# How Safety Leadership Shapes Real-World Outcomes in Canadian Workplaces

Leadership has always mattered in occupational health and safety, but in today's workplaces it has become the defining factor between organizations that merely comply and those that truly protect their people. Over the last decade, as Canadian workplaces have grown more complex and spread out—remote staff, contract crews, multiple sites, mixed workforces—the role of the OHS professional has quietly shifted. It's no longer enough to know the law, file the paperwork, or run the training calendar. OHS managers are being asked to step into something much bigger: a leadership role that influences how people think, communicate, make decisions, and work together.

This shift isn't theoretical. It shows up in the stories behind incidents and near misses. It shows up in investigations and WCB decisions across the country. It shows up in the subtle moments when a worker chooses to speak up—or chooses to stay silent. Real leadership, the humankind that shapes behaviour, has become one of the strongest predictors of safety outcomes in Canadian workplaces.

And what makes this both powerful and challenging is that safety leadership is no longer only the responsibility of senior executives. It now sits squarely with OHS managers, supervisors, and anyone tasked with setting expectations or guiding others. This article explores why, and what it means

for the future of safety work in Canada.

## Why Leadership Is Now the Real Safety Variable

If you strip away the policies, the audits, the binders, the LMS modules, and the toolbox talks—what you're left with is people. People observing hazards, solving problems, reporting concerns, and interacting with equipment, machinery, chemicals, heights, weather, and unpredictable work environments. And what people do under pressure, fatigue, misunderstanding, or uncertainty often tells you more about safety outcomes than any engineering control.

That's why leadership has become the true variable.

Every significant OHS failure, when you dig beneath the surface, reveals a behavioural pattern. Someone felt they couldn't report a hazard. Someone thought a shortcut was acceptable because a supervisor looked the other way. Someone didn't feel safe asking a question. Someone didn't want to slow down production. Someone didn't feel supported enough to speak up when their instincts told them something wasn't right.

These are leadership failures long before they become incident failures.

In interviews and investigations across Canada—from British Columbia forestry operations to Ontario construction sites, from Alberta oil and gas facilities to Nova Scotia manufacturing floors—the same themes emerge. Workers follow the signals and behaviours of the people they perceive as leaders. And this is where many OHS managers underestimate their own impact.

Even if they don't have formal authority, they hold influence. They set the tone. They communicate

expectations. They shape how supervisors behave. And they model what safety looks like in daily practice.

Leadership isn’t about hierarchy. It’s about behaviour people watch and respond to.

## A Story About How Safety Culture Accidentally Forms

A safety manager in Manitoba once shared an incident involving a crew working on a processing line. Production pressures were high, and the supervisor—an otherwise competent and respected leader—had fallen into the habit of quietly allowing minor shortcuts to keep work moving. He didn’t tell anyone to break rules; he simply didn’t intervene when workers climbed over a conveyor instead of walking around it. It was a small behaviour that saved a few seconds each time.

The safety manager noticed it once during a walkthrough and made a mental note to address it later. But later never came, because nothing happened. Weeks passed. Then months. The shortcut became the norm.

One morning, a new worker slipped while stepping over the conveyor. He fractured his wrist trying to break his fall.

The immediate cause was simple. The root cause was not.

The safety manager’s investigation revealed something uncomfortable: the crew hadn’t been ignoring the rules—they had been following their leader. The supervisor’s silence had become permission, even though that was never his intention.

That’s how safety culture forms. Not through posters or policies. Not through training modules or audits. But through the daily choices leaders make in front of workers.

Workers follow what leaders tolerate. They follow what leaders

reinforce. They follow what leaders stay silent about.

This is why OHS managers increasingly see leadership not as an abstract concept, but as a practical, measurable, and deeply human influence on safety outcomes.

## Leadership Creates Psychological Safety—Or Removes It

If there is one leadership skill that directly determines safety performance, it's the ability to create psychological safety. A psychologically safe environment is one where workers feel comfortable raising concerns, admitting uncertainty, asking questions, and reporting hazards without fear of embarrassment, retaliation, or blame.

Canadian regulators may not use that phrase directly, but the concept appears throughout harassment and violence legislation, near-miss reporting expectations, and the due diligence standards that require employers to respond promptly to concerns.

In practical terms, psychological safety shows up through simple behaviours:

- A worker who reports a near miss instead of hiding it.
- A young apprentice who asks for clarification rather than "winging it."
- A worker who admits discomfort handling a new process.
- A crew member who speaks up when a job plan feels rushed or unclear.

Those moments only happen when leadership creates an environment where workers feel safe being honest.

A safety professional in Ontario once described a worker who approached him with shaking hands to report a near miss. The

worker said, “I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble.” When the safety professional thanked him and explained how the report would help the entire crew stay safe, the worker’s shoulders dropped. He said, “I thought you’d be mad.”

That moment changed the safety culture more than any policy or training could have. It proved to the crew that reporting was valued. It proved that mistakes weren’t punishable—they were learnable.

1. Good leaders normalize vulnerability.
2. Weak leaders punish it.
3. And the consequences ripple through the whole organization.

## The Changing Role of the OHS Manager

Historically, OHS managers were viewed as technical experts. They understood the regulations, conducted inspections, delivered training, and ensured paperwork was complete. They were support staff, not strategic leaders.

That model no longer works.

Modern workplaces require OHS managers to become translators, influencers, coaches, and culture shapers. They must translate legislation into plain language workers understand. They must coach supervisors in communication and reinforce consistent expectations. They must influence senior leaders by connecting safety to operational and financial outcomes. They must model steady, respectful, approachable leadership so others follow suit.

OHS managers are increasingly evaluated not just by injury rates or audit scores, but by how well they build trust across teams and departments. They’re expected to influence behaviour—not just document it.

One senior safety leader in Alberta put it bluntly: “OHS used to be the department of no. Now it has to be the department of influence.”

Influence comes from leadership, not authority. And leadership comes from communication, consistency, and integrity.

## Supervisors: The Real Centre of Safety Culture

As much as OHS managers influence culture, supervisors determine it.

Workers spend most of their time with their supervisor, not the safety manager. They watch how supervisors react under pressure. They watch how they communicate, how they enforce expectations, and how they treat concerns. They watch how supervisors balance production demands with safety requirements. Every tone of voice, facial expression, and moment of silence communicates expectations—sometimes more clearly than any formal message.

***Supervisors teach workers what the company really values.***

An OHS director in Québec once said, “If I want to know a site’s safety culture, I watch the supervisors for ten minutes.” She wasn’t wrong. Supervisors control the practical reality of safety: breaks, task planning, equipment readiness, pacing, hazard communication, and the daily decisions that determine risk.

This is why OHS leadership now involves coaching supervisors in communication. A supervisor who leads well creates strong safety outcomes—even with imperfect procedures. A supervisor who communicates poorly creates risk—even with perfect policies.

OHS managers must empower supervisors, not overwhelm them. They must give supervisors the tools, language, and confidence

to communicate safety clearly and respectfully.

That is leadership by extension.

## Leadership That Workers Believe

The most powerful form of safety leadership is credibility. Workers believe leaders who:

- Follow the rules they expect others to follow.
- Listen without defensiveness.
- Treat mistakes as opportunities to learn.
- Show up consistently.
- Explain the “why,” not just the rule.
- Demonstrate they care about people as people.

*One small example:* A supervisor in British Columbia made a habit of starting shift meetings by asking workers how they were coping with the heat during a brutal wildfire season. He brought extra water, helped set up a shade tent, and routinely reminded workers to speak up if they felt symptoms of heat stress.

On paper, that’s nothing revolutionary. But to his crew, it meant everything.

When one worker later experienced dizziness, he reported it immediately instead of pushing through. That early reporting prevented what could have been a serious medical emergency. Afterwards, the worker said, “I only said something because I knew he meant it.”

Leadership isn’t measured in grand gestures. It’s measured in dozens of small moments where workers see who you are—and decide whether to trust you.

# Leadership Failures That Create Real Risk

When leadership is inconsistent, unclear, or absent, risk multiplies quickly. You see it in the hesitation on a worker's face when deciding whether to speak up. You see it in shortcuts justified silently because "no one cares anyway." You see it in crews that stop reporting hazards, not because hazards disappeared, but because they believe reporting doesn't change anything.

A safety consultant from Saskatchewan shared a case where a worker nearly lost his hand due to an equipment malfunction that had been reported three times. The reports never reached the right person because communication had broken down between a supervisor and management. The supervisor didn't follow up. The workers assumed no one cared. The equipment was never taken out of service. When the injury occurred, the root cause wasn't equipment failure—it was leadership failure.

Incidents are rarely isolated. They reflect cultural patterns.

Safety leadership is the antidote to silence, confusion, and inconsistency—the three ingredients that precede most serious incidents.

# The Future of OHS Is Human Leadership

As work becomes more distributed, as hazards evolve, and as expectations rise, the OHS profession is becoming less about enforcement and more about influence. Data from multiple Canadian jurisdictions shows a growing emphasis on safety culture, supervisor competency, communication quality, and mental health—areas that require strong leadership, not just

strong policy.

Leadership determines whether workers feel safe to speak up.
Leadership determines whether supervisors feel supported enough to coach rather than command.
Leadership determines whether safety is lived or laminated.

And leadership determines whether organizations build a culture that prevents harm or one that reacts to it.

For Canadian OHS managers, embracing this leadership role is no longer optional. It’s central to due diligence, essential to cultural change, and directly tied to the real-world outcomes that define safety success.

1. Policies create structure.
2. Procedures create consistency.
3. Training creates knowledge.

But leadership—steady, human, respectful leadership—is what turns all of it into action.