

# Why Safety Improvements Should Be Circular, Not Linear

## The Traditional Linear Approach to Safety Doesn't Reflect Reality

For decades, organizations have approached workplace safety through a linear improvement model: identify the hazard, fix the problem, and move on to the next issue. It's a logical, straightforward process that has produced tangible results, especially during the early stages of formal safety programs. However, this step-by-step mentality assumes a static environment—one where risks are clearly defined, systems remain unchanged, and humans behave predictably. In today's dynamic workplaces, those assumptions are dangerously outdated.

Modern industries from manufacturing to healthcare to cannabis production are constantly evolving, and so are the hazards. New technologies, shifting roles, regulatory updates, and employee turnover introduce variability that linear models often fail to account for. Safety can no longer be seen as a one-time fix; it must become an ongoing, responsive cycle.

## Safety Isn't a Destination, It's a Continuous Loop of Learning and Adapting

The idea of "achieving" safety implies an endpoint an unrealistic notion in high-risk environments. A circular model of safety improvement recognizes that safety is a journey, not a destination. It builds in feedback loops, reassessment stages, and learning cycles. This approach encourages organizations to view safety not as a checklist but as a living system that requires constant attention, engagement, and recalibration.

A circular approach emphasizes three core principles:

- **Feedback-informed decision-making**
- **System-wide learning**
- **Revisiting and reassessing safety measures regularly**

With this model, the moment you implement a change is not the end of the process but the beginning of a new cycle observing outcomes, identifying side effects, gathering input, and refining the approach further.

## Human Factors and Behavioral Variability Demand a Circular Model

One of the biggest shortcomings of the linear model is its inability to account for human variability. In real-world settings, workers don't always follow procedures exactly. Situational awareness, experience, fatigue, culture, and external pressures all influence behavior. A linear approach tends to frame non-compliance as failure or error. A circular model, by contrast, sees it as a valuable source of insight.

Understanding how and why people deviate from expected behavior can lead to smarter, more resilient safety systems. By revisiting processes and talking directly to workers on the floor, safety teams can capture real-

time data that enhances future planning. Circular safety thinking embraces the complexity of human behavior and uses it to design adaptive, people-centered systems.

## **Changing Environments and Technologies Require a Responsive Safety Cycle**

Every organization is in a state of flux. Whether it's due to scaling operations, introducing new equipment, or changing vendors, these shifts introduce new safety risks—even in well-established systems. A linear approach often lags behind, as it's based on assumptions about past conditions. A circular approach, in contrast, is future-focused and anticipatory.

In sectors like cannabis production, for example, companies are constantly innovating: new extraction technologies, packaging formats, and delivery systems all come with unique risk profiles. A circular model keeps safety professionals in constant dialogue with operations, allowing them to revise policies and procedures as changes unfold.

This is particularly critical in emerging industries where regulatory oversight may still be evolving. In these cases, a circular mindset helps companies stay ahead of compliance by actively integrating feedback from inspectors, auditors, and frontline teams.

## **Building a Safety Culture That Thrives on Reflection and Accountability**

Safety culture is not built through policies alone—it's built through shared experiences, conversations, and habits. A circular safety model promotes a culture of ongoing reflection and accountability, where everyone in the organization plays a role in identifying, preventing, and solving safety issues.

Instead of reacting to incidents, circular thinking encourages proactive discussions. Regular safety reviews, employee feedback sessions, and after-action reports are all tools that keep the circle in motion. Leaders become facilitators of learning, and employees are empowered to speak up without fear of blame.

This model fosters a psychological environment where workers feel safe to report near misses, suggest improvements, and participate in solution-building. Over time, these behaviors become embedded in the organizational DNA, making safety a shared responsibility rather than a compliance obligation.

## **Metrics for Success: What Circular Safety Improvement Looks Like in Practice**

Organizations that adopt a circular approach to safety often find that **their metrics evolve** alongside their mindset. Instead of focusing solely on lagging indicators—such as incident rates or days lost—they begin to track:

- **Leading indicators** like near misses, safety suggestions, and training completion
- **System health metrics** such as compliance with safety audits and inspection quality
- **Cultural indicators** like employee engagement and feedback participation

In other words, success is no longer defined by the absence of incidents, but by the presence of safety behaviors and learning opportunities. This creates a healthier, more transparent relationship between management and staff, and a more sustainable path forward.

## **How to Transition from Linear to Circular Safety Thinking**

Making the shift from a linear to a circular safety model doesn't happen overnight. It requires **strategic planning, leadership buy-in, and employee engagement**. Here are a few practical steps:

1. **Audit your current approach** – Identify where your safety practices are static or overly reactive.
2. **Establish feedback loops** – Use surveys, incident reviews, and observation reports to capture insights.
3. **Train leaders and frontline staff** – Educate teams about the benefits of cyclical thinking and continuous improvement.
4. **Build review cycles into your operations** – Make regular safety check-ins part of your routine.
5. **Celebrate learning and adaptation** – Recognize not just what was prevented, but what was learned.

Transitioning to circular safety requires a mindset shift from perfectionism to progress, from blame to curiosity, from one-time fixes to continuous improvement.

## **Embracing Complexity Is the Key to Safer Workplaces**

Linear models helped build the foundation of modern workplace safety, but they are no longer enough. To truly protect workers in today's complex, fast-changing environments, organizations must embrace circular, adaptive safety systems. This approach values human input, anticipates change, and prioritizes learning over perfection. It's not just smarter, it's safer, more resilient, and better aligned with how real-world organizations function.

Email: [info@cannabisriskmanager.com](mailto:info@cannabisriskmanager.com) | Phone: +415-226-4060

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