

# Managing the Safety of Distributed Workforces in the Rail Industry

By Mieke Jacobs, Employee Safety Global Practice Leader, DuPont Sustainable Solutions  
As published in *Rail Technology*, November 2016

**The rail industry is evolving at a rapid pace with technological advances allowing many employees to work more independently. Establishing an organisational culture in which all employees are fully committed to the company's core values and beliefs, particularly with regard to safety, is a hard enough task. Doing so when workers are spread across various locations and have little contact with supervisors adds another dimension of difficulty. In these situations, supervision that can bridge the gap between distributed workers and the company's culture is vital.**

## Impact on Safety

There are three primary aspects that affect the safety performance of a distributed workforce: distance to the company in location, time, or organisation. Each dimension complicates a company's ability to successfully achieve safety goals.

In addition to the overarching safety culture of a company, distinct subcultures can develop at individual work sites or among smaller working groups. As a result of this "location effect," safety behaviour among these groups can vary dramatically. This dilemma is particularly prevalent in the transportation industry.

A similar phenomenon can be observed among workers who are in the same location but have asynchronous communication with leadership and the organisation's larger workforce. A classic example of this "time effect" includes night shift workers who have limited personal interaction with the majority of their peers and even less with company leaders who work during "normal" business hours. Sub-groups of workers may form their own approaches to solving problems, and more alarmingly, their own individual safety behaviours.

Safety can also be negatively affected when people from different companies work together at the same location. This "organisation effect" is common among subcontractors who may bring their own cultures, value systems and objectives to the work site. Integrating them into a seamless, cooperative unit with a common safety culture can be extremely challenging.

Much more so than a "regular" workforce, distributed workers are typically not only exposed to more risk, but are also expected to recognise and respond to risk independently. Workers have to make decisions under significant time and cost pressures every single day at remote locations. A strong safety culture among these distributed workers is therefore critical.

## DuPont Sustainable Solutions

# Managing the Safety of Distributed Workforces in the Rail Industry

One essential ingredient to achieving an advanced safety culture across an entire organisation is effective leadership. Leaders have to function as role models and set an example for the entire organisation by clearly demonstrating a commitment to safety as shown in the DuPont Bradley Curve (Figure 1).

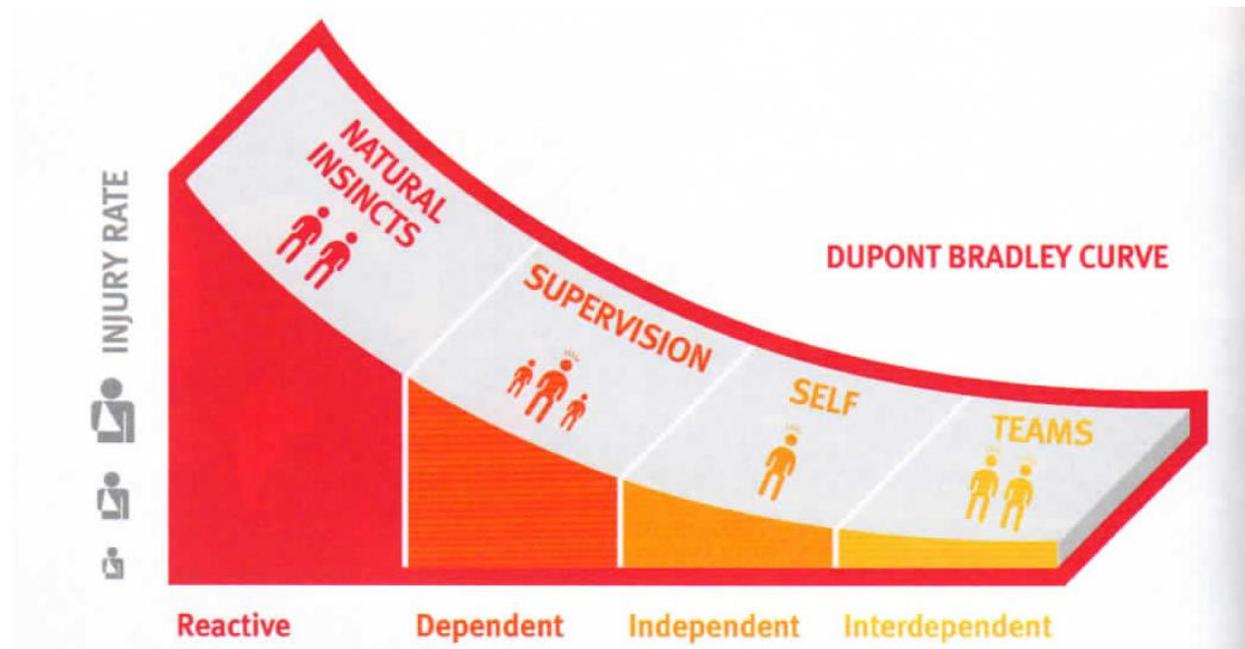


Figure 1 - DuPont Bradley Curve™

## The role of supervisors

Supervisors of distributed workforces must therefore demonstrate felt leadership despite little direct interaction. Regardless of distance, workers must perceive the presence of their supervisors at all times. Establishing clear goals, controls and a regular means of meaningful communication is essential, but adding an element of unpredictability can be very effective. Unannounced site visits or changes to a supervisors' regular routine to work a night shift can help reinforce a supervisor's presence.

Next, it is important that supervisors clearly communicate tasks and position themselves as safety role models during every interaction with distributed workers. Supervisors should establish strong rituals of risk avoidance that are clearly perceived by workers. Supervisors should also constantly challenge workers to take appropriate action if potential risks are observed and provide informative feedback every time.

## DuPont Sustainable Solutions

# Managing the Safety of Distributed Workforces in the Rail Industry

Finally, supervisors need to use emotive communication to strengthen bonds with workers, develop teamwork and improve decision-making. This can also have a powerful effect on behaviour, increase risk perception and improve judgment, and help distributed workers to associate more with the organisation's larger safety culture.

DuPont Sustainable Solutions (DSS) has helped numerous companies with large distributed workforces achieve a strong safety culture no matter where their workers are located. Achieving an effective safety culture in organisations with distributed workforces is not an elusive goal. With a better understanding of the situations in which distributed workforces operate, and by equipping supervisors with the skills to provide distributed workers with effective felt leadership, a culture of safety is both achievable and sustainable.

###