

Member Communication Experience

Why ‘Zero-Injuries’ Is A Misguided Safety Goal And Where You Should Focus Instead

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For years, our industry has upheld the noble pursuit of “zero injuries” and pursued it as our north star. The mantra is ingrained and subconsciously slips into conversations, planning sessions, and motivational speeches. It’s in our physical environment too. We proudly post it at entrances, stitch it to vests, and sticker “ZERO” on our hard hats. But let’s be candid: Asking for zero is asking for perfection, which is unattainable because people are inherently fallible. We make mistakes. All of us slip, trip, and fall sometimes, despite our best intentions and efforts.

I can almost hear the rebuttals through the page (or screen): “Of course people aren’t perfect, but we aren’t OK with anyone getting hurt, and who wants to work for a company that expects injuries?” Agreed, and fair point. Please do not wake up tomorrow and tell your safety director to change the entrance sign to “Taking injuries in stride since ‘85.”

But consider this: Isn’t weaving “We aim for zero” into the – sometimes literal – fabric of our companies subtly telling employees, “We aim for perfection”? To the true zero believers: If you believe zero accidents is a permanently attainable goal, are you willing to bet your workers’ comp insurance on that belief? The gospel of zero accidents and injuries was born out from a genuine desire to keep people safe. As stewards of people in what can be a dangerous line of work, it is our duty to set the bar high; however, the pursuit of zero can inadvertently create a culture of silence that encourages sweeping injuries under the rug.



The TRIR Trap

To understand why “zero” can be a trap, let’s consider how we currently measure safety success. In our industry, the primary scoreboard is total recordable incident rate (TRIR). For those who don’t live in the safety office, TRIR is a mathematical formula used to report the number of injuries per 100 full-time employees. Essentially, if you have a TRIR of 2.0, it means two out of every 100 workers experienced a recordable injury over the course of a year. It is a percentage-based snapshot of past failures.

Here’s the trap: Say your company hits a target of 0.4. Then what? You set the bar to a more ambitious 0.25. You hit it. You’re now considered world-class. But you’re still not perfect.

Do you keep pushing toward zero — toward perfection? Imagine yourself on the jobsite: As day after day your team inches closer to zero, wouldn't you hate to be the one who ruined the streak over a tweaked back? If a manager's bonus is tied to TRIR, what might cross their mind regarding a fringe injury — one that might be OK with basic first aid but probably warrants an urgent care visit (and possibly stitches)?

If we train our spotlight too much on zero, we inadvertently send a silent message: We care more about the scoreboard than the players. What is measured is managed, and if TRIR is our measuring stick, then that is the standard we will continue to reach for, even if it unintentionally undermines safety efforts. It's time for a better measuring stick.

74,000 Reasons to Pivot

For decades, safety professionals operated based on the “Heinrich's Triangle” theory — the idea that if minor incidents at the base of the triangle are reduced, then fatalities at the tip will decrease proportionally. It's a common principle: If you take care of the little things, the big things take care of themselves.

Modern data tells a different story. Preventing a trip over a cord does not necessarily reduce the number of people who fall from a bridge. The hazards that cause a “recordable” injury are often fundamentally different from the hazards that cause a fatality.

Data on U.S. workplaces from the Bureau of Labor Statistics illustrates this disconnect. From 1992 to 2024, TRIR dropped 75% from 8.9 to 2.3. Over the same period, fatalities only fell by 18% from 6,217 to 5,070. If Heinrich were right, the number of fatalities in 2024 would have been 1,600. Expanding that logic back to 1992, almost 74,000 people would have gone home to their families who instead became workplace statistics.

In other words: Although we are reaching world-class TRIRs and better managing the little things, the big things remain.

Three Things to Do Right Now

There is no single way to pivot away from the traditional zero goal, but here are three considerations to help you move the needle, plus tangible “springboard tasks” you can implement quickly.

1. FOCUS ON SIF PREVENTION AND HAZARD MITIGATION

Rather than obsessing over the total number of injuries, we must retrain our spotlight onto the proactive mitigation of serious injuries and fatalities (SIFs). Think of your safety energy like a budget. You likely say “no” to three good projects to say “yes” to one that keeps operations running. That is just good business. We need to bring that same pragmatism to safety.

We have a finite amount of human capital, the focus and energy of our crews. If we focus on an all-encompassing “zero,” we spend a disproportionate amount of that precious budget on the small stuff. In practice, this means shifting focus toward energy-based safety. A high-energy interaction with heavy equipment is far more likely to result in a SIF than a low-energy incident. Rather than asking for zero injuries, we need to shift our energy to a goal of zero SIFs.

This isn't about shelving minor injuries until the “big ones” are cured; it's a recognition that SIF prevention is a persistent, proactive discipline of hazard control, not a finish line we cross once and walk away from. People make mistakes, and we must ensure our systems are robust enough to handle those mistakes without catastrophic outcomes.

Approach your safety strategy with strategic discipline: Allocate your focus proportionate to the potential severity of the hazard. We still care about every injury, but we prioritize the controls that prevent life-altering events.

The springboard:

Take your last three years of injury and near-miss data. Evaluate the potential rather than the TRIR. Ask: “Regardless of the outcome, which of these could have resulted in a SIF?” Focus your next safety committee on those potential SIFs.

2. MEASURE THE PRESENCE OF SAFETY, NOT THE ABSENCE OF ACCIDENTS

Imagine your worksite has hit a milestone: three years without a recordable injury. That number provides comfort and pride, but it may be a dangerous illusion. Research confirms there

is no statistical correlation between a low TRIR and the absence of a SIF. History is full of organizations that suffered catastrophes on the heels of their longest injury-free streaks.

Looking back at yesterday is insufficient to understand our risk tomorrow. We need leading indicators that measure the presence of safety, not just the absence of incidents. This includes things like near-miss reporting (are we hearing about close calls?), safety improvement suggestions (how many hazards are identified and fixed before tasks begin?), and stop-work authority (are people psychologically safe enough to use it?).

These key performance indicators (KPIs) are messier and more human than a “clean” TRIR. But to measure safety culture, which is the strongest predictor of performance, we must measure things like trust and willingness to speak up. These metrics measure engagement and what is actually going on at our worksites. With leading data, we can make meaningful improvements before someone gets hurt rather than relying on a lagging (and potentially misleading) zero.

The springboard:

Evaluate or launch a near miss/good catch program. If you have one, audit the reports for quality rather than just counting submissions. If you don’t, talk with leadership about starting one and defining what it should look like. In either case, treat a high volume of reports as a victory for engagement and trust, not a sign of failure.

3. DON’T LET DATA SPEAK FOR ITSELF

Data is a character in your company’s story, but it is often an unreliable narrator. As you move toward transparency and engagement increases, your reported incident numbers may go up. Do not let this “bad” number speak for itself without context. Stay disciplined and calm; help your leadership avoid a knee-jerk reaction when the data doesn’t look as expected. If you panic or punish when numbers rise, you will instantly kill the trust you’ve worked so hard to build and drive your team back into a culture of hiding.

When reporting your data, address any jumps in incidents up-front and frame them through the lens of your cultural shift. An increase in low-severity or “fringe” injuries is not a failure,

nor does it signal that your site is suddenly less safe. Rather, it is an indication that your culture is improving and things previously hidden are coming into the light. Remind your team that the scoreboard looks different because you are trading the illusion of perfection for the reality of a safer, more informed workplace. After all, the goal isn’t to have nothing to report; it’s to have nothing to hide.

The springboard:

At your next all-hands, recognize an employee who reported a fringe injury. Thank them for the transparency. Show your team that you value the information more than an unbroken streak.

Using the North Star as Intended

Acknowledging the impracticality of zero injuries is not a concession of defeat. It is a shift in perspective to a more pragmatic approach to safety, because to err is human.

In navigation, the North Star is not a destination; it is a bearing. A sailor doesn’t try to reach the North Star in the same way they do not try and reach a lighthouse. Rather, they use the fixed light as a reference to safely navigate the shoreline. If you sailed to a lighthouse, you would crash upon the rocks. Similarly – and in our industry, literally – if we “sail” toward zero, we too may crash upon the rocks.

Embrace zero as your safety bearing. Keep it in sight to ensure you are navigating effectively, but do not fixate on it so much that you lose sight of the biggest hazards right in front of the ship. 🦋



About the Author

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