Why Your OHS Dashboard May Be Giving Leaders a False Sense of Safety

A green dashboard can be dangerous, not because the numbers are necessarily wrong, but because they may be incomplete. A company can report zero lost-time injuries while near misses are rising, corrective actions are overdue, inspections are finding the same hazards, and workers have stopped reporting concerns because they don’t believe anything will change. That’s not excellent safety performance. It’s an incomplete picture presented as confidence.

Many OHS dashboards are built around what’s easy to count: injuries, claims, days lost, inspections completed, training completed, toolbox talks delivered, and forms submitted. Those figures have value, but they don’t automatically prove that risk is controlled. A dashboard that measures safety activity but not control effectiveness may reassure leaders while exposing workers to unresolved hazards.

A safety dashboard should help leaders ask better questions. Where is risk increasing? Which controls are failing? Which hazards are recurring? What work is changing? What are workers telling us? What have we corrected, and did the correction actually work? If the dashboard can’t answer those questions, it may be managing optics instead of safety.

Lagging indicators still matter, but they’re not enough

Lagging indicators tell leaders what already happened. They include lost-time injuries, medical aids, first-aid cases, workers’ compensation claims, severity rates, and incident frequency. These metrics are still important because they help organizations spot harm patterns, benchmark performance, and understand consequences. But they’re retrospective. They don’t tell leaders whether the next serious incident is already forming.

A workplace with low injury numbers may be safe, but it may also be lucky, underreporting, or operating with hazards that haven’t yet produced a serious outcome. That’s especially true in high-risk operations where catastrophic events are rare but severe. A facility can go months without a major incident while still carrying serious exposure in mobile equipment traffic, lockout, machine guarding, violence prevention, confined space work, contractor control, or fall protection.

The stronger approach is to combine lagging indicators with leading indicators and control indicators. Leading indicators show preventive activity and early warning signs. Control indicators show whether safeguards are actually working. Together, they create a clearer risk picture because they move the conversation from what happened last month to what could happen next and what the employer is doing about it.

Dashboards should separate activity from effectiveness

This is where many dashboards fail. They count activity and imply effectiveness. Training completed doesn’t mean competency achieved. Inspections completed doesn’t mean hazards corrected. Toolbox talks delivered don’t mean workers understood the risk. Policies issued don’t mean procedures are

followed. Corrective actions closed don’t mean the hazard was eliminated or reduced.

A better dashboard distinguishes between doing safety work and reducing risk. Instead of reporting only that 97 percent of inspections were completed, it should show how many high-risk findings were identified, how many were repeat findings, how many were corrected on time, and how many were verified after completion. Instead of reporting only that 100 percent of workers completed training, it should show whether supervisors verified competency for high-risk tasks, whether incidents involved trained workers, and whether refresher training was triggered by performance gaps.

The central question isn’t whether the activity happened. It’s whether the activity reduced exposure. If the dashboard can’t answer that, leadership may be reviewing effort rather than effectiveness.

Near-miss reporting belongs near the top

Near-miss reporting should be one of the most visible parts of an OHS dashboard. A serious near miss is a warning that the organization received before the worst consequence occurred. If leaders only see injuries, they’re waiting too long.

Near-miss data requires interpretation. A rise in reports may be positive if it reflects better trust and a stronger reporting culture. A sudden drop may be concerning if workers have lost confidence in the system or fear blame. That’s why the dashboard should show both volume and quality: how many near misses were reported, how many had high potential severity, how many were investigated, how many led to corrective action, how many corrective actions were verified, and how many themes repeated.

This helps leaders avoid two common mistakes: celebrating silence and ignoring weak signals. In a mature safety system,

near misses are not treated as embarrassing numbers to minimize. They’re treated as early warnings that allow the employer to prevent harm before the injury version of the same event occurs.

Corrective action aging is one of the strongest risk indicators

If an organization wants one metric that reveals whether the safety system is working, corrective action aging is a good place to start. Open corrective actions show known hazards. Overdue high-risk corrective actions show unresolved exposure. Repeat overdue actions show a failure of accountability, capacity, or resourcing.

A dashboard should not simply report the number of open actions. It should show risk level, age, owner, location, and reason for delay. A low-risk administrative action overdue by five days is not the same as an unresolved machine guarding issue overdue by six weeks. Leaders should be able to see which hazards remain open, why they remain open, and what interim controls are protecting workers until permanent correction occurs.

If that information isn’t visible, the organization may be knowingly carrying risk without executive awareness. Worse, senior leaders may be reassured by an overall green score while high-risk items age quietly in the background.

Control verification should be measured

The most mature OHS dashboards don’t stop at incidents or activities. They track whether critical controls are present and functioning. For high-risk work, this matters enormously. Lockout procedures, machine guarding, fall protection, confined space controls, mobile equipment separation, violence prevention measures, chemical controls, respiratory protection, and emergency response systems must work in

practice, not just exist in documents.

A dashboard can track control verification through field observations, supervisor checks, JHSC inspections, audits, maintenance records, permit reviews, and targeted control checks. The key is to measure what matters most for the organization’s risk profile. For a construction employer, that may include fall protection planning, excavation controls, equipment inspections, and subcontractor orientation. For a manufacturer, it may include guarding, lockout, ergonomics, mobile equipment separation, and maintenance backlog. For health care, it may include violence prevention flags, patient handling controls, staffing risks, and incident follow-up.

A generic dashboard produces generic insight. A useful dashboard reflects the actual hazards of the workplace and shows whether the controls relied on to protect workers are holding.

Worker voice should appear in the data

A dashboard that ignores worker reporting is missing one of the most important sources of risk intelligence. Workers see drift before management does. They know which procedures don’t match the job, which equipment is unreliable, which tasks are rushed, which shortcuts are becoming normal, and which hazards are being quietly worked around.

The dashboard should include worker hazard reports, unresolved concerns, refusal trends where applicable, JHSC themes, inspection feedback, and recurring issues raised during toolbox meetings. This is not about turning every concern into a statistic. It’s about making sure worker voice reaches decision-makers before harm occurs.

When leaders can see that workers have raised the same concern multiple times, it becomes harder for the organization to miss the warning. It also strengthens the internal responsibility

system because worker participation becomes visible in the same governance conversation as incidents, inspections, and corrective actions.

The executive dashboard should be shorter and sharper

Senior leaders don’t need 60 safety metrics. Too much data can hide the signal. A useful executive OHS dashboard should focus on a small number of high-value indicators, including high-potential incidents and near misses, recurring hazards, overdue high-risk corrective actions, critical control verification results, worker reporting trends, training and competency gaps for high-risk work, and open regulatory orders or inspection findings.

The dashboard should also include a plain-language risk summary. Leaders need to know what the data means and what decision is required. A useful summary might say: “Pedestrian and mobile equipment near misses have increased in shipping over the past quarter. Three events involved blind corners and two involved contractor drivers. Temporary spotters are in place, but permanent traffic redesign and barriers require approval.” That is much more useful than a green box showing zero lost-time injuries.

The dashboard should trigger decisions. If high-risk corrective actions are overdue, who will remove the barrier? If near misses are clustering, what control will change? If reporting is low in a high-risk department, who will investigate whether workers trust the process? If training is complete but incidents continue, who will verify competency? If the same inspection finding keeps recurring, who owns the systemic fix?

Without action triggers, dashboards become theatre. They create the appearance of oversight without changing risk.

The due diligence value

A well-designed dashboard can support due diligence because it shows that the employer monitored risk, identified patterns, escalated issues, assigned corrective actions, and followed through. But a dashboard can also create legal exposure if it shows unresolved hazards that were visible to management and ignored.

That’s the uncomfortable truth. Better data increases responsibility. Once the organization can see a risk, it must respond reasonably. This is why dashboard design should be tied to governance. Leaders need clear expectations for review, escalation, resourcing, and follow-up. The dashboard should not merely inform them. It should require them to decide.

A strong Canadian OHS dashboard doesn’t ask how safe the organization looked last month. It asks where serious risk is building, what the employer is doing about it, and whether the organization can prove that controls are working. That’s the shift from optics to insight, from reporting to prevention, and from green boxes to defensible decisions.