

# The Whack-A-Mole Model of Safety Management

Some companies have a unique approach to safety: the blame game. One person is designated the safety “officer” and becomes responsible for every safety-related event that happens in the company. This approach usually results in a management response along the lines of, “Why did you let this happen?” This is also known as the Whack-A-Mole Model of Safety Management, named for that silly carnival game where you take a mallet and hit the mole every time its head pops up.

When the Whack-A-Mole Model is applied to safety, little or nothing positive gets accomplished except for a great deal of finger-pointing. And when that happens, people become less likely to step forward and instead expend more energy figuring out ways to not get caught.

Fortunately, the industry is moving away from the Whack-A-Mole Model to one where no one central safety person shoulders the responsibility for everything that goes wrong. We are instead seeing a trend where every company department becomes responsible and is held accountable for policing itself.

The Safety Manager is no longer the traffic cop. He or she is responsible for safety resource management, with support from the CEO/accountable executive. The safety manager becomes a facilitator, coordinator, event analyzer, trainer, and measurer of the company safety and health management process.

To succeed, this new philosophy toward safety management requires an appropriate company safety culture. You might ask, “How do I know that my company’s safety culture will ensure success?” The following four elements are key:

- An informed culture: Employees understand the hazards and risks involved in their area of operation and work continuously to identify and overcome threats to safety.
- A just culture: Errors must be understood, but willful violations cannot be tolerated. Employees know and agree on what is acceptable and unacceptable.
- A reporting culture: Employees are encouraged to voice safety concerns, which once reported are

analyzed and followed up by appropriate action.

- A learning culture: Employees are encouraged to develop and apply their own skills and knowledge to enhance organizational safety. Employees are updated on safety issues by management. Safety reports are communicated to all employees so that everyone learns the lessons.

## Organizational Safety: From the Worst to the Best

I hate to say it, but you’re not out of the woods yet as the type or character of an organization also greatly affects the success of its safety culture. To help you evaluate how your company’s makeup could affect safety, below are five company types and the resultant affect on safety. Where is your organization along this journey? Honestly? Can your safety culture be improved?

**Pathological:** The organization cares less about safety than about not being caught.

**Reactive:** The organization looks for fixes to accidents and incidents only after they happen.

**Calculative:** The organization has systems in place to manage hazards, but the system is applied mechanically. Employees and management follow the procedures but don’t necessarily believe these procedures are critically important to their jobs or the operation.

**Proactive:** The organization has systems in place to manage hazards. Employees and management have begun to believe that safety is genuinely worthwhile.

**Generative:** Safety behavior is fully integrated into everything the organization does. The value system associated with safety and safe working is fully internalized, almost to the point of invisibility. Arriving at the generative stage of this evolutionary process is the ultimate goal.

Your company most likely lies somewhere between the Whack-A-Mole Model and nirvana (as described in the generative organization). If you’re really brave, ask your employees in a confidential survey what they think about your company’s approach to safety. That will be a sure sign of how much work lies ahead.