



# Eating the elephant

How do I tackle the really  
difficult issues?

The essential elements – or chapters – of this story can be applied to any major challenge that doesn't have an obvious solution and where you aspire to lasting change:

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## This story is about...

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...how leaders go about tackling their toughest challenges – the mission-critical, 'elephant-sized' issues with no precedents or ready-made answers. Today there are plenty of them in business and in our wider society: from achieving zero waste, Zero Harm, zero infection, zero damage to the environment, through to tackling obesity, worklessness and child poverty. At the start, an elephant-sized issue seems impossible – and it will be, unless you can use the equivalent of the whole village to wrestle it to the ground.

From working closely with leaders tackling these issues, we know that breakthroughs require a different approach. You have to be curious, with a strong sense of purpose, and determined to do something bold and different – and you have to be brave, to stick with it when others question what you're doing.

We've learned that it can't be solved in a strategy session or by leaders thinking up the answers. Leaders who achieve results that no-one could have predicted involve the wider organisation and people beyond its boundaries – the people who will be at the sharp end of making the strategy work. They're also conscious of the organisational culture which shapes and can limit thinking. So they make good use of external ideas and perspectives to help break habits of leadership and culture.

Here we share the story of one company's experience, a company that is still grappling with the issue but already achieving things that seemed impossible just a few years ago. We share what we've learned from working alongside the key leaders every step of the journey so far. Not everything is new. What's different is a fresh way of thinking and acting in the absence of answers, and bringing together a range of different approaches – on risk, organisation practice, culture and leadership – to realise an ambition beyond anything achieved before.



It started with a phone call. “I’ve got a new job. It’s a big strategic issue. I don’t know exactly how I’m going to tackle it and I don’t know if you can help. I’m talking to lots of people. Will you come and see me?” On the phone was Andy Rose, a Group MD for Balfour Beatty, an international infrastructure business. He went on: “I’ve never done anything like this before. I don’t think there’s an obvious way to go about it.”

#### Conditions for success

Key words in this conversation were, “I don’t know.” Openness and willingness to explore were there from the start. There were no expectations of a fixed solution. This leader knew he needed a breakthrough, and that it would take something new and different. His curiosity was stronger than his doubts.

Balfour Beatty’s chief executive, Ian Tyler, had appointed Andy Rose to drive through a step change in the company’s safety performance. There had been sustained progress over the years, but it had plateaued. With this top level commitment, there was challenge and permission to create radical change, not just incremental improvement, to eliminate death and serious injury on all Balfour Beatty sites and workplaces. And not just for the company’s 50,000 employees, but among its 500,000 sub-contractors, too. The bold aspiration was absolute: to make the final shift to Zero Harm, and keep it there.



**“The fact is we’ve never properly challenged our industry’s assumptions about risk. No longer. I do not want this company to risk causing harm because it has not set the bar on safety high enough. So this is our goal now: we will achieve Zero Harm across all our businesses by 2012. Nothing else is acceptable. We will not risk doing harm. So we will not accept any target other than Zero. Those who work for us and with us have the right to expect nothing less.”**

Ian Tyler, Chief Executive, Balfour Beatty, 1 October 2008

#### Shape the vision

Taking up this challenge, Andy Rose proposed to set the bar even higher – to achieve Zero Harm by 2012 – within four years. This indeed was a challenging goal (“My colleagues thought I was mad at one stage”), but also inspiring. The sheer size of the shift needed to achieve it in every part of the business was enormous.

The first step was to debate the proposal with the business leaders of the operating companies (there were 26 at that time). Achieving dramatic change with a constantly changing population of over half a million people required a joint ‘leap of faith’. That meant engaging closely with company leaders in a two-way process. Along with his passion and high personal ownership of the vision, Andy Rose recognised the need to let go of it - to put it out there to the operating companies, to test its resonance and build commitment among the people who would have to make it happen. We gathered input and feedback on an early draft from every one of the senior leaders, first at a senior management conference and then individually, to make sure we heard all their views and concerns to build a shared commitment.

The result of this testing and feedback process was a complete rewrite of the vision as a compelling set of messages which clearly signalled that something different was happening. We focused on the aspiration – expressed as big, bold numbers (Zero and the 500,000 as seen on page 9) – and the outcomes – what success would look like. Supported by a strong brand, striking imagery and plain language, the vision was captured in a brochure unlike any other corporate publication. It created a buzz around a new goal that meant something to everyone.



Performance on safety was already good, providing a strong platform for Zero Harm. But the new shared goal meant a new focus on two important shifts: a shift in the culture throughout the whole organisation and a focus on the elimination of risk in every aspect of the work. That would mean broadening the way the company thought about safety, introducing entirely new ways of thinking, deepening and personalising it for everyone in the business.

Ingrained aspects of the existing culture would be challenged. The deep-down acceptance that some injuries, even deaths, were inevitable in a dangerous business would have to go, to be replaced with personal conviction, especially by every leader, that, 'I don't accept it'.

#### Conditions for success

To take safety performance to the next level, the key was to re-define it as a leadership issue. Many people think of safety as an operational rather than a strategic or leadership issue and delegate the responsibility to the health and safety professionals. Re-framing the issue meant helping all leaders across the business to think about safety in a different way – in a strategic context, and from a leadership perspective.

We helped them to reframe and refocus by using six new 'pillars' of safety leadership – leading, learning, involving, simplifying, rethinking and tracking – to make the point that safety was no longer just about safety management processes (though having the basics in place is essential). It's about creating a proactive strategy for change.

#### Safety is a leadership issue

The breakthrough came from the insight that 'the seeds of every accident are not sown at the workplace'. There are people in 'warm offices' who underestimate the impact of their business decisions on how the work gets done. That meant challenging leaders to stand back from the day-to-day and look into the business, as if from the outside. Does the way we operate, for example in the way our commercial contracts are drawn up or how the work is designed and planned or how we manage our budgets, have the unintended consequence of actually making accidents more likely? Does the usual way of doing things actually limit our ability to see the real risks? Now leaders needed to think beyond safety management to the role of risk, organisation practices and culture, as well as their own behaviour.

#### The six pillars of safety leadership

## 01 Leading

Challenging leaders to think differently about their roles in setting the tone for the rest of the organisation to follow

## 02 Learning

Ensuring lessons are learned from near misses and people seek out best practice

## 03 Involving

Inviting the wider 'village' of partners and subcontractors to share the problem

## 04 Simplifying

Making communication of rules and guidelines more accessible and user-friendly

## 05 Rethinking

Challenging and redesigning work methods to eliminate risk altogether

## 06 Tracking

Monitoring progress and sharing success.



“We don’t have all the answers yet. But we do have an incredible shared fund of knowledge, creativity and determination.... It’s going to mean doing things the industry hasn’t even thought about yet. And above all it’s going to take committed, inspirational leadership across all our businesses. We need people to apply their minds to this. But we need their hearts and their passion too. We need them to make safety personal.”

From the Zero Harm vision brochure,  
October 2008

The project had reached a point where all the operating companies supported the vision. But the experience for each one was going to be different. In fact, the dominant ethos was based on highly devolved ways of working; each business already had its own safety branding and campaigns. We had to create a strong, unifying message that bound every business together in pursuit of the shared goal.

#### Conditions for success

A standard approach – one that might have felt less risky – would have been to keep the responsibility firmly in the centre and simply give directives to the operating companies. But that would have represented a far greater risk to both the short and long-term goals of Zero Harm. It would have given a greater sense of control, but it would have failed to create the powerful personal connections and ownership that was central to the culture shift being achieved.

It was simply made clear that “if one fails, we all fail” and “failure is not an option”. There was a palpable pressure on each business to do more than they were doing already to achieve such an ambitious goal, so they welcomed help in rethinking their traditional approaches. To further reinforce the need to think differently, Andy Rose and Sally Brearley, Balfour Beatty’s Director for Safety, personally visited every operating company. “Of the myriad things we did,” Andy Rose reflects, “**continued personal engagement** with all the businesses has been one of the most crucial.”

#### Involving the ‘village’

Each business was asked to develop its own ‘journey plan’ – a roadmap to 2012 using the new ‘pillars’ of safety leadership. Creating plans focused on these new elements encouraged the business leaders to invite their wider ‘village’ – employees, sub-contractors, partners and suppliers – to share the problem and help figure out how to reach the goal of Zero Harm and sustain it. This triggered a renewed focus on safety as a priority in every business and at every level, creating real momentum for change.



“The centre has to exercise influence without oppressing the business. But what does that look like in practice? We’ve been round all the businesses several times, because what’s right for one doesn’t work for another. We’ve learned to make the case so compelling – it drives itself. And achieving ownership through influence is worth the investment of time and effort.”

Sally Brearley, Director for Health Safety and Environment,  
Balfour Beatty plc



Zero Harm made safety everyone's personal responsibility. Instead of looking to the company to take responsibility, individuals needed to take it on for themselves, through their own personal commitment, not just because it was part of their job. The business leaders had travelled from an idea to wanting to mobilise an entire organisation and beyond to include the wider 'village' of sub-contractors, suppliers and partners.

So what created the buzz that got everyone to think differently about safety? Each business had signed up to the shared challenge, and people now had to embrace it into their daily work.

#### Conditions for success

The **strong message** of the vision brochure, the unusual images and colours had provoked a new level of debate about safety. The **bold branding** helped to build ownership because it quickly gained instant recognition as a **distinctive daily reminder** of the individual and collective commitment to the goal. The message spread like wild fire.

But it was not a monolithic corporate roll-out, risking stifling the diversity of the individual operating companies. There was a gradual drip-feed of high profile events, publications and presentations following the launch of the vision in October 2008. The evidence that the businesses had taken the goal on board was in the branded vehicles, the placards and giant billboards, the badges, pens and coffee mugs that quickly followed. Wherever you went, you saw the vivid Zero Harm brand given different expression. These visual reminders and the **freedom to contribute ideas**, combined with the development of **shared personal responsibility**, created a powerful focus on achieving the goal of Zero Harm by 2012.



"Zero Harm is a shared challenge across our businesses. Yet it is the visual and mental image of the brand that generates energy and literally brings life to the vision."

Andrew McNaughton, Chief Operating Officer, Balfour Beatty plc

#### Multi-layered approach

The campaigns wove together aspirational leadership, organisational development, culture change and employee motivation, all with a clear focus on one complex and challenging issue.

It couldn't have been done this way by offering a 'one size fits all' solution. A single initiative designed at the centre would have failed to reflect the daily reality of the business, and the variations among the different operating contexts.

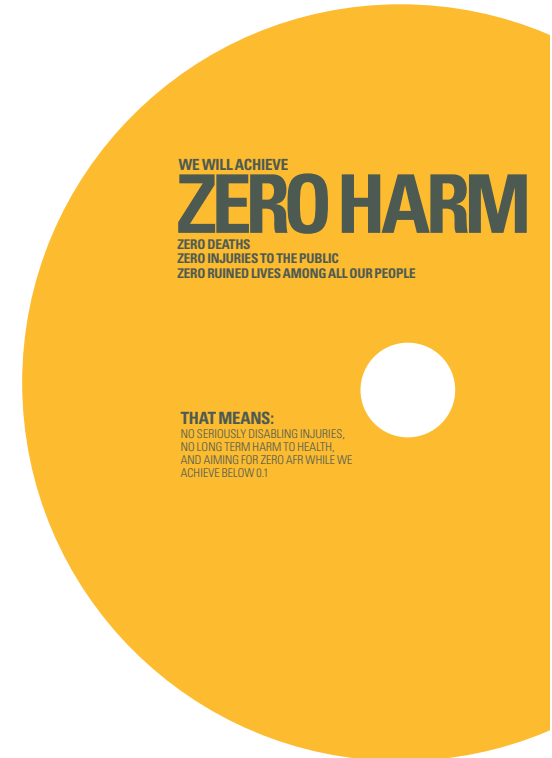
## THE GOAL

WE ARE BALFOUR BEATTY  
**500,000**  
PEOPLE

**THAT MEANS:**  
ALL OUR PEOPLE: EMPLOYED BY US OR BY ANY  
SUBSIDIARY, SUB-CONTRACTOR OR PARTNER  
WORKING ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD OVER  
THE COURSE OF A YEAR (SO IT'S 500,000 -  
AND GROWING)

WE WILL ACHIEVE  
**ZERO HARM**  
ZERO DEATHS  
ZERO INJURIES TO THE PUBLIC  
ZERO RUINED LIVES AMONG ALL OUR PEOPLE

**THAT MEANS:**  
NO SERIOUSLY DISABLING INJURIES,  
NO LONG TERM HARM TO HEALTH,  
AND AIMING FOR ZERO AFR WHILE WE  
ACHIEVE BELOW 0.1





By this stage there was an aligned group of senior leaders committed to taking Zero Harm forward. The next step was to broaden the capability among a wider group of leaders to recognise the deeper culture change required. Leaders needed to be better equipped to balance the hard technical challenges with the challenges of engaging people and changing practices. The bar had been set high by giving them accountability for Zero Harm. Now, the bar was set even higher for transformational leadership that would enable them to not only deliver, but sustain future performance.

Dialogue with leaders revealed their concern that working harder at the way they had always done it might achieve only incremental improvements. Leaders also realised that they needed more tools in their armoury to tackle the deeper cultural issues for which they were not fully equipped.

#### Conditions for success

We had to make it clear that there was a new set of expectations for leaders, of which mindfulness about safety and risk was an important element, whatever your role. Balfour Beatty defined a new leadership framework for the whole company that set out clearly what they should aspire to – and the new ‘Zero Harm thinking’ was woven into the language throughout.

There was an appetite for new and different approaches to success and there was no ready-made Zero Harm leadership rule book sitting on the shelf. No-one had yet designed a safety leadership programme that tackled all levels of risk, organisation practice, culture and behaviour. The need was for a specially designed leadership experience that would make everyone think and act differently. And that meant making sure every executive director across Balfour Beatty would share the same experience to create the momentum for lasting change.

#### Integrated experience

The investment in its leaders has been unprecedented in scale. Over 18 months, over 500 Balfour Beatty senior leaders will take part in a development programme called Leading Change: Leading Change - Driving the Safety Agenda, with a three-day residential module at its core. Working in close collaboration with Duke Corporate Education on the design of the custom programme, the focus is on excellence in leading complex change more generally, applied through the lens of achieving Zero Harm.

The nature of the experience is different, too. It’s practical, personally challenging and integrated with real live issues. It takes people out of their comfort zone and their normal daily environment. Shared learning and working in leadership teams develop the operating companies as a resource to each other, replacing the insular effects of competition between them. Crucially, the programme is dovetailed with the business values and based on a thorough understanding of the expectations it has of its leaders, so new leadership success criteria will be reinforced through future assessment and selection for key roles.



**“Investing in all of our 500 leaders sent a signal that we are serious about our commitment to Zero Harm. This clearly positioned the programme not as learning and development for its own sake, but as strategic change leadership to achieve a specific business result.”**

Paul Raby, Group HR Director, Balfour Beatty plc



Achieving Zero Harm is a complex challenge because it is about managing a negative: the absence of accidents and incidents. It's difficult to manage an absence of something, but you can manage the risks that give rise to accidents and incidents. There's no fixed point of having arrived – zero means being able to measure and demonstrate how zero risk of serious injury will be maintained.

What are the conditions that will enable Zero Harm to be achieved and sustained across all the operating companies? What will deliver the difficult last little bit of the zero goal? How do you assess the likelihood of achieving zero? And the most difficult challenge of all: what are the predictive measures of excellence and sustained progress once zero is achieved?

#### Conditions for success

The individual company road maps showed wide variations; the progress to Zero Harm and the areas needing focus and attention were different in each context. This is why it is so important for each business to assess its own progress as a 'Zero Harm organisation', as well as identify what it needs to do to sustain 'zero'.

Metrics can be powerful triggers for change if they **reveal fresh insights** about how to keep improving performance. They also maintain focus on accountability for a corporate goal, without crushing the freedom of individual businesses to set their own aspirations. It puts in place a **strong framework** while at the same time allowing each company to address its own particular issues.



**"We are now half way on the journey towards our ambitious goal of Zero Harm by 2012. From the start, leaders expressed the desire for a better way to identify the potential blocks and weaknesses that might exist in their systems and cultures, so they will know where to focus their attention and further action."**

Andy Rose, Group MD Engineering and Safety, Balfour Beatty plc

#### Vital signs

Halfway through the programme, we have helped to create some predictive vital indicators of organisational readiness for Zero Harm. 'Zero In' has been developed by a blended team of experts in safety, risk, culture and leadership. It's a simple approach to help each business assess how well it is performing on the key drivers of Zero Harm, and identify where to focus future effort on the right things. New tools help each business to assess and identify both achievements as well as potential weaknesses in leadership, cultures, systems and behaviours that are the necessary conditions for achieving Zero Harm. The outputs are not the usual measures of safety performance, but rather vital signs and predictors of effective leadership of culture and complex risk. They include:

- o **Identification and management of major risk** – are leaders 'risk-intelligent'?
- o **Awareness of a changing risk profile** – are leaders re-thinking their risk focus and priorities and ruthlessly applying risk control to all layers of protection?
- o **An ethos of open reporting** – have we got a culture that catches errors, potential risks and near misses early?
- o **A hunger for learning** – are people constantly seeking out best practice to address specific, as well as systemic, failures and is the organisation adapting its own practices as a result?
- o **Engagement of the wider 'village'** – how well do employees, sub-contractors and partners understand, engage with and feel commitment to the shared goal?
- o **Customer commitment** – do leaders systematically and regularly engage with customers to make them aware of their role in helping to support the goal?

Tracking progress and looking for 'weak signals' in the wider system is core to the approach of continually adapting and learning in the service of achieving a challenging business goal. Discovering something that works doesn't mean the solution has been found: it's kept alive and evolving by constant review.



## The result of radical action



The impact of taking this bold approach to Zero Harm can already be seen:

**It's working** – there has been a significant improvement in the consistency of safety performance, narrowing the gap across the businesses. The expectation is that the goal of zero should be reached by 2012

**It's embedded** – the seeds of accidents and incidents are not sown in the workplace. Operating companies have included safety-related aspects in every area of day-to-day business, touching everyone so that “it's the way we do it now”

**It's strategic** – it includes a commitment to eliminate the risks of causing harm by removing root causes in the design and planning of the work

**It's good for business** – Zero Harm is being leveraged as a competitive differentiator, showing the commercial advantages of getting this right and the consequences of getting it wrong: unsafe businesses simply won't survive

**It's an indicator of operational excellence** – excellent safety performance goes hand-in-hand with product quality, efficiency and delivery

**It's about the future** – the expectations of customers, employees and society at large are continually increasing. Successful businesses of the future will have to be capable of delivering 'Zero Harm'.



“What has it taken to drive this through? Imagination. Perseverance. Not over-complicating things. Trusting your instincts. Scepticism. Never being satisfied that we've got there. My personal view is that it has effected permanent change in the people and in the organisation.”

Ian Tyler, Chief Executive, Balfour Beatty plc

## What's your 'elephant-sized issue'? 15

Many other organisations have achieved what might seem impossible challenges. In 'The Tipping Point', Malcolm Gladwell describes using 'zero tolerance' to break the cycle of graffiti, petty crime and more serious violence on the New York subway. Since 1993, major crime has fallen by 39% and murder by 49%. In the UK, some police forces have cut crime by nearly 40% using similar 'zero tolerance' policies.

Ray Anderson, founder of a US carpet tile manufacturer, set out his vision for a fully sustainable business by focusing on 'zero waste'. In his 2009 book, 'Confessions of a Radical Industrialist', he describes the journey as like climbing “a mountain higher than Everest” – difficult, yes, but with a careful and attentive plan, not impossible. In tracking the company's progress, not only are both energy use and greenhouse gas emissions being dramatically reduced, but net sales are growing strongly, too.

All these missions to achieve 'zero' are about achieving what at first seems impossible. We hope they inspire you to think differently about your own elephant-sized issues, and to achieve your own ambitions for breakthrough change.

## One last question...

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### What's stopping you?

To help you find out, we can offer you free advice to explore:

- o The suitability of your tough elephant-sized issue to this approach
- o The role and capability of your leadership to tackle complex change
- o What success is worth to you, and the investment you want to make
- o How to apply some of the key features of this approach to achieve breakthrough change in your business.

Please contact in the first instance, Melissa Hope, at [melissahope@stantonmarris.com](mailto:melissahope@stantonmarris.com)

To read previous editions of our think piece books, please visit us online at [www.stantonmarris.com/resources](http://www.stantonmarris.com/resources) and register for Inside Track.

### Further reading

- o 'The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World', Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky, Harvard Business Press, 2009
- o 'Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity', Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, Jossey-Bass, 2001
- o 'Failure to Learn: The BP Texas City Refinery disaster', Andrew Hopkins, CCH Australia Limited, 2009
- o 'Mastering Operational Risk: Understanding Operational Risk and How to Manage it', Tony Blunden and John Thirlwell, Pearson Education Canada, 2010
- o 'Confessions of a Radical Industrialist: Profits, People, Purpose - Doing Business by Respecting the Earth', Ray Anderson, McClelland & Stewart, 2009
- o 'The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference', Malcolm Gladwell, Little Brown, 2000

### Acknowledgements

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