

# Fostering a positive safety culture



Learning from the experience of other high-risk industries, the EU Agency for Railways has developed a Safety Culture Model to support the embedding of safe practices within the European rail sector, as Programme Manager **Grégory Rolina** explains to **Nick Kingsley**.



Few would argue that the rail mode does not merit its reputation as the safest mode of surface mass transport, but that enviable position has only been achieved by an unstinting commitment to improvement. Today, this increasingly means that organisations across the rail sector are adopting an inclusive approach to a 'safety culture', rather than seeing safety as a series of rules and regulations to be 'bolted on' to their business-as-usual activities.

In Europe, this shift in emphasis was formalised in 2016 when an article on Safety Culture was included in the Railway Safety Directive EU 2016/798. The European Union Agency for

*ERA hosted a safety leadership training event at its Valenciennes headquarters in January 2020 to support the roll-out of its safety culture model.*

Railways was then able to establish a dedicated Safety Culture Team and develop a programme to support railway companies and authorities from the member states.

This multidisciplinary team is led by ERA Programme Manager Grégory Rolina, who has brought extensive experience of safety culture development from high-risk industries, having previously worked at the International Atomic Energy Agency. From the outset, it was clear that it would not be enough for European railways and policymakers simply to agree upon a widely accepted definition of safety culture; a much broader framework would be required. With

this in mind, Rolina's team has been working to finalise a Safety Culture Model for the sector.

### Defining culture

Such a model could only be developed in a highly collaborative manner, he explains, integrating expertise from within the rail industry and from outside. This was especially important when assessing human factors and organisational culture, both of which have a significant bearing on the successful adoption of a safe working environment. ERA has undertaken a series of benchmarking exercises looking at other industries. It has also worked with ICSI, France's Institute for an Industrial Safety Culture.

A task force was established to inform the development of the model and engender a sense of industry 'buy in', bringing together representatives from a diverse set of bodies across the European rail sector.

Following the initial development phase, ERA's model was subjected to rigorous testing through several member states' National Safety Authorities, which integrated the model in their supervision activities. A full independent assessment was also carried out at one railway operator.

The resulting European Railway Safety Culture Model was formally launched in 2019 and is available on the ERA website. It is currently being translated into 24 languages. As Rolina explains, the model essentially looks at safety culture in the two halves of the phrase: culture and safety.

Organisational culture is notoriously

*Launched in 2019, the European Railway Safety Culture Model is now being translated into 24 different languages.*

difficult to define; it can perhaps best be viewed as 'the way things are done here'. In its model, ERA has set out a series of what he terms 'cultural enablers' that set out the factors influencing shared ways of acting and thinking. These include training programmes, dissemination of best practice, formalisation of processes, and reinforcement of standards by the leadership.

'The key issue here is that you can't just press a button and enact cultural change. We recognise that most organisations are slow to change,' Rolina explains.

The safety half of the model, meanwhile, is based around four 'fundamentals':

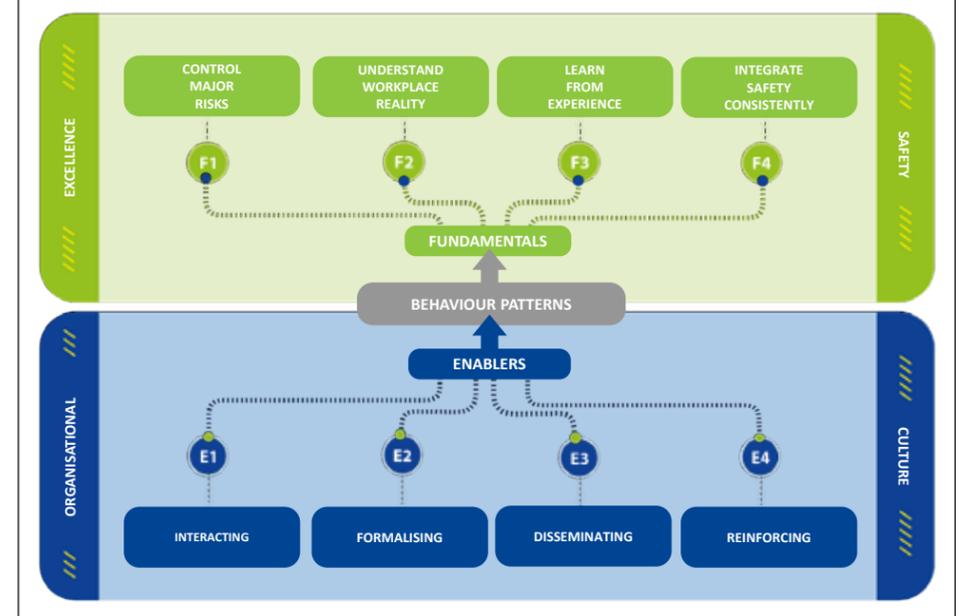
- control major risks;
- understand workplace reality;
- learn from experience;
- integrate safety consistently.

Rolina is especially keen to emphasise the last point. 'Safety culture must be embedded within an organisation; it cannot just have its own floor in the building, so to speak. These four fundamentals have to be part of a consistent safety vision, promoted by the leaders and shared by all staff.'

Buy-in for ERA's safety culture programme was catalysed by the 2018 European Rail Safety Summit, where more than 150 rail industry leaders signed a European Railway Safety Culture Declaration, expressing their willingness to change their organisations' culture and committing themselves to become influential safety leaders.

Since the model was launched last year, there has been encouraging uptake. However, Rolina is keen to point out that adoption of ERA's model is not mandatory, explaining that there were a number of railway markets where advanced work was already underway on safety management and culture development.

### European Railway Safety Culture Model



Nevertheless, the model is being used successfully for safety culture assessment and to identify areas for improvement. Spanish infrastructure manager ADIF and Austrian incumbent ÖBB are already implementing the model in their cultural change programmes. In addition, ERA is working with CER on a pilot peer review of safety culture within large European operators. Borrowing from practices developed for the nuclear industry, such a review should in particular assess the companies' openness to criticism and enhancing the maturity of their approaches to safety issues.

### Leadership and safety

To augment the safety culture model, ERA has designed Safety Leadership Training and 'train-the-trainer' programmes; these have already been trialled by companies as diverse as Thalys, VR Group, Iarnród Éireann and Ermewa. Having garnered feedback from the trials, in which more than

150 railway staff participated, ERA is now able to offer both programmes as chargeable services. Among the features of the leadership training is a film portraying an accident broadly based on historical events. Over the course of the day, the trainees are encouraged to respond to the sequences of the video. At the end, each leader is expected to produce their own personal safety improvement plan, which they then take back to their workplaces. 'We are creating a community of skilled safety people,' Rolina emphasises.

**150**  
rail industry leaders committed themselves to become influential safety leaders at the 2018 European Rail Safety Summit

Looking ahead to the European Year of Rail in 2021 (p20), ERA and its taskforce partners are assembling a European Rail Safety Climate Survey and seeking responses from professionals right across the industry. This broad-based exercise should give the agency meaningful insight into the status of safety culture within European railway companies and highlight areas for improvement. Participating organisations will receive detailed feedback based on the replies given by their employees.

'We are convinced that this survey will create a pull effect to implement the model, create the necessary communication and internalise safe behaviours, which will in the mid-term contribute to enhancing safety in railways,' Rolina explains. The survey is to be launched formally at the European Rail Safety Days event, which is currently planned to take place in Porto on June 14-16 2021 under the auspices of the forthcoming Portuguese presidency. 🌐

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