

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF DREDGING SAFETY, ONE PROJECT LAUNCH MEETING AT A TIME

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ABSTRACT

One of the surefire markers of a company's transition from a traditional to a transformative safety culture is the comprehensive embedding of safety into its operations. Redesigning project launch meetings as cross-stakeholder events is an integral component of this journey to sustainable safety excellence. Focusing not only on technical specifics, but also on leadership expectations for the safety culture of the project is essential.

This paper will present a case study from a best-in-class dredging company that identified the need for revamping its project launch meetings. This decision was based on unfavorable incident rates and trended injury data. It will highlight the shortcomings of traditional project launch meetings and identify the characteristics and processes of building comprehensive, cross-stakeholder assemblies, laying the groundwork for project-wide safety accountability. In addition to providing guidance on how to plan, conduct, and follow up on re-invented meetings, the paper will detail how to scale meetings for various size companies and suggest how to measure their lagging and leading impacts on safe operations.

Keywords: Dredging, safety, culture, construction, operations, project launch.

INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing quest to fully integrate safety into operations, redesigning project launch meetings has proven to be an excellent initial place for companies to set safety culture expectations. It is a way for entire project teams to be on the same page regarding safety prior to performing any work.

As with any long-distance race, it's imperative for a project's success to have a solid start. Through careful research and study, we have seen great success across multiple industries through their careful planning and execution of cross-stakeholder, participative project launch meetings.

Launch meetings are essential for finding a project's safety voice and ultimately empowering all members—from senior leadership to new hires to subcontractors—to be equally empowered in using that voice.

SHORTCOMINGS OF TRADITIONAL PROJECT LAUNCH MEETINGS

We are in no way critical of traditional project launch meetings, because we all must start somewhere. However, the biggest shortcoming is their tendency to have an autocratic approach. They are often led by a safety professional or project management team member who delivers the dreaded "death by PowerPoint." The meeting is primarily about conveying necessary content in an agreed-upon amount of time instead of engaging in active learning for the project participants.

Reading PowerPoint slides verbatim prevents relationship building and frankly causes people to shut down and tune out. The emphasis on information delivery sets up a Manager to talk *at* employees about safety instead of *with* them, preventing employees from influencing the direction of the safety message during the meeting. Addressing safety conversations in this way builds passivity in employees instead of dynamism. The difference is a room full of people who *know* what Job Safety Analysis (JSAs) forms are and people who plan to *use* JSAs to actively identify and mitigate hazards when planning and executing their work.

Additionally, allowing the meeting's facilitators to dominate the content delivery through a traditional classroom approach leaves no room for the participants (the crews that will actually be performing the work) to voice their concerns, ideas, and opinions on how to complete the job safely and efficiently. We have heard the rebuttal that "crews are just going to complain whenever they get the chance." This is true only if there is no safety

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feedback/comment process in place for employees to raise concerns. By allowing employees to raise their concerns early and often, beginning at the project launch meeting, you set the stage for a continuous safety feedback loop that stands a good chance of sustaining itself throughout the duration of the project.

Traditional project launch meetings have often billed safety as first priority, but everyone knows that production usually takes precedent. There can be a tendency for project management to treat safety as something they have to “get through” in order to focus more on the operational aspects of the meeting. As you will learn later with our proposed updated approach to project launch meetings, letting safety take a seat at the table as an equal partner to production allows safety professionals and project management alike to work toward the same goal—a safe, efficient project delivered on time and within budget.

Finally, many project management team members may not have the time to visit the field much after a project gets underway. This can be due to scheduling, logistic, and workload issues. Such managers can be largely unconnected to the project workforce for the duration. It can also give them a bad reputation if they are only able to come on the project site when there is a safety or production issue. Conversely, when all project management team members attend the project launch meeting, they have the ability to hear and recognize concerns up front and build relationships with all crew members from day one.

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL PROJECT LAUNCH MEETINGS

The most recurring observation in project launch meetings is that companies consistently expect employees to do as told, but then are at a loss when employees are not empowered to drive safety as project work heats up. Clarifying the message about when to follow the guidelines as discussed and when to own decision-making is essential to achieve the safety improvements you seek. This must be addressed at the beginning of a project.

The project launch meeting is the opportune time to bring together all project stakeholders. This includes administrative staff, project managers, company leadership, safety personnel, Union representatives, crew members, subcontractors, and vendors. All are equally important to the success of a project, so all are equally important to be in the room for a project launch meeting.

Characteristics of Successfully Re-invented Project Launch Meetings

Successful project launch meetings set safe operations expectations for project team members at all levels. Table 1 below illustrates a check-and-balance system that project leadership can use to ensure their team’s performance is in line with their expectations. By walking through and addressing each of the questions in the right-hand column in Table 1, project management can ensure their project launch meeting is accurately poised to address potential performance gaps before they arise.

By adhering to the framework below, you ensure the entire project team has built in performance expectations, accountabilities, and feedback loops to address performance gaps before they spiral out of control.

Table 1. Organization Factors Supporting Performance.

Organization Factor	Key Questions Related to Performance Gap
<i>CLEAR PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS</i>	Do people know what they are supposed to do?
<i>NECESSARY SUPPORT</i>	Do people have what they need to do what they are supposed to do?
<i>CLEAR CONSEQUENCES</i>	What currently happens when people do what they are supposed to do?
<i>PROMPT FEEDBACK</i>	How do people know if they are doing what they are supposed to do?
<i>INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITY</i>	Are they capable of doing what they are supposed to do?

From *Five Minutes or Five Days: Strategies for Leading, Learning, and Collaboration* by Julie Hile, Hile Group (2018). Extended from Rummler and Brache (1992, 1995).

Additional characteristics of successful project launch meetings include:

- ✓ High attendance: Meetings are well-attended by cross-stakeholder groups that will be participating in the project. Simply inviting them is not enough. They must show up!
- ✓ Well-articulated goals: Meeting presentation reflects the goals that are articulated at the beginning. It's imperative that all meeting content ties back to one (or more) of the agreed upon goals. When developing content for project launch meetings, it's important to determine relevance to all parties in the room. If a topic doesn't apply to the full group in the room, consider saving it for smaller sub-group meetings after the initial project launch.
- ✓ Balanced participation: Ensure the conversation is not dominated by the presenter, but rather a nice mix of content delivered by the presenter and active participation from all attendees.
- ✓ Facilitation strategies: When participants “go to town” and begin speaking up during project launch meetings, you have to know how to make the conversation meaningful. The presenter's facilitation skills need to be up and running so that the participants' ideas can turn into a momentum for owning safety. This way the presenter can adeptly connect group participation with the meeting's goals, contents, and application opportunities.
- ✓ Use of a “Parking Lot”: Note items that might be currently off-topic but are relevant to the project and note circling back to. If using a Parking Lot, it's imperative to follow up on the items listed. Not following up sends the message to employees that their questions and concerns really are not a part of the meeting's agenda, creating a mixed signal between what is said at the start of the meeting and what is modeled during the meeting.

If the Parking Lot does not contain suggestions, questions, or issues that need further attention, then either the presenter asked inauthentic questions, or he/she did not accurately record what was said. In a meeting where employees are likely looking to see how well their management's actions match their words when it comes to leadership and safety, do not underestimate the importance of participant-generated questions and comments!

If You Build Engaging Meetings, The Crews Will Come!

One of the main goals of a re-vamped project launch meeting is to make it the kind of meeting that crews cannot afford and *do not want to miss*. Through successfully planning, conducting, and following up on the meeting, you are ensuring your project is set up for safety success from day one. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, a carefully planned and executed project launch meeting will hold the attention of all participants. Note how everyone is paying attention to the facilitator—all eyes are front and not a cell phone in sight!



Figure 1. Project launch meeting led by project management team.

How to Plan

1. **Have a pre-meeting with the project management team to determine the content and structure of the meeting.** A shared facilitation strategy not only builds the skills of the management team, but it also conveys a sense of shared ownership to the rest of the project team. Knowing their leadership team is speaking with a unified voice will help the rest of the project team understand that safe production is a shared responsibility for all.

Be sure to let the project management team OWN the presentation. They will need significant time for this planning. Don't assume they can take a PowerPoint from the Safety Department and adapt it within an hour or so to be able to facilitate.

2. **During the pre-meeting, ensure the project management team reviews historic safety data from your company on similar project to yours.** What issues have been hot spots in the past and what have other projects done to successfully mitigate them? Learning from others beforehand will give your project a leg up on anticipating and mitigating hazards before any work even begins. The project management team should decide together what of this data they will share with the participants at the project launch meeting.
3. **Schedule a half day meeting.** Showing the team that you're willing to take the time up front to get it right sends a clear message about the safety mindset on the project. Be sure to accommodate shift schedules so that all crews can attend together. It's important for day and night crews to learn about the project's safety culture as a community of learners in the context of the work they're about to begin.
4. **Establish a mission and clear vision for the project's safety.** Beyond what your company may have already set forward, be sure to clearly articulate how this project's safety culture will be proactively delivered on site every minute, every day, by everyone for the entire project. Don't be shy to have a little fun here. This is a great place to get creative with ideas, logos, even slogans that are project-specific and will really help your team own their safe production for the duration of the project.
5. **Outline active facilitation of meeting content.** This means plan activities in which employee contribution is key to developing solutions that will be used during the project. Be sure to slow down the meeting and increase opportunities to hear from all attendees. Real-time solutions developed by crew members are far more likely to be the ones that stick with them. Use the expertise in the room. It's expected that the facilitators will not have all the answers going into the meeting.

Alternate between participant-focused and facilitator-centered activities. Changing up these combinations based on knowledge of your company's recent safety/ops performance and the new project will help keep meetings from feeling predictable or repetitious.

6. **Ensure representatives from senior management, subcontractors, vendors, local first responders, and any other third parties that will be associated with the project are invited, too.** Including those that aren't directly employed by your company at the project launch meeting will help set the overall project tone and convey that safe production is a shared responsibility and all will be held accountable. Plus, with first responders present you have access to a fresh perspective on your crisis management plan and can ensure they know exactly where to find you, and more importantly, an injured party, in the case a serious incident occurs.
7. **Focus on eliminating "Us vs. Them" mentality that can sometimes creep into management-employee meetings.** The meeting is not about what project management needs to tell their project employees about safe production for the project, but rather about developing a unified voice for the entire team that they will use to produce safely. Setting the expectation from day one that management, project employees, and subcontractors alike will be held to the same safety accountability standards will go a long way towards identifying and sustaining a positive project safety culture.
8. **This meeting is also your opportunity to divulge project specifics about emergency procedures, reporting, timelines, etc.** Be sure to have all of this information collected ahead of time and be ready to deliver in a concise, engaging manner.

9. **Don't forget the important logistic pieces like breaks, enticing food, stretching, stories from home, and introductions.** Learn and USE people's names and encourage others to do the same.
10. **Create handouts like graphs, charts, and familiar documents they will be using on the job.** Be prepared for participants to review, mark up, discuss, and plan to use on the project. This will not only help keep the learning active, but it will reinforce the documentation you will require on the project.

How to Conduct

1. Flip charts are highly recommended as a stealth strategy to not only keep a record of the wicked smart comments your participants are willing to make, but they will also be the beginnings of a project-specific safety culture plan that you can transcribe and use for the duration of the project. As illustrated in Figure 2 below, done right, the flip charts will become a great tool for recording meeting participants' ideas in addition to the facilitator's.



Figure 2. Project launch meeting participant actively flip charting ideas in conjunction with facilitator.

2. Complete safety briefing at all project meetings from day one. This is not only a necessity in case of emergency at an early project meeting, but it will also help set the tone that project management is serious about the safety culture of the project permeating all areas.
3. At the bare minimum, be sure to have participants identify the top three hazards and opportunities in their eyes for the project. Getting the pulse of the room on anticipated hazards and opportunities may open your eyes to previously unforeseen hazards, underscore those you thought were already important, and maybe even highlight some that you thought were going to be an issue that your team might not agree with.
4. Spread out management team within the meeting room. There is an important cue sent to employees when the Vice President sits with them at the kickoff meeting: management is part of the team, wants to build relationships with employees, knows that opportunity to sit together does not occur very often and is time well spent. Plus, in the effort of eliminating an "Us vs. Them" mentality, it's not ideal to have all managers at one table!
5. Ensure you are set up to ask open questions to participants. Questions with yes/no answers or where you expect participants to guess what answer you are thinking of do not contribute to an open, active learning environment where all's opinions are valued. Open-ended questions like "Why do incidents happen?" or "Why don't we speak up when we observe unsafe acts?" are excellent starters for bringing small group discussions to life.

6. Check that you are not getting PowerPoint heavy and are providing ample opportunities for attendees to engage in a *conversation* about safety. Remember the W.A.I.T. concept: “Why Am I Talking?” is an important question to ask yourself if you find you are dominating the conversation. See Figure 3 for the ideal mix of participant-facilitator involvement in a project launch meeting.

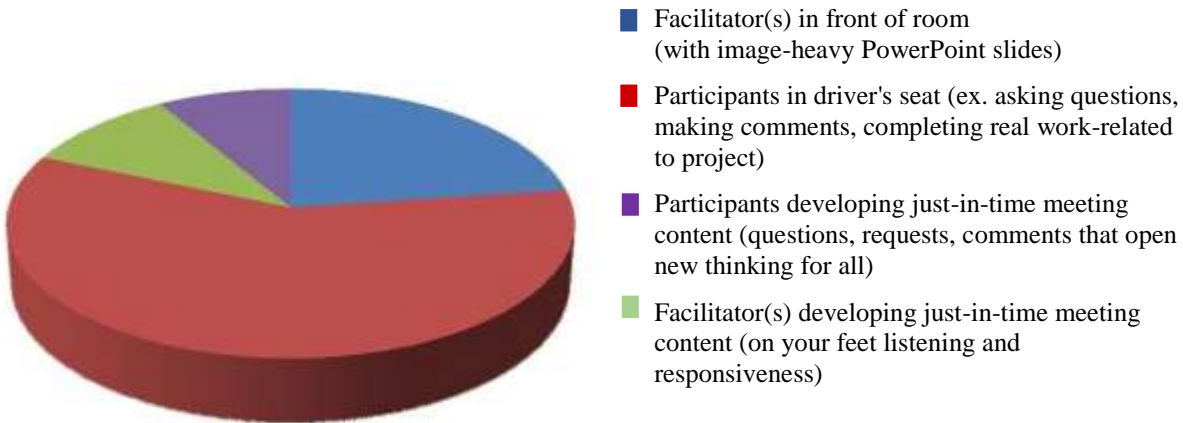


Figure 3. Ideal mix of participant-facilitator involvement in a project launch meeting.

7. “Productive is safe” and “Speak up about unsafe conditions” messages go a long way toward achieving projects with zero incidents and injuries. During the meeting, explicitly discuss going through the trouble of stopping a shift even if close to quitting time to address a safety concern because that is safer than the alternative. In other words, extending the work day a little is the safer solution than ignoring the risk and potentially working through the night to search for a body. Important that in real life, supervisors and managers on-site back up this statement when employees test it out.
8. Don’t forget to circle back to objectives. Important for you and all meeting participants to know that you are on track with where you intended the meeting’s learning to go.
9. Finally, circling back to the Organization Factors Supporting Performance in Table 1, it’s imperative that there are clear consequences for missing the meeting. It needs to be apparent that if you don’t come to the meeting you will not be allowed to work on the project until you have gone over the meeting’s content with a member of the project management team.

How to Follow Up

It’s often said that “You get what you measure.” This is definitely true of successful project launch meetings. Using Table 2 below, consider how you will gauge the success of the project launch meeting and follow up on evaluating the success of the attendees.

Table 2. Kirkpatrick's Levels of Evaluation (Kirkpatrick 1998).

Level	What measured	How measured	When measured
Level 1: Event Success	Did learners enjoy the learning? Do they think they learned something?	"Smile" sheets	At the end of the project launch meeting
Level 2: Learner Success	Can they talk about what they learned? Can they perform new skills? Is their attitude changed?	Audits, tests, interviews, self, CBT, role plays	During, at the end of the meeting, and within a month after the meeting
Level 3: Transfer Success	Are they using what they learned? Are others who are affected by their application seeing the difference?	Performance on new project; numbers related to safety, customer service, retention, cycle times; stories	3 months, 6 months, 9 months
Level 4: Impact Success	Is the system benefiting from their use of what they learned? Is there larger, global result to be seen?	Numbers related to large trends, long-term changes in service including for the duration of the project and beyond	Continuous

How to Scale for Large and Small Companies

You don't need a large budget or a large crowd for the project launch meeting to be successful. Remember it's about the quality of the content and conversation during the meeting, not about quantity.

In remote areas where you may have more transient, differently educated/experienced work-forces, remember to adapt language and approach to fit your audience. For example, if you have crew that is largely experienced in construction but not marine construction, you may need to dial back the dredging jargon and focus more on basic marine terminology to begin.

How Do We Know When a Project Launch Meeting is Successful?

The simplest way to know your project launch meeting was successful is to have a project that finishes on time and on budget with zero incidents or injuries. However, this is a traditional lagging indicator, one that can only be measured at the end of the project.

While a project that finishes with zero incidents and injuries is certainly desirable, it's important to focus on leading indicators of success along the way to ensure you are on track to that goal. A few examples of leading indicators that will tell you your project launch meeting was a success include:

- ✓ Heightened awareness of risks by all crew members, which can be measured by the number of Good Catch or Near Miss Reports received on the project.
- ✓ Employees taking care of each other. This can be measured by the quality of peer to peer safety conversations happening daily on the project and the caliber of conversation during daily and weekly safety meetings.
- ✓ Members from all areas of the project team speaking up when unsafe conditions are observed. Whether they're a new hire, a vendor, or a senior company manager, anyone on the project that is observed speaking up about unsafe conditions is a leading indicator that the project's safety culture was successfully communicated at the project launch meeting.
- ✓ Safety accountability is in action on the project site for all team members, including management. This is easily measured by the number of repeat Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or safety rules violations.

CASE-STUDY OF SUCCESSFULLY RE-DESIGNED PROJECT LAUNCH MEETINGS

Dredging Company A

In 2005, Dredging Company A began work on improvement of their safety culture, beginning with a focus on care and concern of employees at all levels for one another's safety. As a direct result of this safety culture work, you will note a dramatic drop in their Total Recordable Injury Rate (TRIR) between 2005 and 2006, illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Hile Group first engaged with Dredging Company A in 2007 and immediately identified the need for re-vamping project launch meetings as a continued step in its safety culture improvement journey. The overhaul began with auditing existing project launch meetings to determine what was strong and where there was opportunity for improvement.

The biggest area of opportunity identified was the need for there to be more active participation from the crews in the project launch meetings and for them to be less reliant on content-heavy PowerPoint slides. Through careful facilitation planning and facilitator coaching to lead re-designed project launch meetings implemented in parallel with other safety improvement efforts such as safety leadership training and safety rules revision, among others, you can see the dramatic decline in their TRIR from 2007 to 2008, also illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Dredging Company A followed the formula outlined earlier in this paper, successfully updating its project launch meetings across all divisions of the company and continues its safety journey and drive toward zero incidents and injuries today.

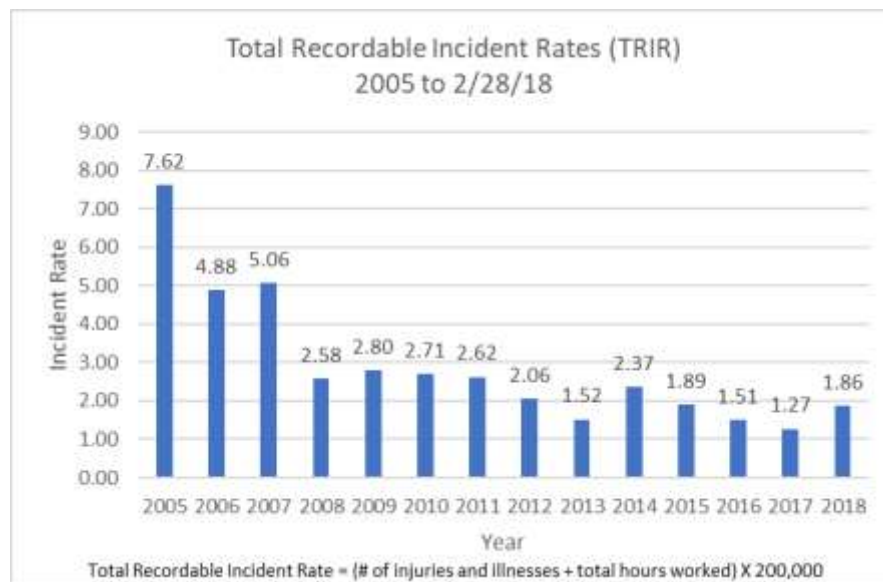


Figure 4. Dredging Company A Safety Results Pre- and Post- Re-designed Project Launch Meetings.

CONCLUSION

Project launch meetings can and should be positioned as learning events in which project leaders require participants to drive the meeting. This gives leaders a more dynamic role than that of solely information-sharing. Instead, it becomes the facilitator's job to ensure the project being kicked off has the necessary safety commitment. Leaders can also gauge participants knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as leadership and peer-to-peer relationships needed to sustain safe production.

Through cross-stakeholder, highly participative project launch meetings, the work done will generate not only strong analysis and focused plans that can be executed within the project but also meaningful data points. Company leaders can use this information to link the project launch effort to results project-wide. Ultimately, those results can take be implemented system-wide, continuously improving the ever-evolving safety culture.

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