how work truly happens.

In high-risk environments where variability is common, safety systems can’t be mechanical. Instead, they should demonstrate the flexibility and quick response of an octopus.

## WHAT ‘OCTOPUS SAFETY’ WOULD LOOK LIKE

To reimagine safety as an octopus-like function, leaders can consider the following principles:

**Make Changes With People, not to Them:** Instead of imposing centrally designed safety initiatives, involve workers in developing risk controls and procedures together. Measure success by the number of improvement ideas generated by frontline employees.

**Entwine Learning and Impact:** Incorporate learning opportunities directly into daily work routines. View near misses and deviations not just as mistakes to fix but as meaningful insights into systems and assumptions.

**Do Less to Achieve More:** Focus on critically evaluating current practices to identify which safety measures can be streamlined or eliminated without increasing risk, instead of constantly adding new safety protocols after incidents. Often, reducing bureaucracy improves operational efficiency and clarity.

## THE EIGHT ARMS OF AN OCTOPUS SAFETY STRATEGY

To help structure the transformation towards octopus-like safety, think in terms of eight essential “arms”:

- » **Clarity:** Define a clear safety purpose beyond just avoiding harm, with explicit priorities and trade-offs.
- » **Ownership:** Empower frontline leaders to take responsibility for operational risks, while safety personnel serve as facilitators and coaches.
- » **Curiosity:** Cultivate a culture where questioning is normal and employees feel safe to express concerns and ideas.
- » **Experimentation:** Implement a visible set of small, time-limited safety experiments that promote innovation.
- » **Subcultures:** Recognize that culture exists at various levels within an organization and needs different strategies for different subgroups.
- » **Learning Architecture:** Develop systems for ongoing feedback that support double-loop learning in practice.
- » **Spreading, not Rolling Out:** Focus on identifying and adapting local best practices rather than forcing uniform approaches.
- » **Leadership:** Guide leaders to work on the system, emphasizing inquiry over instruction, and promoting clarity, ownership, and curiosity in their teams.

## THREE QUESTIONS TO PROPEL CHANGE

Transitioning to an octopus-like safety approach is an ongoing process. Consider these questions:

- » Where are we most stuck in rigid, Tin Man-like thinking?
- » Which processes might unintentionally weaken clarity, ownership or curiosity in our safety approach?
- » What practices or rituals could we simplify or remove to improve our functioning?

Explore what would truly break if safety systems were passed temporarily. If it’s “not much,” that suggests the function is too hollow or superficial; if it’s “everything,” we might be too dependent. The goal should be a balance where operations can keep evolving while learning capabilities remain strong.

The bold move is not just to discuss agility and performance, but to fundamentally rethink the safety profession itself to mirror the adaptive nature of an octopus in a constantly evolving workplace. **EHS**



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