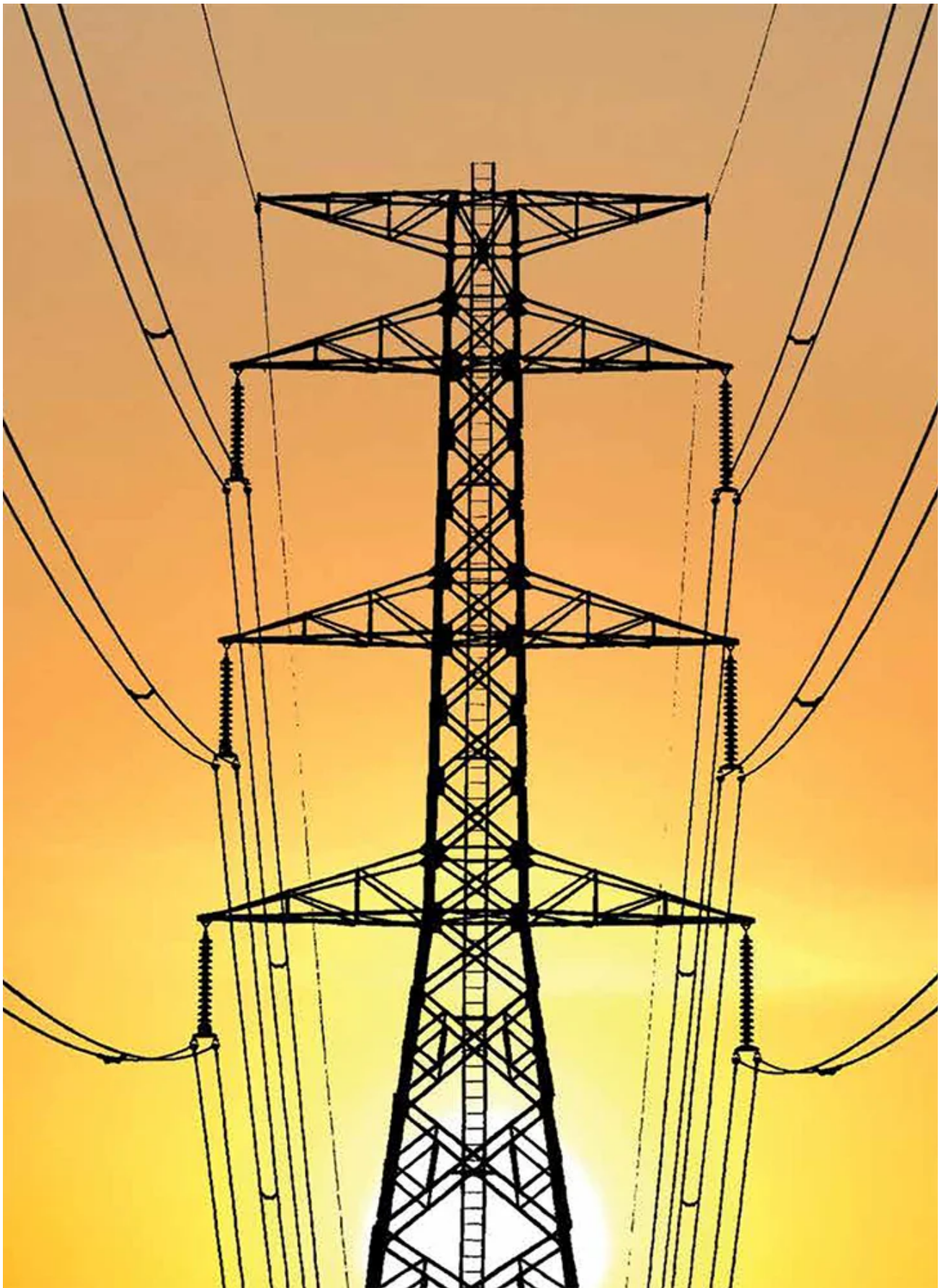




Making Safety the Easy Choice

WRITTEN BY [SHAWN M. GALLOWAY](#) ON JULY 12, 2026. POSTED IN [SAFETY MANAGEMENT](#).

How can employers design expectations so that the right behavior becomes the employee's simplest, safest option?

Walk through any industrial environment and you'll hear familiar messaging: "Be proactive." "Own safety." "Follow the procedure." Then step into the boardroom, where the conversation shifts to yield, uptime, injuries and cost.

We coach people on behaviors yet judge them based on outcomes, sending mixed signals to the frontline workers at the sharp end of the stick. People tend to rally faster and stay aligned longer when we direct them toward a clear goal and support it with a few nonnegotiable guidelines or guardrails. Most disappointment lies within the gap between what leaders expected and what they made clear and achievable and reinforced to workers.

This isn't an argument against coaching behavior; it's encouragement to design expectations so that the right behavior becomes the worker's safest and easiest choice. Human beings naturally think in terms of outcomes. Crews can visualize a target like "first-pass yield at 98%," "no loss of containment" or "pressure steady at 40-45 psi." Comparatively, "be proactive," "own safety" and "follow the procedure" are broad phrases that ultimately break down into dozens of judgment calls. Experienced workers can interpret them differently when stress, aging equipment or limited staff availability is a factor. Drift occurs, debates multiply, and blame begins to look for a place to land. Naturally, behavior still matters, aligning much more quickly when it's anchored to a concrete outcome and protected by a few clear guidelines that every worker understands.

Resolving Disappointment

For our purposes, disappointment equates to actual performance minus expected performance. It becomes inevitable when expectations are vague, impossible or under-resourced, appearing as rework, near misses and shortcuts that gradually become normalized under the banner of "getting 'er done." The more generic leadership's guidance is, the greater the gaps between how work is imagined, directed and actually performed.

Consider this familiar scenario: The words "Zero Recordables" prominently displayed on company banners and dashboards. Management's goal is clear – to keep the streak going – but the behaviors and systems necessary to achieve it are not. In lieu of clarity, supervisors begin to minimize minor injuries and discourage workers from reporting gray-area events. Later, when a contractor needs stitches, three earlier near misses suddenly come to light.

The leadership solution here isn't to abandon the goal but to establish and communicate clear boundaries: no hiding or reclassifying incidents, all incidents must be reported within 24 hours, and each one must be investigated for systemic causes. Typically, reporting will increase and then

eventually decrease as systems and conditions improve (i.e., recordables will drop for the right reasons).

Theater or Performance Management?

Behavior is a byproduct of influence, which is one reason why it's ineffective to solely focus on changing it. Here's another reason: Broadly or vaguely defined behaviors carry an ambiguity tax. Without translation, people improvise, and they do so differently. Behavior often gets distorted once it's turned into a target; workers tend to focus on the number or specific goal they've been instructed to achieve rather than how they will achieve it. Thus, while it may sometimes seem easier to correct people than fix systems, over time, that choice largely results in meaningless theater – not true performance management.

To design expectations that won't lead to disappointment, begin by communicating in system states, not slogans. "Hold suction pressure between 40 and 45 psi during transfer," for example, provides workers far more clarity than "Keep it steady." "No energized work without verified isolation" conveys more detail than "Work safely." From there, pair each expectation with two kinds of protection: the behavioral lines we won't cross (e.g., no work above 4 feet without full tie-off, period) and the resources that must be present before we start (e.g., work shall not begin if anchor points or lifelines are missing). Stated goals tell us what we're after; the protective measures we implement define how we get there.

Collaboration and Ownership

Translating broad or vague ideas ideally occurs where the work takes place. Sit with your team to turn each one into clear expectations. For instance, when working on a specific tank, the team may collaboratively define "speaking up" as (1) stopping if the gas reading exceeds X ppm, (2) calling Control, and (3) resuming work only after receiving clearance to do so.

Next, select leading indicators that truly impact exposure, such as physical barrier inspections and independent valve checks. Be sure to thoroughly test all targets before setting them in stone. If bending the rules is the only way to reach them, you won't achieve excellence. Add buffers, capacity or staffing instead.

Accountability Done Right

Accountability demands the same careful design, working best when measures are implemented early and fairly using a layered approach.



Start with leaders: Have guardrails and expected results been clearly communicated to workers in operational language? Have leaders allocated ample time, tools and staffing? Are any incentives subtly promoting the wrong trade-offs? Accountability begins at the top.

Examine the system next: Is the work process truly feasible under real-world conditions? Have controls been integrated, with PPE as the last line of defense? Can workers quickly escalate problems without issue?

Then, assess the team: Do they translate expectations into specific standards suited to their context? Stop and escalate when a guardrail can't be met? Implement learning loops that lead to actual improvements? Only now do we evaluate the individual, and fairness is essential. Human errors require support and system improvements. At-risk behaviors call for coaching and safer conditions. Reckless actions (e.g., knowingly bypassing critical controls) merit proportionate consequences.

Make It Tangible

To make a lasting impact using this approach, develop one-page expectation briefs for every critical outcome. Each brief should specify the overarching goal and include details about guardrails, resources, known traps, error precursors, and stop-work or pause-work triggers. When work is complete, check for fidelity to the guardrails and resource availability, not just whether a number or metric has changed. Consider both the work results and all evidence that employees upheld the guardrails while doing the work. Publicly support schedule delays when a worker invokes a guardrail. We must be willing to celebrate a missed target when someone refuses a bad trade-off. This is how you teach real expectations and pursue excellence.

Many safety failures are easy to understand when viewed from this perspective. “Zero harm” is an endless promise wrapped into a limited time frame. Lack of clear design goals, such as avoiding single-point energy vulnerabilities, can prompt people to hide issues. Observation programs are useful only when they result in changes to the design, tools, staffing or training; otherwise, they're just paperwork. Also note that many “leading” indicators are in fact misleading. Counting conversations rarely influences hazard trends, for example, while independently verifying high-energy isolations before starting work often does.

Leaders must clearly communicate the trade-offs they will never accept and allocate the time needed to keep those commitments credible. This means observing work firsthand. While on-site, ask, “When did a guardrail last stop an issue, and what happened next?” and then recognize that decision. In addition, consistently share stories of people who protected a guardrail and earned leadership support. Stories are how a culture updates its operating system.

Conclusion

Traditional ideas suggest that clearly defining the right worker behaviors will lead to desired results. Experience proves the opposite. A safer way forward begins when leaders define optimal results as specific system states. Clearly communicate the trade-offs you won't accept. Allocate resources to those constraints. Hold leaders and teams accountable for respecting the plan's design.

When we set specific expectations for results and provide clear guidance, guardrails and resources, the right behaviors naturally develop as the normal, effortless way to work. Disappointment shrinks to the size of your next learning opportunity. And performance becomes what it was meant to be all along: not just luck but a deliberate outcome.

This is how you make safety the easy choice.

About the Author: Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety (<https://proactsafety.com>) and a globally recognized adviser on safety strategy, leadership and organizational performance. For nearly three decades, he has helped executive teams build the capacity to prevent harm, recover from disruptions and integrate safety as a key driver of business value. Galloway has also written multiple bestselling books and hosts the Safety Culture Excellence podcast.

