



Ministry  
of Defence

# Safety leadership guide:

## How listening and learning are our best defence



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## Foreword

This guide has been produced for leaders at all levels in Defence. You could use it as an informal guide or a briefing sheet for your teams, or use it to develop your own material and literature (for example, a Commander's Guide).

If you develop your own version of this document, you must report this to Director HS&EP to make sure a consistent message is maintained.

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Document contact: [hsep-groupmailbox@mod.gov.uk](mailto:hsep-groupmailbox@mod.gov.uk)



‘The safety performance of Defence is influenced by our collective behaviours and leadership, and as leaders we need to communicate the safety behaviours we expect of our ourselves and those we lead. A safety culture builds slowly, but behaviours are influenced quickly through strong leadership, messaging, expectations, and examples. We call this the ‘tone from the top’.

‘At the same time we need to do more to listen and support our people. We are aiming to build an organisation where we are always learning and always getting ahead of incidents – an organisation that recognises people make mistakes, encourages learning from these mistakes and balances the impact of organisational factors against individual actions. This short guide has been written to help you lead safety from the front and to set the ‘tone for the top’ that will allow us to improve safety through learning’ in Defence.’

David King, Director Health, Safety & Environmental Protection

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## The importance of listening and learning

When an organisation is listening and learning in relation to safety, the following are true.

- Leaders support fairness, openness and learning by making personnel feel confident to speak up when things go wrong, rather than fearing blame.
- Actions and decisions are understood before they are judged, and people are supported to learn from their actions.
- People are asked for their advice to help with designing the systems that could help change things for the better.
- Those responsible for managing incidents draw on human factors (things which influence people’s actions and decisions) investigations, skills and expertise to fully understand how an incident happened, the lessons that can be learned and how to adapt in the future.

**Everybody makes mistakes.** Decisions and actions that seem irrational now probably made sense to people in the circumstances they were in at the time.

In Defence, our people are involved in some of the most pressurised and constantly changing situations it’s possible to be in. They have to adapt and be flexible in complex situations. It can be tempting to interpret mistakes as rule-breaking, or a problem with a person’s capability. However, when we blame individuals, three things happen.

- We fail to **learn** why a person made a particular decision or had to adapt a task based on circumstances.
- We put people off **speaking up** about safety and risk-related issues.
- We do people a disservice by not **supporting** them to be successful in difficult situations.

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“These people are closer to the action. They're the ones standing on the deck, feeling the vibration in their shoes. Whatever it happens to be, they're closer to the problem. They know something you don't know, and your job at that point is to make it easy for them to tell you what that is. If you want a resilient system where errors don't get propagated through the system, you really need to create an environment where it's okay for people to tell you you're wrong.”

David Marquet, US Submarine Commander

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An organisation that listens to and learns from its people is one that is constantly improving, understands that mistakes, misjudgements and the need to adapt are normal. Evidence from many industries shows that most accidents are due to errors, and are influenced by poorly designed equipment and procedures, unhelpful pressures and not preparing people for situations they find themselves in.

We recognise that the people who know the most about equipment, tasks and systems are the people who do the work. We want to encourage our people to speak up about mistakes, and the conditions that make mistakes more likely, so we can learn from them.

Within a listening and learning organisation, people still take responsibility for their actions. We tackle the workplace situations that influence people's actions and decisions, as well as supporting people to be equipped to deal with situations they find themselves in.

## Why we need openness and transparency in safety

- **It makes systems robust and resilient when it matters**

When people speak up about mistakes and conditions that make tasks difficult, we can make improvements so that systems work when they are really needed.

- **It helps personnel to be successful**  
We value the ability to adapt and need to understand what trips people up, or helps them, so their work can be successful.

- **It will help us achieve the highest possible standards of safety and effectiveness**

Evidence shows that an environment which promotes learning leads to increased reporting of unsafe conditions, incidents and accidents, and provides greater opportunities to tackle issues before problems develop.

- **It boosts motivation, morale and retention**

Being open about events, and learning from them, is associated with increased trust between all levels of an organisation, and higher motivation and morale within a workforce.

- **It will help us to take advantage of new technology**

The development of effective and innovative new technology relies on constant feedback from those who have to use it, so that potential mistakes and issues can be recognised and addressed.

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"Survival from major injury of British military personnel has improved every year since 2002. Lessons learned by the Defence Medical Services over the last decade of conflict were not just about how to resuscitate better or debride wounds more thoroughly but also how to tease out the very best human factors from the teams on the ground. Much of this evolved seamlessly by multiple personnel suggesting multiple solutions and the headquarters having the confidence to listen and allow changes to happen."

**Members of the Defence Medical Service explaining rapid improvement in treating severely injured in Iraq and Afghanistan**

### Defence Organisational Learning Strategy (DOLS)

The Defence Organisational Learning Strategy (DOLS) aims to make Defence a 'learning organisation', where knowledge and experience are readily accessible, and where learning, and passing on learning, become routine.

Defence learns best through:

- people who are open to sharing and learning from experience;
- processes that help us learn from experience; and
- tools that enable learning processes.

## What leaders can do to promote openness in safety

To make sure Defence listens to its people, and learns from safety events, you should:

- talk about how you recognise that mistakes, and the need to adapt, are normal; and
- encourage people to speak about mistakes and the conditions that cause them.

It especially matters how you respond when things go wrong, or you receive bad news.

- **Assume good intent**  
Assume that those involved are doing their best and respond without blame. When you can respond in a way that avoids blame and promotes learning, people will continue to feel confident to speak up.
- **Learn from those who do the work**  
Work with those who are most familiar with the equipment or tasks. They can help you understand the conditions that lead to mistakes or misjudgements.
- **Understand and address the factors that make mistakes more likely**  
If an incident needs to be investigated, ask what happened and why, and what can be learned. Take action to tackle the conditions that make mistakes more likely.

Below is a brief checklist that you can use to prompt responses to situations you may find yourself dealing with.

### A checklist for leaders

1. People will make mistakes.
2. People's actions are rarely malicious and usually make sense to them at the time.
3. Mistakes are typically due to underlying conditions and systems.
4. Understanding why mistakes happen can help us prevent or correct them.
5. Plant, tools and activities can be designed to reduce mistakes and manage risk better.
6. Leaders help shape the conditions that influence what people do.
7. It matters how leaders respond when things go wrong. Take the opportunity to learn

### Accountability

Taking time to learn from safety mistakes does not mean there is no accountability. We aim to continually improve and develop our processes to help with our decision making abilities and to make sure our people are better equipped to deal with situations they find themselves in.

Leaders have an important part to play in helping to identify errors, and it's important to acknowledge that you are part of a chain.

On the rare occasion that someone intends harm, normal disciplinary processes apply. However, even in these situations we have a duty to understand the conditions that influenced the person's actions. Harmful acts can result from issues that an organisation must tackle (such as frustration with dangerous equipment or a communication breakdown) or circumstances where people need support.