

The background is a solid dark blue. On the left side, there are several large, white, curved, abstract shapes that resemble stylized wings or a modern logo. These shapes are layered and curve upwards and to the right, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Going beyond compliance: Safety leadership in the boardroom

Dr Kirstin Ferguson

Safety leadership



While there are many models of safety leadership available for organisations to understand how to improve safety cultures and safety outcomes, most personal safety leadership behaviours are designed for supervisors and managers working in the field.

Yet board members, by the very nature of their duties and responsibilities, do not have a direct leadership role in an organisation. And many senior executives, particularly of large organisation, are located remotely and well away from day-to-day operations.

While often not involved in day-to-day operations on site, board members and senior executives have a strong influence on the tone and safety culture of an organisation through the questions they ask, the focus they place on key organisational issues and the messages they give during interactions with employees. Regrettably, the important safety leadership role of this group of senior leaders has been highlighted after recent high profile disasters such as the Pike River mine explosion and the BP Texas City oil refinery fire.



Recent research¹ has investigated the intersection of corporate governance, leadership and workplace safety to consider safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives. This research has identified four criteria of safety leadership relevant for board members and senior executives:



Vision



Personal commitment



Decision-making



Transparency

“The board did not provide effective health and safety leadership and protect the workforce from harm. It was distracted by the financial and production pressures that confronted the company.”

Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy, 2012; p. 18

¹ Ferguson, K. (2015). A study of safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives. PhD thesis. QUT.

Vision



When considering a senior leader having vision regarding workplace safety, this criterion refers to their ability to publicly articulate shared safety goals that resonate across all levels of an organisation. Senior leaders demonstrating vision will inspire others, set high standards for safety behaviours, establish safety expectations and solicit commitments to safety from others.

Practical examples:

- CEO and Chair regularly reinforce the existing company safety vision;
- the board authentically engages with employees in safety issues while on site visits; and
- the board understands the importance of, and actively supports, the CEO and senior executive team in their day-to-day safety leadership activities.

Personal commitment



Senior leaders exhibiting a personal commitment to workplace safety have a sincere, visible and genuine dedication to safety that demonstrates care for the welfare of others. Senior leaders with a personal commitment to safety exemplify a positive attitude to safety in the workplace, role model safe behaviours and help solve safety issues on behalf of employees.

Practical examples:

- commitment to safety included in board charter;
- company safety vision is communicated regularly and widely; and
- the concept of 'safe production' is confirmed by the board and communicated widely with board decisions made which are consistent with that message.

Decision making



With respect to board, safety decision-making involves promoting sound assessment of safety issues while also providing an opportunity for open communication between all levels of an organisation. Senior leaders promoting decision-making ensure safety concerns are heard and employees are included in the safety planning process.

Practical examples:

- a board committee is established focused on safety;
- there is regular, robust and meaningful safety reporting to the board; and
- senior executives are encouraged by the board to think strategically about safety and not just as a source of statistical analysis.

Transparency



In the context of the board, transparency involves being open to scrutiny of safety performance through monitoring and communicating the effectiveness of safety initiatives. Senior leaders demonstrate transparency through formal and informal communications which celebrate safety successes, as well as openly communicate safety challenges as they emerge.

Practical examples:

- ensure consistent and comparable range of lead and lag indicators are reported and disclosed to stakeholders;
- develop open communications with other companies to develop best practices in safety; and
- include team safety performance with an executive remuneration system.

Further reading

Ferguson, K. (2015). A study of safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives. PhD thesis. QUT. A copy can be accessed online [here](#).

Additional white papers can be downloaded from www.kirstinferguson.com :

- Safety governance and safety leadership for board members and senior executives
- Practical actions for safety leadership : Safety governance frameworks for boards
- Going public on safety leadership : Best practice safety disclosures for annual reports & CSR reports

About Dr Kirstin Ferguson



Dr Kirstin Ferguson is a business leader, company director, keynote speaker and author. Sitting on a range of company boards across a variety of industries since 2008, Kirstin has extensive experience as a non-executive director, Board Chair, Remuneration Committee Chair and Nominations Committee Chair.

During her executive career, Kirstin was the CEO of an international consulting organisation working in health and safety as well as a senior executive of a large corporate law firm. Kirstin began her career as an Officer in the Air Force. Kirstin has a PhD, Bachelor of Laws (Honours) and Bachelor of Arts (Honours).

Kirstin's PhD research was focused on safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives and was awarded the QUT Colin Brain Corporate Governance Fellowship as well as the Eric Wigglesworth Medal from the Safety Institute of Australia for her research contributions. Kirstin is an Adjunct Professor at the QUT Business School.