Why Leaderboards Can Undermine Safety Culture



Leaderboards look harmless.

They’re familiar. They’re easy to understand. They create visibility. They can make a dull training rollout feel more active. They give managers a quick way to see which departments are ahead, which teams are behind, and where follow-up is needed.

In the right context, that can be useful.

But in safety training, leaderboards are more dangerous than they look.

The problem isn’t the leaderboard itself. The problem is what it teaches people to value. A leaderboard doesn’t just display performance. It shapes behaviour. It tells workers what the organization is watching. It tells supervisors what they’ll be judged on. It tells teams what counts as winning.

If the leaderboard is designed around the wrong measure, it can quietly weaken the safety culture it was supposed to support.

That’s especially true when leaderboards rank workers or teams by speed, completion volume, or incident-free status. Those metrics may look clean on a dashboard, but they can create pressure in the wrong direction. They can reward people for rushing through training. They can discourage slower learners from asking questions. They can embarrass workers who need more support. They can push supervisors to prioritize completion over understanding. They can even encourage underreporting if the leaderboard is tied to injury-free days or low incident counts.

That’s not engagement.

That’s distortion.

A safety manager may launch a leaderboard with good intentions. The goal is to increase participation. The team has struggled with overdue training. Supervisors need a nudge. Workers are tired of reminders. A little competition seems like a reasonable way to create momentum.

At first, it works. The night shift climbs into first place. Maintenance catches up. The warehouse crew jokes about beating production. The dashboard looks better each week.

Then the side effects start.

A worker who struggles with reading takes longer to complete modules and becomes the reason their team is behind. Another worker clicks through as quickly as possible to avoid being singled out. A supervisor tells the crew to finish training before the end of the shift, even though workers are tired and distracted. A new employee doesn't ask questions because everyone else seems to be moving faster. The team celebrates being first, but nobody talks about what they learned.

The leaderboard improved activity.

It didn't improve safety.

This is the central risk. Leaderboards are powerful because they make comparison visible. But comparison can either strengthen or damage learning, depending on how it's used.

Safety training is not the same as a sales contest. In sales, a leaderboard may reward revenue, calls, demos, or closed deals. Those measures still need context, but competition is often built into the work. In safety, the purpose is different. The safest worker isn't always the fastest. The safest team isn't always the one with the cleanest record. The safest supervisor isn't always the one with the fewest overdue assignments.

Sometimes the safest person is the one who slows down.

The safest person asks the awkward question.

The safest person admits they don't understand the procedure.

The safest person reports the near miss.

The safest person stops work when the plan doesn't match the conditions.

A poorly designed leaderboard can make those behaviours feel like losing.

The first major problem is speed. A leaderboard that ranks people by how quickly they complete training sends a terrible message. It teaches workers that the organization values getting through the course more than thinking through the content. It also penalizes workers who take the training seriously. A person who pauses on a scenario, rereads a procedure, or asks a supervisor how the rule applies to their task may fall behind someone who clicks quickly and guesses well.

That's not a learning culture. That's a race.

Speed-based leaderboards are especially risky for high-consequence topics: lockout, fall protection, confined space entry, powered industrial trucks, machine guarding, respiratory protection, workplace violence, emergency response, trenching, electrical safety, and hazardous chemicals. These are not topics where workers should be encouraged to finish fast. They're topics where

workers should be encouraged to slow down, think, practise, and ask questions.

The second problem is public shame. Some workers are already nervous about training. They may have lower literacy, limited English proficiency, limited computer confidence, past negative school experiences, learning differences, or simply less familiarity with the topic. A public leaderboard can make those workers feel exposed.

This matters because psychological safety affects physical safety. If a worker feels embarrassed during training, they're less likely to admit confusion. If they think everyone else understands the procedure, they may pretend they do too. If they're worried about looking slow, they may avoid asking for help. The organization may get a completed training record while the worker remains uncertain.

That uncertainty doesn't stay in the LMS. It follows the worker back to the floor.

The third problem is supervisor pressure. Supervisors are often measured on whether their teams complete training. That's reasonable to a point. Supervisors should support compliance. But if the leaderboard makes departments look bad for being behind, supervisors may push training in the same way they push production: finish it, close it, get it off the list.

That pressure changes the tone. Training becomes an obstacle to clear rather than a learning event to use. Workers hear, "Get this done," not "Make sure you understand this." If the supervisor doesn't follow up with discussion, observation, or coaching, the leaderboard has only improved administrative closure.

The fourth problem is false confidence. A team at the top of the leaderboard may believe it's safer because it completed training first. Senior leadership may believe the same thing. The safety department may see the dashboard and assume the campaign worked.

But completion ranking doesn't prove learning quality. It doesn't show whether workers understood the material. It doesn't show whether the content matched the actual job. It doesn't show whether supervisors reinforced it. It doesn't show whether behaviours changed. It doesn't show whether hazards were corrected.

A leaderboard can make a weak training system look strong.

The fifth problem is underreporting. This is the most serious cultural risk when leaderboards are tied to incident rates, injury-free days, or "safest department" rankings based on reported outcomes. A team that's rewarded for having no incidents may learn to keep incidents quiet. Workers may avoid reporting pain, near misses, property damage, minor injuries, or unsafe conditions because they don't want to hurt the team's score.

This is one of the oldest mistakes in safety recognition, and gamification can make it worse by turning silence into competition.

The safest organization is not the one with the fewest reports. It's the one with the clearest view of risk and the strongest response. Near misses, hazard reports, first-aid cases, worker concerns, and minor incidents are signals. If a

leaderboard rewards teams for keeping those signals low, the company may lose the information it needs to prevent serious harm.

The sixth problem is individualism. Safety is a shared system. Workers influence each other. Supervisors set expectations. Maintenance affects production safety. Engineering affects exposure. Scheduling affects fatigue. Procurement affects equipment. HR affects onboarding. Senior leadership affects resources and priorities.

Individual leaderboards can oversimplify that system. They imply that safety learning is mostly about personal effort and ranking. That may be useful for some low-risk learning goals, but it can distract from the team-based nature of hazard control. A worker may complete every course on time and still work in a department with poor supervision, outdated procedures, weak guarding, unrealistic production pressure, or poor communication.

Ranking individuals won’t fix that.

The better use of visibility is to strengthen shared accountability without creating harmful competition.

That means leaderboards need to be redesigned.

The first rule is to avoid fastest-completion rankings. There’s almost no good reason to rank workers by speed through safety training. Time spent learning should not be treated as a weakness. For critical topics, the better signal may be thoughtful participation, scenario performance, supervisor follow-up, or practical verification.

The second rule is to avoid public individual rankings for mandatory safety training. Private progress dashboards are usually safer. Workers should be able to see what they’ve completed, what remains, and what they need to do next. Supervisors should be able to see who needs support. But public displays that rank individuals from best to worst should be used cautiously, if at all.

The third rule is to favour team-based progress over individual competition. Team-based visibility can work when it reinforces readiness. For example, departments might see progress toward completing a seasonal heat stress readiness campaign. But the campaign should include more than course completion. It might include training, supervisor discussion, water/rest/shade planning, review of emergency response procedures, and correction of known gaps.

In that model, the team isn’t racing through modules. It’s preparing for a hazard.

The fourth rule is to measure positive safety behaviours, not silence. A leaderboard should never reward low reporting. Better measures include hazard reports submitted, near-miss learning discussions completed, corrective actions closed, safety observations conducted, refresher participation, supervisor coaching conversations, and completion of practical checks. These measures encourage visibility and prevention.

The fifth rule is to separate learning support from performance embarrassment. If a worker is behind, the system should prompt help, not shame. The supervisor’s job is to find out why. Is the worker overloaded? Is the module not

available in a usable format? Is there a language barrier? Is the employee new to the task? Is the technology difficult? Is the schedule unrealistic? Is the worker avoiding the course because they don’t understand the topic?

A training delay is not always a discipline issue. Sometimes it’s a system design issue.

The sixth rule is to make the leaderboard temporary and purposeful. Permanent leaderboards can become background noise or create ongoing pressure. Short campaigns are often more effective. A winter driving readiness challenge. A heat stress preparation campaign. A new worker orientation push. A supervisor incident response pathway. A forklift refresher month. A hazard reporting improvement sprint.

A temporary campaign lets the organization focus attention on a real risk without turning safety into constant competition.

The seventh rule is to pair leaderboard data with conversation. A dashboard should not replace supervisor engagement. If a team completes a training challenge, the supervisor should talk about what was learned. If scenario scores are weak, the supervisor should revisit the topic. If workers ask questions, those questions should feed back into the safety system. If the leaderboard shows uneven participation, the organization should investigate the barrier.

Data should start the conversation, not end it.

The eighth rule is to use leaderboards only when they support the safety culture you want. Before launching one, ask a simple question: what behaviour will this encourage?

If it encourages rushing, don’t use it.

If it encourages hiding incidents, don’t use it.

If it embarrasses slower learners, don’t use it.

If it creates pressure without improving understanding, don’t use it.

If it encourages teams to complete meaningful preparation, report hazards, close corrective actions, discuss scenarios, and support each other, it may be useful.

The distinction is purpose.

A good leaderboard might show that each department is progressing through a “Heat Stress Readiness” campaign. The score might be based on completion of a short refresher, supervisor-led crew discussion, water/rest planning, emergency response review, and completion of corrective actions from last year’s heat events. That leaderboard rewards preparation.

A bad leaderboard shows which worker completed heat stress training fastest. That rewards speed.

A good leaderboard might show teams participating in a “Find and Fix” hazard recognition campaign. Points might be awarded for legitimate hazard reports, verified corrective actions, and shared lessons from near misses. That rewards prevention.

A bad leaderboard ranks departments by the fewest reported incidents. That rewards silence.

A good leaderboard might show supervisors progressing through an incident investigation skills pathway. The measure might include training completion, use of a structured investigation template, review of corrective action quality, and follow-up conversations. That rewards leadership.

A bad leaderboard ranks supervisors only by how quickly their teams clear overdue training. That rewards administrative pressure.

This is where safety leaders have to be more thoughtful than most generic gamification advice. In ordinary corporate training, a leaderboard may simply be a way to drive engagement. In safety training, engagement is not enough. The leaderboard has to support competence, reporting, hazard recognition, supervision, and due diligence.

A leaderboard that undermines any of those should be removed.

That doesn’t mean organizations should avoid visibility. Safety performance does need visibility. Training status should be visible. Overdue assignments should be visible. Supervisor follow-up should be visible. Corrective action closure should be visible. Hazard reporting trends should be visible. Competency verification should be visible.

The issue is not visibility.

The issue is ranking.

Visibility helps people understand what needs attention. Ranking turns that information into comparison. Comparison can motivate, but it can also distort. Safety leaders need to decide when comparison is helpful and when it creates pressure that harms learning.

For many organizations, the best compromise is a progress dashboard rather than a competitive leaderboard. A dashboard can show departments where they stand against required training goals without declaring winners and losers. It can show completion, outstanding items, supervisor observations, refresher status, and corrective action follow-up. It can identify gaps without turning the process into a contest.

Another option is threshold-based recognition. Instead of ranking teams from first to last, recognize every team that reaches a meaningful readiness standard. For example, any department that completes all winter safety refreshers, conducts a supervisor-led discussion, and closes identified seasonal hazards receives recognition. The goal is not to beat another department. The goal is to meet the standard.

That model is often healthier for safety culture because it reinforces shared expectations. Everyone can win by becoming ready. Nobody has to hide weakness to protect a ranking.

SafetyNow and similar training systems can support this shift when organizations use them for more than completion tracking. The value of a safety training platform is strongest when it helps assign the right training, document

completion, manage refreshers, support supervisors, and provide evidence of follow-up. If points, badges, or dashboards are used, they should reinforce those serious goals. The software should help safety teams build consistency and accountability, not create a race to the certificate.

The adult learning piece matters here too. Workers are more likely to respect a system that treats them as responsible adults. That means avoiding childish competition, exaggerated praise, and public embarrassment. It means using clear, operational language. It means recognizing real progress. It means giving supervisors better tools for coaching. It means tying training to actual hazards, not arbitrary rankings.

A mature safety culture doesn’t need to make everything a contest.

It needs to make expectations visible, learning practical, and follow-up consistent.

Leaderboards can play a role in that, but only if they’re designed carefully. They should be used sparingly, tied to specific campaigns, focused on teams rather than individuals, built around positive safety behaviours, and supported by supervisor conversation. They should never reward speed through critical training, low reporting, or superficial completion.

The warning sign is simple.

If workers start asking, “How do we get more points?” instead of “How do we do this safely?” the leaderboard is leading them in the wrong direction.

The best safety training systems don’t make people compete to appear safe. They help people learn, remember, ask questions, report hazards, practise judgment, and apply safe procedures when the work gets difficult.

That’s the culture worth building.

A leaderboard should serve that culture.

It should never become a substitute for it.