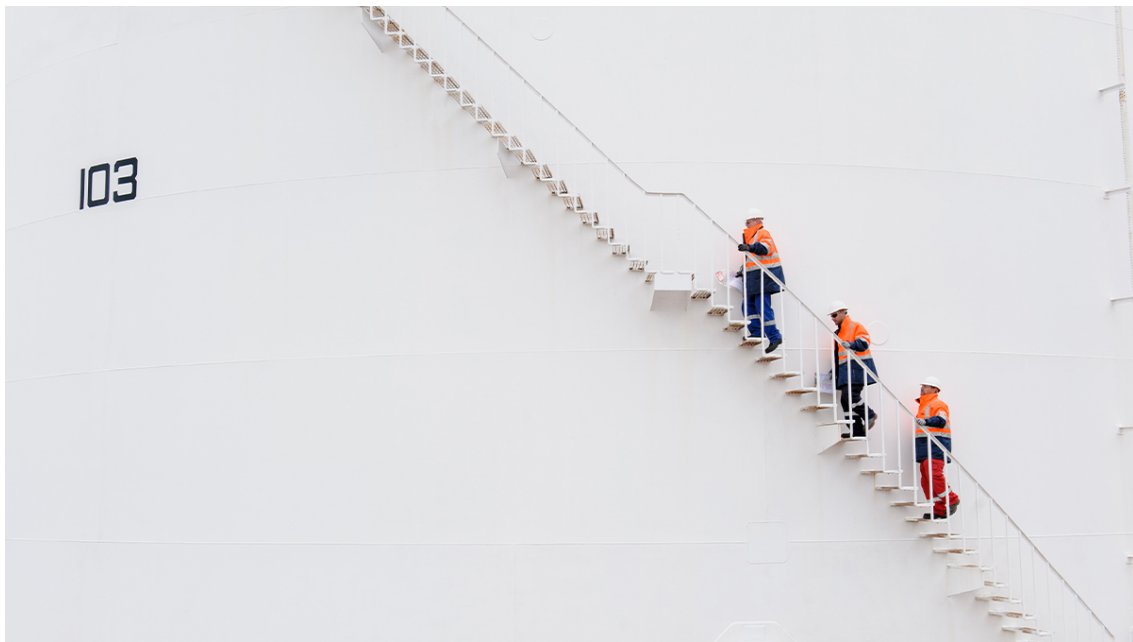


Worker Safety Needs to Be Central to Your Company's Operations

by David Michaels

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Summary. Especially in high-hazard industries, there's nothing more central to your firm's operations than worker safety. By making worker safety central to a firm's operations, not only are lives saved and injuries prevented, but there is a greater commitment among the... [**more**](#)

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To some employers, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is best known for its surprise inspections, checking to see if an establishment is complying with the agency's standards, and issuing fines when it fails to do so. But to the firms who build and maintain the U.S. power grid — the nation's electrical transmission and distribution infrastructure — OSHA has become a partner in a collective enterprise that has prevented hundreds of serious injuries and saved dozens of lives.

The hazards facing the workers who construct and repair live electrical lines, often at great heights or even while hanging from helicopters, are enormous. Following hurricanes or other disasters, many work very long hours, often far from home, increasing their risk of injury. Following Hurricane Ian in September 2022, for example, more than 44,000 workers from at least 33 states were temporarily relocated to Florida to help bring power back to the more than three million people whose homes had gone dark.

Twenty years ago, the electrical transmission and distribution construction industry was struggling to control injuries and fatalities caused by exposures to workplace hazards and, for that reason, OSHA had placed the industry squarely in their crosshairs with respect to enforcement. In 2002, one company was even facing criminal charges of alleged willful violations of OSHA standards following the deaths of two electrical line workers. But the problem was even larger industry-wide; in 2003 alone, of approximately 22,000 workers in the electrical construction industry, 15 were killed, and almost 6 in every 100 workers were injured on the job that year, according to an internal OSHA report.

Recognizing the need for radical change, the CEO of one contractor, MYR Group, Inc., working together with labor attorney Dennis J. Morikawa, reached out to other CEOs in the industry, and proposed that they join forces and work together to improve the safety performance of all of the firms. They also asked OSHA to join the effort. OSHA may be known for inspections, but it

applies a variety of tools and approaches in different circumstances, based on the commitment and willingness of an employer to address safety concerns. Prevention has always been OSHA's top priority: The agency's objective is to convince employers to abate hazards before an inspection, and certainly before a worker is hurt.

The CEOs also invited the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the labor union that represented workers in some of the participating firms, to join the effort. This was central in demonstrating to the workforce that their employers were serious about protecting their safety. And the CEOs brought in two key trade associations — the National Electrical Contractors Association, representing large and small contractors, and the Edison Electric Institute, representing the utility companies that own the grid and contract with the construction firms for grid building and maintenance.

Together, they launched the Electrical Transmission and Distribution (ET&D) strategic partnership in 2004. The partners agreed to focus only on safety, pledging to not use this forum to address other concerns, like competitive disputes between the firms or labor management issues. This also helped to remove concerns that this would be seen as violating antitrust laws.

The partnership first focused data analysis, best practices, and training. Their experts analyzed every injury that had occurred over the previous five years and identified causal factors that could be modified or eliminated through best practices, which included new requirements for pre-job briefings, and the required use of insulated gloves and sleeves. Training programs were developed to support those best practices. Firm-specific injury data were collected, anonymized, and analyzed, enabling continuous improvement and benchmarking. Representatives from each of the partners met frequently in teams to analyze accidents and near-misses in order to determine how to effectively prevent their reoccurrence.

The ET&D strategic partnership has grown from its original five partners to 12 over the 19 years since its inception. It has identified numerous best practices and developed and delivered training programs to thousands of workers and supervisors. OSHA estimates that the industry's average fatality rate dropped from more than 40 deaths per 100,000 workers per year before the partnership to less than four per year from 2018 to 2022. Serious injury rates have also fallen and remain a fraction of what they were before the program began.

How Senior Leaders Can More Proactively Address Workplace Safety Issues

The success of this strategic partnership demonstrates that a focus on worker safety can help a firm achieve operational excellence. Executives who share this objective can make great progress by personally embracing and communicating the importance of safety. One very powerful way to message safety is to make it an important component of hiring, promotions, and bonuses, taking care not to institute a system where managers may be disposed to underreport injuries or hazards to make their safety performance look better than it is.

Every injury, as well as the close calls where a worker narrowly avoided severe injury, should be seen as a tool for understanding why injuries occur, and should be used to develop work requirements and training programs. Workers should be encouraged to identify hazards before they cause an injury. Acknowledging and promptly abating serious hazards demonstrates the commitment of the firm and its leadership to safety.

These approaches can be applied by executives in any firm with high-hazard work practices. But the ET&D strategic partnership also demonstrates that much can be gained when the leaders of firms that normally compete can take what initially might feel like an uncomfortable first step of collaborating on safety, only to find that such a collaboration can lift an entire industry. Since the

start of the partnership, the CEOs of some of the largest construction companies in the electrical transmission and distribution industry have met in person regularly to consider what needs to be done to ensure that their workers are safe. This sends a strong message to everyone in their firms that safety is not just a priority (which can change from year to year), but a core principle of their entire enterprises.

This type of collaboration provides many additional benefits. More firms contribute data to the analytical activities, making the statistics much more robust, and enabling the firms to benchmark their performance against their competitors. More incident investigations assist in developing best practices and improving the design of training programs and safety messaging.

I have seen firms go from being leaders to laggards in workplace safety, especially when there are financial pressures to reduce costs, or when a CEO retires and their replacement embraces new priorities. The collaborative, cross-industry nature of such a partnership keeps each CEO actively involved and committed, even through leadership changes in their organizations.

The companies whose line workers repair the grid recognize that the next few years will bring more challenges. Poorly maintained electrical lines have sparked enormous wildfires, and power failures following hurricanes and tornadoes are growing in size and frequency. The changes in safety practices driven by the ET&D strategic partnership will undoubtedly prevent more on-the-job deaths and serious injuries, lessening the likelihood that another natural disaster will also lead to further personal tragedy among the industry's workers.

The lesson of the ET&D partnership for other high-hazard industries is that worker safety should be seen not as a cost but as an investment. By making worker safety central to a firm's operations, not only are lives saved and injuries prevented, but

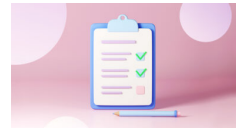
there is a greater commitment among the entire workforce, from the CEO down to the shop floor, to achieving operational excellence.

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David Michaels, PhD, MPH, is Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University. From 2009 to January 2017, Dr. Michaels served as the United States Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health, the longest serving in OSHA's history. He also served as the Assistant Secretary of Energy for Environment, Safety and Health, 1998-2001. His current research focus is on the relationship between injury, safety and health management, productivity and profitability. Follow him on X @drdavidmichaels.

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