

Project

Let's Talk Safety

Bringing Safety into Systems Thinking, and Systems Thinking into Safety

Practitioner

Robin Stowell

Situation & Context

The traditional occupational safety profession is largely dominated by a reductionist risk management paradigm. This conventional approach focuses heavily on hazard identification, risk registers, regulatory compliance, and post-incident analysis. However, despite decades of effort, workplace accidents, near misses, and safety culture challenges persist, often because this framework fails to account for the complexity of real-world work environments.

With over two decades of occupational safety management consulting practice, the author of this project recognized these limitations. Frustrated with being asked to deliver interventions that complied with regulations but neglected systemic realities, the author sought to identify a paradigm shift in the safety discipline. The Level 7 Apprenticeship in Systems Thinking Practice provided the ideal platform to do this, creating an opportunity to reframe safety as "protecting yourself and others around you" rather than compliance-focused risk management.

Practitioners Involved

Robin Stowell led the project, collaborating closely with his mentor who is an experienced management consultant and practitioner of the Viable System Model (VSM). Both shared extensive backgrounds in occupational safety and human factors training. The mentor had experience delivering SafeStart, a mainstream behavioural safety program, but shared the author's dissatisfaction with linear, compliance-driven models. Through their monthly mentorship discussions, the two co-created the ConverSafe Competencies, combining systems thinking, behavioural science, and practical safety knowledge.

System of Interest

The system of interest is the occupational safety environment, particularly within high-risk sectors like the maritime and offshore energy industries in Western Europe. However, the project expanded its view beyond workplace hazards to consider the broader social environments in which individuals operate. The focus shifted from traditional risk control to empowering individuals and groups to manage situational hazards dynamically, whether at work or in daily life.

This change reframes safety as protection, emphasizing agency, situational awareness, and proactive behaviours. The ConverSafe Program seeks to embed this paradigm into organizational and social systems through training and behavioural change interventions.

Approach Taken

The project applied systems thinking principles and systemic inquiry to critically analyze the contemporary safety framework. Using systems laws, Beer's Viable System Model, and Boyd's OODA loop, the author diagnosed the weaknesses of the risk management approach, such as:

- Over-reliance on risk registers (Law of Calling, Law of Requisite Variety)
- Ignorance of human behaviour in dynamic contexts (Darkness Principle, Law of Sufficient Complexity)
- Failure to adapt to emergent risks (Conservation of Adaptation Principle)

Through this lens, the project team developed a systemic alternative to traditional safety interventions, resulting in the design of the ConverSafe Competencies and the founding of the ConverSafe Partnership as a formal business entity.

Models & Insights Developed

The central output is the **ConverSafe Competencies Model**, a set of eight behavioural intervention points designed to enhance protection capabilities:

1. **Read Yourself** – Recognizing and controlling emotional and physical states.
2. **Read Others** – Using social awareness to identify potential dangers.
3. **Read Around you** – Purposeful observation of the local environment.
4. **Recognise Hazards** – Identifying the energy and impact that can do harm.
5. **Read the future** – Practicing anticipatory thinking and scenario planning.
6. **Stop Yourself/Stop Others** – Intervening when risks escalate.
7. **Recognise Habits** – Building protective behaviours into automatic routines.
8. **Read Close Calls** – Reflecting on near misses to reinforce learning.

The model superimposes these competencies onto Boyd's OODA loop, integrating real-time perception, decision-making, and action with both individual and social behavioural factors. Additionally, Sylvestre's concepts of inattention states (rushing, fatigue, frustration, complacency) were extended to include modern distractions like alcohol, drugs, and mobile phone use.

From an organizational perspective, the Viable System Model (VSM) was used to design the ConverSafe Partnership structure. It incorporates five national language-based operational elements (UK, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy) to deliver culturally adapted, conversational training experiences.

Key Interventions

Key interventions included:

- Creation of the ConverSafe Partnership, a UK-registered LLP with Associates across Europe.
- Development of a Training Handbook emphasizing conversation-based delivery rather than presentations or compliance checklists.
- Establishment of a Training Assurance System, including self-assessments, audits, and external validation (e.g., RoSPA certification).
- Creation of a business intelligence system for client and associate recruitment, balancing supply and demand for training missions.
- Implementation of a Missions Control framework using SharePoint and Office365 to manage delivery, learning, and organizational coordination.

Strategically, ConverSafe positioned itself to challenge SafeStart and other legacy safety training providers by emphasizing protection over compliance and delivering nationally adapted, systems-based training.

Reflections, Afterthoughts & Further Work

The project successfully exposed the systemic flaws of the current safety industry and offered a viable, ethically grounded alternative. However, shifting the safety profession's mindset from "safety" to "protection" remains a significant challenge. Cultural inertia and regulatory pressures keep organizations locked into traditional metrics and processes.

In the medium term, the ConverSafe Partnership plans to expand its associate network and may need to develop recursive organizational structures to manage growth. In the long term, the potential exists to extend ConverSafe beyond Europe and explore new markets while maintaining the balance between commercial viability and systems integrity.

This project has demonstrated the emergence of *Systems Thinking Safety Practice* and the autopoiesis of the ConverSafe Partnership.

The ultimate learning is clear: you cannot eliminate risk, but you can develop competencies to better protect yourself and those around you; both at work and in life.