

LESSONS FROM THE NAVY SEALs

Enhancing Human & Organizational Performance for a Culture of Safety Excellence

By Shawn M. Galloway

In environments where discipline meets daring and precision blends with perseverance, the U.S. Navy SEALs stand as paragons of excellence. Safety professionals can learn essential lessons from the SEALs, who exemplify discipline, teamwork and resilience—key elements in fostering a culture of excellence.

Navy SEALs undergo rigorous training to anticipate and manage risks in demanding situations. Similarly, safety experts can implement proactive measures to identify hazards before they escalate into serious issues. SEALs emphasize the importance of clear communication and trust within their teams, creating an environment where employees feel secure enough to report concerns without fear of repercussions.

By adopting a mindset of continuous improvement and maintaining an unwavering commitment to safety, much like the SEALs' pursuit of excellence, organizations can cultivate a culture with the capacity to make safety a core value, not just a policy or priority.

The influence of human and organizational performance is pivotal in determining safety success. This article delves into the essential elements of human and organizational performance using insights from the Navy SEALs to enhance safety culture and performance. By analyzing the fundamental principles of the Navy SEALs, we can uncover valuable strategies to advance safety excellence that are not industry-specific.

Human Performance Elements

1) Individual Knowledge & Skills

The basis of human performance is rooted in the knowledge and skills of individual employees. Competence in job-related tasks is crucial for reducing errors and boosting efficiency. According to Salas et al. (2012), training and

education are vital for improving employees' competencies. Organizations that invest in ongoing learning programs foster a culture of safety where employees possess the necessary skills to identify hazards and respond effectively.

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) *Human Performance Improvement Guidebook* (2009, p. 55) emphasizes that training is important but should not be relied upon alone as a preventive tactic: "Not all hazards, dangers, and possible scenarios can be anticipated in order to develop appropriate procedures. Even training is unable to anticipate all possible situations that can be encountered."

The Navy SEALs exemplify this principle through their rigorous and comprehensive training programs, which prepare members for a wide range of scenarios because they realize that no plan of action survives contact with the enemy. As former Navy SEAL and leadership consultant Jocko Willink (2017) states, "Discipline equals freedom." This quote captures the essence of their training philosophy: Through discipline in training, SEALs gain the freedom to make quick, effective decisions in high-pressure and unanticipated situations.

2) Motivation & Engagement

Employee motivation and engagement greatly influence safety performance. When workers are motivated, they are more likely to follow safety protocols and actively take part in safety initiatives. Gallup's 2016 study on engagement found that "companies with engagement scores in the top 25% of Gallup's employee engagement database have 70% fewer safety incidents than those located in the bottom 25%" (Ross, 2016).

The Navy SEALs demonstrate a high level of intrinsic motivation, driven by a strong sense of purpose and camaraderie. This motivation is developed through shared goals and mutual accountability among team members. Former Navy SEAL and author David Goggins (2018)

highlights the importance of internal motivation and perseverance: "Always be ready to adjust, recalibrate, and stay after it to become better, somehow." This outlook encourages individuals to go beyond their limits and face challenges, which directly helps foster a culture where employees are motivated to take an active and proactive part.

3) Communication

Effective communication is crucial for ensuring that safety information is shared and understood throughout the organization. According to Reason (1997), clear communication decreases misunderstandings that can lead to incidents. The U.S. DOE (2009, p. 99) highlights the importance of clear communication in fostering a culture of accountability and safety, noting that "Finding and eliminating latent weaknesses improve dramatically when worker feedback and communication are encouraged."

The Navy SEALs emphasize communication as the "lifeblood of operations" (Fussell & Goodyear, 2017). Their success depends on clear, concise language and nonverbal signals that aid coordination under pressure. As former Navy SEAL Chris Fussell says, "As a leader, you must consistently drive effective communication. Meetings must be deliberate and intentional—your organizational rhythm should value purpose over habit and effectiveness over efficiency" (Fussell & Goodyear, 2017). Organizations should establish open communication channels that encourage employees to report safety concerns without fear of retaliation. Regular safety meetings, bulletins and digital platforms can support this exchange of information, much like how Navy SEAL teams maintain constant communication during missions.

Organizational Performance Elements

1) Safety Culture

The U.S. Department of Transportation (2023) defines safety culture as "the shared values, actions, and behaviors that

Vantage Point

Vantage Point articles in *Professional Safety* provide a forum for authors with distinct viewpoints to share their ideas and opinions with ASSP members and the EHS community. The goal is to encourage and stimulate critical thinking, discussion and debate on matters of concern to the EHS profession. The views and opinions expressed are strictly those of the author(s) and are not necessarily endorsed by *Professional Safety*, nor should they be considered an expression of official policy by ASSP.



demonstrate a commitment to safety over competing goals and demands.” However, this now-common description is limited as it tends to describe characteristics and does not address capabilities. Mathis and Galloway (2013, p. xiii) state, “The most basic capability of a safety culture is the ability to improve. That is the real challenge; not what managers or consultants can make of a safety culture, but what a safety culture can make of itself.” A strong safety culture promotes a proactive safety approach, where employees prioritize safety over productivity and feel safe discussing concerns or ideas. It is important to remember that safety culture is just one aspect of occupational culture. Culture is the common beliefs that influence and govern common behaviors, and it is more about the mindset behind why things are done than how things are done.

The Navy SEALs embody a culture where safety is ingrained in every aspect of their operations. Safety is a core value, guiding systematic behaviors and decision-making that prioritize well-being. This is embodied in the common Navy SEAL mantra, “Slow is smooth, smooth is fast” (Fowler, 2023). When our mindset is focused on safety, we can achieve anything.

2) Leadership Commitment

Leadership is essential in shaping organizational performance and safety outcomes. Leaders who genuinely commit to safety set the tone for the entire organization and, in turn, create additional leaders through influence rather than control. According to Zohar (2002), transformational leadership that emphasizes safety can improve safety performance.

In the Navy SEALs, leadership is demonstrated in every mission and is viewed as a responsibility to yourself and your team. It is reflected in how missions are carried out, not just through a figurehead issuing commands. The SEAL ethos states, “We expect to lead and be led. In the absence of orders, I will take charge, lead my team, and accomplish the mission” (Naval Special Warfare Command, n.d.).

3) Systems Thinking

Adopting a systems thinking approach helps organizations understand the connections between different elements of performance and safety. This approach highlights that human and organizational factors are linked and that changes in one area can affect others.

The U.S. DOE guidebook (2009, p. 146) also emphasizes the importance

of systems thinking and understanding human factors:

Human factors is the name of an engineering profession that focuses on how people interact with tasks, machines or computers, and the environment, with the consideration that humans have limitations and capabilities. Often, human factors will study the human within the system to ensure that we understand the limitations of the human within the current structure, product, or process.

Galloway (2021) underscores the need for a “systemic approach” to safety, integrating safety performance into overall business processes to boost organizational resilience. The Navy SEALs apply systems thinking to adapt their strategies flexibly, ensuring mission success in complex environments. Former Navy SEAL and author Brandon Webb (2013) writes about the importance of systems thinking, training, and understanding the bigger picture in the context of Navy SEAL training and sniper work.

Integrating Human & Organizational Performance for Occupational Safety

1) Training & Development Programs

Integrating human performance elements such as knowledge and skills into organizational training programs can enhance workplace safety. For instance, scenario-based training that simulates real-life safety challenges enables employees to practice their skills in a

controlled environment (Salas et al., 2012). The U.S. DOE supports this approach by advocating for dynamic training programs that adapt to changing workplace conditions and challenges.

By bridging the gap between knowledge and application, organizations can enhance safety performance. The SEALs exemplify this through their rigorous training, often summarized by the phrase, “Embrace the suck,” (Gleeson, 2020) which encourages trainees to “lean into the suffering and get comfortable being very uncomfortable” during intense sessions. Training should go beyond simply teaching task completion; it must include comprehensive programs that combine routine safety drills with simulations of unexpected scenarios. This approach ensures that employees are equipped to respond confidently and effectively during emergencies. However, it is important not to cross the line into unnecessary suffering.

2) Employee Involvement

Encouraging employee participation in safety initiatives promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility. For example, involving employees in creating safety policies and procedures can result in more relevant and effective safety measures. The Navy SEALs demonstrate this principle by encouraging all team members to contribute to mission planning, emphasizing that every voice matters in the pursuit of safety.

3) Continuous Improvement

Organizations should implement a continuous improvement approach to

safety by regularly assessing and updating safety procedures. This may include performing safety audits, reviewing incident reports and gathering employee feedback. By fostering a culture of learning and adaptation, organizations can proactively address safety issues and enhance overall performance. The Navy SEALs’ commitment to the military standard of after-action reviews demonstrates this principle, as they analyze missions to learn from successes and failures, fostering a culture of ongoing learning. Goggins (2018) states, “In every failure there is something to be gained, even if it’s only practice for the next test you’ll have to take. Because that next test is coming. That’s a guarantee.”

Lessons in Safety From the U.S. Navy SEALs

1) Embrace Uncertainty

At the heart of the Navy SEALs’ operational philosophy is a steadfast acceptance of uncertainty. They recognize that even with careful planning, each mission can face unexpected challenges. This mindset is also vital for safety professionals. By accepting uncertainty, safety experts can develop a more flexible and responsive approach to managing risks.

2) Extensive Training: Preparation Meets Reality

The Navy SEALs go through a tough training program that pushes their physical and mental limits. This preparation is not just about building skills; it is about mimicking real-world situations that might happen during a mission. As former Navy SEAL and author Mark Owen (2015) stresses, “The best way to make your team succeed is to make them fail in training.” This level of preparation can be reflected in the safety field. Organizations can hold regular training sessions that simulate emergency scenarios such as fire drills, evacuation plans and cyberattack response drills.

3) Teamwork & Communication: The Power of Collaboration

Navy SEAL missions are carried out by close-knit teams where each member knows their role and trusts their teammates completely. This camaraderie is built through intense training and a shared dedication to the mission’s success. Communication is crucial; Navy SEALs use clear, direct language and nonverbal signals to stay coordinated under pressure. Safety professionals should

NAVY SEAL-INSPIRED PRACTICES FOR SAFETY

- Train for the unexpected.** Supplement routine instruction with realistic, scenario-based exercises that prepare employees to respond effectively when conditions deviate from the plan.

- Build open communication.** Create an environment where employees can report hazards, share concerns and exchange safety information without fear of retaliation.

- Strengthen situational awareness.** Conduct regular site assessments, use checklists, and encourage workers to identify and report changing conditions before they become incidents.

- Assess risk proactively.** Identify potential hazards, evaluate their likelihood and consequences, and develop contingency plans before work begins rather than reacting after problems arise.

- Engage employees in safety.** Involve workers in developing safety procedures, planning work, and solving safety challenges to increase ownership and improve practical solutions.

- Learn through continuous improvement.** Hold structured after-action reviews, analyze both successes and failures, and update safety practices based on lessons learned to strengthen organizational performance over time.

foster a collaborative environment where employees feel at ease sharing safety concerns and set up regular communication channels to keep everyone updated on safety protocols.

4) Situational Awareness: The Art of Anticipation

A hallmark of Navy SEAL operations is sharp situational awareness. Navy SEALs are trained to observe their environment, evaluate potential threats and anticipate changes. This skill enables them to adapt their strategies on the fly, ensuring mission success. Safety professionals should develop a similar awareness by regularly performing site assessments, utilizing checklists and encouraging employees to report any anomalies they notice.

5) Risk Assessment: The SEALs' Tactical Approach

Before each mission, Navy SEALs conduct detailed risk assessments by identifying potential threats and creating multiple contingencies and backup plans. Safety professionals can follow a similar process by conducting systematic risk evaluations in their workplaces and better understanding work as done and the alignment or misalignment from work as planned. This involves spotting potential hazards, assessing the chance and severity of each risk, and formulating strategies to reduce them.

6) After-Action Reviews: Learning from Experience

One of the most important parts of the Navy SEALs' operational strategy is their dedication to debriefing after each mission. These after-action reviews help teams evaluate what went well, what did not and what could be improved. Safety professionals should hold similar debriefing sessions to understand both what led to deviations and what leads to success. This should especially be done after contractor work is completed, using these moments to learn, adapt and improve safety protocols.

Conclusion

The U.S. Navy SEALs demonstrate the highest standards of preparation and risk management. Their strategies of embracing uncertainty, extensive training, effective communication, situational awareness, thorough risk assessment and dedication to learning provide valuable insights for safety professionals. By



By accepting uncertainty, safety experts can develop a more flexible and responsive approach to managing risks.

applying these principles, organizations can better manage both known and unknown risks, creating a culture of proactive and resilient safety excellence.

Ultimately, the goal is not just to react to risks but to foresee and prepare for them, fostering a safer environment for everyone. As the Navy SEALs say, "The only easy day was yesterday" (Gleeson, 2014). Embrace the challenge and make every day a step toward increased occupational safety, reduced risk exposure and overall organizational readiness and the capacity to deal with deviations and unforeseen challenges. There is no standing still, and there will always be work to be done. **PSJ**

Disclaimer

During the preparation of this article, the author used ChatGPT to assist with generating accompanied graphics. The author has reviewed and edited and takes full responsibility for the content, accuracy and originality of the final publication. For updated ASSP AI policy information, see <https://assp.us/AI>.

References

- Fowler, L. (2023, Oct. 2). Slow is smooth, smooth is fast: Navy SEALs' efficiency secret. NAVYSEAL.com. www.navyseal.com/slow-is-smooth-smooth-is-fast
- Fussell, C. & Goodyear, C.W. (2017). *One mission: How leaders build a team of teams*. Portfolio.
- Galloway, S.M. (2024, April 14). Five core capacities for sustainable safety excellence. <https://incident-prevention.com/blog/five-core-capacities-for-sustainable-safety-excellence>
- Gleeson, B. (2014, June 30). These 7 motivational Navy SEAL sayings will kick your butt into gear. *Inc.* www.inc.com/brent-gleeson/

7-motivational-navy-seal-sayings-will-kick-your-butt-into-gear.html

Gleeson, B. (2020). *Embrace the suck: The navy SEAL way to an extraordinary life*. Grand Central Publishing.

Goggins, D. (2018). *Can't hurt me: Master your mind and defy the odds*. Lionscrest Publishing.

Mathis, T.L. & Galloway, S.M. (2013). *Steps to safety culture excellence*. Wiley.

Naval Special Warfare Command. (n.d.). SEAL ethos. www.nsw.navy.mil/NSW/SEAL-Ethos

Owen, M. & Maurer, K. (2015). *No hero: The evolution of a Navy SEAL*. Dutton.

Reason, J. (1997). *Managing the risks of organizational accidents*. Ashgate.

Ross, J. (2016, Nov. 8). 2016 Gallup data proves that engaged companies produce safer workplaces. C.A. Short Company. www.cashort.com/blog/2016-gallup-data-engaged-companies-produce-safer-workplaces

Salas, E., Tannenbaum, S.I., Kraiger, K. & Smith-Jentsch, K.A. (2012). The science of training and development in organizations: What matters in practice. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 14(2), 74-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612436661>

U.S. Department of Energy. (2009). Human performance improvement handbook, volume 1: Concepts and principles. www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2026-04/doe-hdbk-1028-2009_volume1_0.pdf

U.S. Department of Transportation. (2023, July 3). Safety culture. Federal Highway Administration. <https://bit.ly/4xMeF5b>

Webb, B. (2014). *The red circle: My life in the navy SEAL sniper corps and how I trained America's deadliest marksmen*. St. Martin's Press.

Willink, J. (2017). *Discipline equals freedom: Field manual*. St. Martin's Press.

Zohar, D. (2002). Modifying supervisory practices to improve subunit safety: A leadership-based intervention model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(1), 156-163. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.1.156>

Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety and author of several books. As an award-winning consultant, trusted advisor, expert witness, leadership coach and keynote speaker, he has worked with organizations in every primary industry to improve safety strategy, system capacity, culture, leadership and engagement. He also hosts the weekly podcast series *Safety Culture Excellence*. Galloway is a member of ASSP's Gulf Coast Chapter and the Global Operations and Management practice specialties.

Cite this article

Galloway, S.M. (2026, Sept.). Lessons from the Navy SEALs: Enhancing human and organizational performance for a culture of safety excellence. *Professional Safety*, 71(9), 30-33.