

Stop Looking for the Next Tool, and Start Rethinking How You Think

Moving from programmatic to systems thinking ensures safety efforts are sustainable and adaptable to changing conditions.

By Shawn M. Galloway

The safety profession doesn't need another program. It needs a philosophical reckoning.

Earlier this year, I wrote about why EHS leaders should think more like an octopus and less like the Tin Man—adaptive, distributed, and responsive rather than rigid, centralized, and mechanical. The metaphor resonated because it named something many leaders already feel but struggle to articulate: the growing disconnect between how safety functions are designed and how work actually unfolds.

The real issue runs deeper than metaphor. The safety profession has a pattern. Every few years, a new framework emerges. A new model, a new certification, a new acronym, and organizations adopt it with enthusiasm, implement it with discipline, and measure it with precision, only to find, a few years later, that not much has fundamentally changed. Injury rates may fluctuate, audit scores may improve, but the underlying capacity to prevent and recover from serious events remains largely unchanged.

The problem is not the tools. The problem is the thinking behind them.

What I am suggesting is not anti-program or anti-methodology. There is a place for structured approaches, but when the profession's default response to every challenge is to seek the next thing to implement, we reveal something important about ourselves: We have become addicted to activity as a substitute for strategy. Activity feels productive; strategy requires confrontation. Activity can be measured; strategy must be reasoned. Activity protects us from uncertainty; strategy demands we sit with it. That distinction matters more now than ever.

Let me define what I mean by a philosophical shift. I am not talking about swapping one belief system for another. I am talking about reexamining the foundational assumptions that drive how we design, lead and evaluate safety performance. Assumptions like: safety is primarily a compliance function. If we follow all the rules and meet all the standards, we will be safe. This assumption is comforting. It is also incomplete.

Compliance creates a floor; it does not build capacity. In complex, dynamic environments, which describes nearly every modern workplace, the gap between compliance and excellence is where serious events live.

Safety is everyone's responsibility.

This phrase appears on posters or is posted in virtually every facility I have visited and, in most of those facilities, it means



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almost nothing in practice. Responsibility without ownership is rhetoric. When we tell everyone they are responsible but centralize every decision, every investigation, and every standard within a single department, we create a compliance culture dressed in the language of engagement.

Shared ownership, real ownership, requires leaders to delegate authority, not just hold people accountable. These beliefs are significant. They influence budgets. They shape conversations in boardrooms. They determine how frontline supervisors respond when problems occur, and because these assumptions are rarely questioned, they remain unchallenged for years. Meanwhile, the profession keeps trying different tools and programs, searching for a solution that was never going to arise from it.

The fix must come from a different way of thinking.

What does this philosophical shift look like in practice?

First, it means moving from a prevention-only mindset to a prevention-and-recovery mindset. Most safety systems are designed as if every incident is preventable in advance. That assumption, while aspirational, ignores the reality that complex systems produce unexpected outcomes. Organizations that build recovery capacity—the ability to detect, respond to and learn from deviations before they become catastrophic—are not admitting defeat. They are building resilience. A culture that cannot recover is not resilient. It is fragile.

Second, it means elevating safety from a reporting function to a strategic discipline. Safety professionals spend enormous energy generating reports, dashboards and metrics. But reporting is not a strategy. Metrics reveal outcomes. Capacity determines them. If we want to be taken seriously at the executive level, we have to speak in terms of enterprise risk, operational continuity and value creation, not just trailing

indicators and near-miss counts. The moment safety becomes a line item in a governance conversation rather than a footnote in an operations review, everything changes.

Third, it means replacing programmatic thinking with systems thinking. Programs have start dates and end dates. They have champions who eventually move on. They have rollout phases and measurement cycles. Systems, by contrast, are persistent. They are designed to adapt. They evolve with the organization rather than expiring beside it. When we think in programs, we ask: What should we implement next? When we think in systems, we ask: What capacity are we building, and will it sustain performance when conditions change?

Fourth, it means redefining leadership's role in safety. Too many leaders treat safety as something they support rather than something they own. Support is passive. Ownership is active. A leader who owns safety does not just review incident reports. That leader asks diagnostic questions: Where are our blind spots? What signals are we missing? Where is our system most fragile? What would break first under pressure? Those questions are strategic. They create clarity, and they position safety as a leadership discipline, not a departmental obligation.

Here is the uncomfortable truth.

This shift is harder than adopting a new tool. New tools come with training guides and implementation timelines.

Philosophical shifts come with ambiguity. They require leaders to acknowledge that some of their most deeply held beliefs about safety may be incomplete. That is not a comfortable conversation, but it is the one we must have.

The profession is at a crossroads. We can continue searching for the next methodology, the next framework, the next silver bullet. Or we can pause long enough to ask whether the thinking behind our approach is still fit for the environment in which we operate.

Compliance may prevent violations. It does not create excellence. Engagement without ownership is theater, and a system that looks good on paper but cannot adapt under pressure is not a safety system. It is a performance.

The next evolution in safety will not come from a new program. It will come from professionals who are willing to think differently about the work itself. That is not a comfortable message, but I believe it is the right one. **EHS**



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