



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
**University
of Auckland**



The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace

1. Introduction

Safety walks are proactive leadership activities where leaders visit work areas to observe work, understand how tasks are successfully performed, identify risks, and most importantly engage with workers about health, safety and wellbeing. They provide leaders with an opportunity to understand "work as done" rather than "work as imagined", moving beyond procedures, reports, and assumptions to gain insight into how work is really performed.

While safety walks may identify hazards and non-conformances, they are not primarily compliance audits. Their greatest value comes from engaging with workers, learning from frontline experience, understanding the realities of work, and fostering meaningful conversations that strengthen safety culture and continuous improvement.

Safety walks reinforce safety culture by transforming safety from a written policy into a visible, everyday leadership practice and shared organisational value.

2. Core Value of Safety Walks

Safety walks are not inspections, they are interactions. The shift from "checking compliance" to "connecting with people" is what unlocks their real benefit.

Safety walks provide:

- ✓ A visible commitment to safety from leadership
- ✓ A direct line of communication between workers and decision-makers
- ✓ Opportunities to understand real work conditions rather than relying on reports
- ✓ A practical way to build a culture of shared responsibility for safety

3. The Role of Workers Engagement

The most impactful safety walks centre on **listening rather than telling**. When leaders actively engage workers, they:

- ✓ Show respect for frontline knowledge
- ✓ Encourage openness and trust
- ✓ Create psychological safety, where workers feel comfortable raising concerns

Effective engagement during safety walks involves:

- ✓ Asking open questions e.g. "What's the hardest part of this task?"
- ✓ Listening without judgement
- ✓ Acknowledging good practices, not just identifying issues
- ✓ Following up on issues workers raise

This approach turns safety walks into two-way conversations, rather than one-way audits.

The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace	Version: 2	Issue date: August 2026	Review Date: August 2029
Approved by: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing	Document Owner: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing		
Content Manager: Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager	Once printed this document is uncontrolled		Page 2 of 6

4. Core Benefits of Safety Walks

4.1 Enhanced Leadership Visibility

WorkSafe guidance highlights that worker engagement and leadership visibility are essential for effective risk management. See [guidance from WorkSafe NZ](#).

Leaders who regularly engage with teams in the field:

- ✓ Build credibility and approachability
- ✓ Strengthen relationships across the organisation
- ✓ Demonstrate that safety is a priority, not just a policy

The Business Leaders Business Health & Safety Forum reinforces that visible presence and authentic engagement are critical to effective leadership. Safety walks provide one of the most effective ways for leaders to demonstrate this commitment in practice. Further information is available on the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum webpage, [What is Safety Leadership?](#)

4.2 Improved Communication

- ✓ It reinforces that visible presence and authentic engagement are critical to effective leadership
- ✓ Encourages open dialogue by creating a safe space for two-way conversations, making it easier for workers to raise concerns, ask questions, and share ideas
- ✓ Clarifies expectations by providing real-time opportunities to reinforce key safety messages, ensuring consistent understanding of standards and behaviours across teams
- ✓ Enhances feedback quality. Direct interaction allows leaders to give immediate, constructive feedback and better understand frontline challenges, improving the relevance and clarity of communication overall

4.3 Increased Reporting and Participation

When workers see their input being heard and acted on, they are more likely to:

- ✓ Report near misses and hazards
- ✓ Suggest improvements
- ✓ Take ownership of safety practices

4.4 Proactive Risk Identification

- ✓ Safety walks help spot issues before they become incidents, reinforcing the importance of hazard identification and reporting
- ✓ They also ensure a risk-based approach, prioritising environments and activities with the highest potential for harm, aligning with risk-based walk schedules
- ✓ They allow the early detection of emerging risks
- ✓ They provide a better understanding of how work is actually performed
- ✓ Workers are closest to the risks in their roles. Engaging them directly leads to more accurate identification of hazards

4.5 Aid Better Decision-Making

Insights gained from conversations during safety walks provide:

- ✓ Real-world context to inform policies and procedures
- ✓ More practical and effective controls
- ✓ Reduced gap between "work as imagined" and "work as done"

The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace	Version: 2	Issue date: August 2026	Review Date: August 2029
Approved by: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing	Document Owner: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing		
Content Manager: Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager	Once printed this document is uncontrolled		Page 3 of 6

4.6 Reinforcing Safety Culture

Visible leadership during safety walks helps embed a safety-focused mindset, set expectations, and normalise safe behaviours and builds trust and drives long-term behavioural change.

Regular engagement reinforces that:

- ✔ Safety is a shared responsibility across the organisation
- ✔ Leadership genuinely cares about worker wellbeing
- ✔ Speaking up is valued and encouraged

4.7 Improved Wellbeing Outcomes

- ✔ Meaningful engagement during safety walks can help identify psychosocial risks, workload concerns, fatigue, and wellbeing issues before they escalate, supporting a healthier and more sustainable workplace

Safety walks also support leadership due diligence by providing opportunities to verify that risks are being effectively managed, resources are available, and workers are actively consulted on health and safety matters.

5. Critical Success Factors

To maximise value, safety walks should:

- ✔ Be **planned, but informal** in tone
- ✔ Focus on **dialogue, not fault-finding**
- ✔ Include **recognition of safe behaviours**
- ✔ Lead to **visible follow-up actions**

Without genuine engagement, safety walks risk being seen as compliance exercises and can undermine trust.

6. How to Undertake a Safety Walk

1. Prepare

- ✔ Review previous safety walk notes and outstanding actions
- ✔ Familiarise yourself with high-risk activities in the area (using your risk register)
- ✔ Invite the right people, including workers, supervisors, technical experts, and Health and Safety Representatives, to participate in safety walks to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and to promote shared ownership of safety outcomes
- ✔ Engage with your Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager, who can guide and participate in the process

2. Engage

- ✔ Introduce the purpose of the walk, to learn, listen, and support
- ✔ Encourage open, two-way conversation and make space for workers to raise concerns
- ✔ Acknowledge positive behaviours and good practices observed

3. Observe

Apply a risk-based lens. Look more closely where the likelihood and potential consequences of harm are highest. Walk through the area systematically, focusing on:

- ✔ Housekeeping and physical conditions
- ✔ Safe behaviours and use of equipment
- ✔ Alignment with risk controls and procedures
- ✔ Psychosocial risks, worker wellbeing, workload pressures, fatigue, and other factors that may affect health, safety & wellbeing

The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace	Version: 2	Issue date: August 2026	Review Date: August 2029
Approved by: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing	Document Owner: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing		
Content Manager: Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager	Once printed this document is uncontrolled		Page 4 of 6

4. Record

- ✔ Note observations, hazards, and good practices
- ✔ If appropriate, capture agreed corrective actions in the online incident reporting platform, assigning responsibilities and timelines

5. Follow-up

- ✔ Ensure actions are tracked to completion
- ✔ Schedule a follow-up walks to confirm progress
- ✔ Using a risk-based approach, consider developing a schedule for safety walks across your areas

Reporting and Recording

- ✔ Any observations, hazards, and corrective actions are entered into the online incident reporting platform for tracking and monitoring
- ✔ Progress on actions is reviewed during follow-up walks (typically within three weeks)
- ✔ Outcomes are summarised in monthly HSW reports, ensuring leadership visibility
- ✔ Data contributes to university-wide HSW performance monitoring and continuous improvement

7. Example Questions for Meaningful Safety Conversations

These questions are intended to help leaders understand how work is successfully completed, explore challenges workers face, and identify opportunities to strengthen HSW outcomes:

- ✔ What is working well here?
- ✔ What helps you do this job safely every day?
- ✔ If you could improve one thing, what would it be?
- ✔ What could make this job safer or easier?
- ✔ Is there anything which concerns you most about this task?
- ✔ Are there any barriers preventing work from being completed safely?

8. Measuring Success

Safety walks should be evaluated not only by the number of hazards identified but also by:

- ✔ Quality of worker engagement
- ✔ Completion of agreed actions
- ✔ Improvement trends over time
- ✔ Increased hazard and near-miss reporting
- ✔ Positive feedback from participants

9. Conclusion

Safety walks are more than a compliance requirement; they are a leadership practice that builds safer workplaces, stronger relationships, and a culture of care. They provide an opportunity to understand not only where risks exist, but also how workers successfully manage challenges and keep work safe every day. However, their effectiveness depends on how they are conducted. When centred on authentic engagement with workers, safety walks move beyond hazard spotting to become a key driver of trust, learning, and continuous improvement.

By applying a risk-based approach, drawing on external guidance, and ensuring robust reporting, the University continues to strengthen its health, safety & wellbeing framework. Through active

The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace	Version: 2	Issue date: August 2026	Review Date: August 2029
Approved by: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing	Document Owner: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing		
Content Manager: Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager	Once printed this document is uncontrolled		Page 5 of 6

participation in safety walks, leaders reinforce their role as champions of wellbeing and demonstrate that health and safety are integral to everyday work and decision-making.

In essence, the greatest benefit of safety walks is not simply what leaders see, but what workers feel: heard, valued, supported, and actively involved in creating a safer and healthier workplace.

The Value and Benefits of Safety Walks in the Workplace	Version: 2	Issue date: August 2026	Review Date: August 2029
Approved by: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing	Document Owner: Associate Director, Health, safety & wellbeing		
Content Manager: Health, Safety & Wellbeing Manager	Once printed this document is uncontrolled		Page 6 of 6