

Leading a Culture of Safety

5 essential strategies and how to put them into practice

Organizations that protect and serve children have a duty to ensure the safety—physical, emotional and social—of team members and those they serve. To do that, they need an effective culture of safety. As a leader, you are uniquely responsible for creating that culture, setting the tone and providing a positive example that everyone within your organization will follow.

Redwoods has identified five essential elements for creating a culture of safety which leaders can address when developing their organization's safety plan.

1. Develop trust and build relationships
2. Have clear and communicated safety goals
3. Educate and engage your Board
4. Implement effective performance management
5. Collaborate with external stakeholders

Together, these five elements form the foundation of safer, more impactful organizations. In this document, we explore the five elements in detail and offer actionable steps any leader can take to implement them.



Develop Trust and Build Relationships

Strong, meaningful relationships between leadership and employees are essential to ensure physical and emotional safety for all. Only when trust and respect are established can true relationships form.

When leaders practice honesty, inclusion and transparency across all levels of their organization, they demonstrate to their teams that they respect and care about them as human beings. This, in turn, builds mutual trust.

Building trust also requires leading by example. Leaders who emphasize safety-forward thinking serve as a model which all others can strive to follow. With that in mind, consistency and accountability are key. Make and keep your commitments. Hold all leaders accountable to codes of conduct. And do so across every level of the organization.

3 Steps to Get Started

1. Meet with all managers and supervisors individually, first, to learn about their needs and what they believe is important. Ask how leadership can support their success in managing their program areas. If time allows, meet with all staff to undergo the same process. This will show staff that you value their needs and opinions, while inviting them to be part of the path moving forward—which will, in turn, make them feel invested.
2. Prioritize transparency organization-wide. When appropriate, publicly share available information about safety events, responses and prevention. Hold staff meetings monthly or quarterly to provide updates on organizational goals and how you plan to achieve them. And make it clear how each program area plays an important part in the broader goals of the organization.
3. Make diversity and inclusion training available to all team members across the organization. This will build trust by making it clear that everyone is welcome at your organization, and that it's important to you that everyone is aware of—and held accountable to—your inclusion policies.





Have Clear and Communicated Safety Goals

By developing trust and building strong relationships within your organization, you're laying the groundwork for staff to "buy in" to your efforts to improve safety. But improving safety requires us to specifically define both end goals and interim milestones that need to be met along the way. It's important that these goals are clearly communicated to all levels of the organization, and that leadership demonstrates its commitment to the importance of meeting them.

This leadership commitment can manifest in many ways:

- Holding staff meetings to discuss safety priorities and goals
- Incorporating professional development goals specifically related to safety for all managers and supervisors
- Adding risk management as an agenda item during all leadership meetings
- Having your risk manager implement facility inspections regularly
- Engaging your Board in safety goals and encouraging input

When safety becomes an integral part of day-to-day operations, and is communicated in the form of clear, actionable goals, it becomes a top priority organization-wide. Relating your safety goals to your organization's vision is also a great way to develop a common purpose with your staff and demonstrate your commitment to the overall vision of your organization.

3 Steps to Get Started

1. Assess your organization's safety vulnerabilities. Before you can identify your goals around safety, you need to understand the vulnerabilities your organization faces. This includes social, physical and general vulnerabilities. We have developed [a short guide on how to get this process started](#). You can also use internal surveys, observations and conversation to establish where your organization currently stands.
2. Once you've evaluated your organization's safety vulnerabilities, you can then develop an action plan. An action plan serves as a working document that states your goals around safety, tracks the changes that need to be made in the organization, identifies action items to keep the plan moving and defines who is responsible for each action item. It will also establish a specific, detailed timeline.
3. Regularly monitor safety measures in all programming and work with program management to determine their specific safety goals and how they relate to the broader goals of the organization. We have [developed a list of questions](#) to think about to determine if you have adequate safety measures in place.



Implement Effective Performance Management

Goals are only helpful if those goals are actually met. And that's why creating a culture of safety is not a "set it and forget it" process. It requires ongoing care and attention across your organization.

As you build out your safety goals and initiatives, it's important to put in place effective performance management strategies that give leaders greater insight into the progress their organization is making. The first step in establishing these strategies is to set expectations and accountabilities. Make sure everyone understands that they will be held to the same standards when it comes to safety—directors and entry-level staff alike. When expectations are clear, errors and adverse events are easier to recognize, respond to and prevent.

Once expectations are set and shared, the next step involves removing barriers to effective action. Barriers come in all shapes and sizes, and will vary from organization to organization. They may come in the form of competency gaps among team members (removable by providing further training). Or in the form of outdated organizational processes (removable by implementing new safety-focused processes). By identifying and removing these barriers, you're making sure that everyone has the conditions, tools and resources they need to succeed.

The final piece of effective performance management is accountability. Once again, walking the walk is critical. Leaders promote accountability by modeling expected behaviors, and then holding staff accountable to the same.

Enforceability is key; accountability requires appropriate action. Develop behavioral standards in collaboration with representatives across your organization to promote and communicate expectations and accountabilities in a transparent way.

3 Steps to Get Started

1. Develop a Code of Conduct that clearly defines behavioral expectations for everyone in your organization. Be sure this Code of Conduct outlines all safety protocols and clearly explains that practices must match protocols at all times.
2. Develop an onboarding plan that includes safety expectations and provides appropriate training to address these protocols. Have a specific segment of your onboarding plan that focuses on the importance of safety and how each role and program relates to the overarching safety goals of the organization.
3. Conduct regular check-ins and performance reviews with all management. It's important to create goals together, so that they align with the broader goals of the organization. Make one goal for all management specifically related to safety. Hold them accountable by reviewing these goals at each check-in and giving them the support they need to be successful in meeting their goals.

Educate and Engage Your Board

Staff aren't the only team members you need to consider when creating and enforcing a culture of safety. Your Board will be critical too. By definition, Boards typically focus their attention on matters one or two steps removed from day-to-day operations. That includes holding the organization as a whole accountable for its performance metrics, especially those that relate to safety.

Well-informed Board members are uniquely positioned to bring a more objective perspective to organizational matters—identifying issues or uncovering blindspots that the team on the ground level may not see. Leaders can work with the Board to set direction, goals, metrics and systems of mutual accountability to ensure safety remains a sustainable focus for the organization.

Who sits on your Board is just as important as what they're tasked with. When thinking about the makeup of your Board, think first about your broader community. Representation matters. An effective Board consists of individuals who represent the larger community your organization serves. A well-rounded and diverse Board will bring a variety of unique perspectives and expertise, especially on matters involving equity and inclusion.

3 Steps to Get Started

1. Educate your Board on risk exposures, risk management, safety goals and perceived gaps, so that they have a solid starting point prior to leading improvement in the culture of safety.
2. Identify a Board member with safety and culture expertise to either lead a task force or a safety committee. This task force or committee can largely focus on safety—specifically replicating what's working in other programs and bridging the gaps that are identified.
3. Ask Board members to regularly participate in and show support for safety-related events. Helping with safety audits or attending organization-wide safety trainings are great examples.



Collaborate with External Stakeholders

Safety doesn't begin or end in the lobby of your organization. If the community around you is not safe, it's likely impossible to ensure safety within your programs or facility. That's why, along with engaging your own internal staff and your Board, it's also important to enlist the help of your surrounding community—including collaborations with organizations that share a similar mission.

As with any successful collaboration, it's important to make the most of relative strengths and weaknesses of each participating entity. Understand the expertise or insights you bring to the table, but also recognize where other organizations or individuals may have more experience to offer. For example, work to develop relationships with organizations that enjoy strong connections to specific demographics or groups within your community that you'd like to reach.

3 Steps to Get Started

1. Developing new social impact programs brings new risks. Collaborate with other organizations who have the expertise in those risk areas. For example, one community organization worked with Children's Health to create the curriculum for swim lessons given to residents of apartment buildings in Dallas, because the team at Children's Health had a better understanding of the specific challenges faced by this group.
2. Build your network. Reach out to other youth-serving organizations throughout the country that may have addressed similar safety goals or initiatives. Learning from others can give you ideas and create building blocks for you to move forward with your own goals. Collaboration doesn't have to be related to a specific task—remain open, talk to other organizations and join the conversation.
3. Think beyond non-profits and community groups. Local authorities, for example, can be a valuable resource. Working with your fire department to develop an effective emergency action plan can be a great way to improve your preparedness.

Final Thoughts

Creating, nurturing and promoting a culture of safety within your community organization takes effort, but the results are well worth it. By addressing these five essential elements, you'll be well on your way to leading your organization to a safer, more impactful future. Try starting with the actionable steps we've outlined in this document, and remember you don't have to do it alone. Look to your team of committed, mission-driven individuals to help you along the way. A culture of safety takes all of us.

Redwoods is committed to helping organizations like yours deliver on their missions to safeguard children and communities. To discover more safety resources please visit us online at redwoodsgroup.com/safety-resources. Our library of tools, guidelines, videos and other materials are created to make it easier for your organization to serve your community.