

Creating a Safety Culture

Tim Murray

Chief Executive Officer

Cardinal Virtues Consulting, Mechanicsville, United States of America

Corresponding author: tim@cardvirtues.com

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explain the transformation of the Aluminium Bahrain (Alba) safety culture during the period of 2007-2019. I joined Alba as General Manager of Finance in 2007 and completed my career as CEO at the end of 2019. During my time at Alba I also held the roles of Chief Financial Officer, Chief Marketing Officer and Chief Supply Chain Officer.

Alba is one of the largest industrial companies in the Middle East and was the first primary aluminium smelter in the region. Alba is the largest smelter outside China with an annual production of 1.6 Mt per annum. Alba is a huge contributor to the Bahrain economy with the Alba and the whole aluminium industry representing approximately 12 % of the GDP of the country.

Today Alba is considered a world leader in safety, winning many accolades for its safety performance and the continued goal to achieve zero injuries. However, this was not always the case and there was a period of time when Alba had poor safety performance. When I joined Alba in 2007, I would describe the safety culture as one of compliance where there were many policies and procedures, but it was a just “Check the box” exercise.

Anyone who has worked in an aluminium smelter knows that there are significant inherent risks in the operation. There is dealing with the electrical hazard risks in the potline areas as well as the movement of liquid metal at 965 °C, large hot furnaces as well as many vehicles and cranes in constant motion around the plant. Given the nature of these risks it is critical that the company have a strong safety culture. Sadly, safety was not the number one priority when I joined Alba and the focus was on production targets. The prevailing attitude toward safety was it is not my job, that is the job of the Safety Manager.

Keywords: Aluminium Bahrain (Alba), Safety culture, Aluminium smelter, Risks, Safety performance.

1. Ownership of Safety Starts with You

I was promoted to CEO of Alba in 2012 and the primary reason for the CEO change was Alba’s poor safety performance. Alba had experienced 5 fatalities in less than 3 years and the Board of Directors was very upset and decided a drastic change was needed. The Board decided I was the strongest internal candidate having been in an executive role within the company for the past 5 years. At the time I was in the role of CFO and 41 years old and there were some who felt I was too young to become a CEO. I was fortunate I had strong supporters in the Board who said Tim is the right guy and we don’t have time to do a formal CEO search as people were dying in the plant.

As a result of the poor safety performance Alba had engaged safety consultants to fix the problem but this did not work and had the opposite effect of enabling people to just blame the consultants for everything. On my second day as CEO, I terminated the safety consultants and Alba took over sole responsibility of safety. Many within my management team felt this was a mistake and as a

new CEO I will get blamed if there are further fatalities. My response to them was that we needed to take “Ownership” of safety and that all of us are responsible and if I go down, we are all going down together. The word of my actions spread like wildfire throughout the plant and that Tim was serious about changing safety. This was the shock value we needed at the time as the general mood in the plant was one of apathy.

My next step after firing the safety consultants was to implement clear and simple safety principles that everyone needed to abide by if they wanted to work in Alba. The new “ZERO Accident” principles were as follows:

- Ownership of Safety is everyone’s responsibility
- Working safely is a condition of employment
- All workplace injuries and illnesses are preventable.

These principles replaced the 8 complicated safety principles developed by the safety consultants which no one took seriously. I made the implementation of the “ZERO Accident” principles my mission and pounded the message on a daily basis. This was done in the form of daily plant visits as well as constant safety campaigns. However there was still a general skepticism throughout the plant about management commitment to safety. In many respects people felt this was another “Flavor of the month” exercise that would fade away.

I needed to prove to the workers that we were serious and as such management had to lead by example. For myself I decided to do show my commitment to safety by learning Arabic. I had been with Alba for 5 years and never bothered to learn Arabic as everyone in Bahrain spoke very good English. However I quickly realized when I did plant visits, I needed to understand Arabic if I really wanted to connect with the operators. Previously I had learned Spanish in the USA and I thought how hard could it be to learn Arabic? Well as I learned very quickly it was hard! I realized this was going to take a commitment and had a private tutor giving me lessons 2 times per week for a period of 2 years.

As you can imagine this was not easy to fit into my busy schedule as a new CEO but I believe you can always do more than you think if you plan your work and work your plan. My tutor was great and she was tough with me, which is what I needed in order to stay disciplined. In a few months I was really starting to understand Arabic and it was like a whole new world appeared before me. Once I began to understand Arabic, I learned that Arabic was the primary language in Alba and everyone was speaking it I just never realized it. Learning Arabic made a monumental difference in my dealing with the shop floor employees. Not only could I communicate directly it was a huge sign of respect that I would take the time to learn their language. I am a big guy being 1.96 meter so the people in the plant were saying the “Ameriqi Kabeer” (Big American) has learned Arabic so you better watch out when he visits.

In addition, we translated the ZERO Accident principles into 6 different languages which were spoken throughout the plant. This was critical as we had many contractors in the plant who did not speak English nor Arabic. Another thing we did with the ZERO Accident principles was to color code them. Initially the use of colors was a way to ensure people paid attention to the new signs when they were posted around the plant. For the principles we used bright white for the 1st principle, yellow for the 2nd and bright pink for the 3rd principle. Yes, that is right we used pink all through the giant industrial plant.

It was amazing to see the impact the color coding. It was clear that many workers, especially the contractors, were linking the colors to the principles. When I would do safety visits and quiz people on the ZERO Accident principles, they would sometimes say it is the white one or the yellow or the pink one. It was really eye opening to see how they were linking colors with each principle, to me this was great as my objective was that they understand the meaning of the

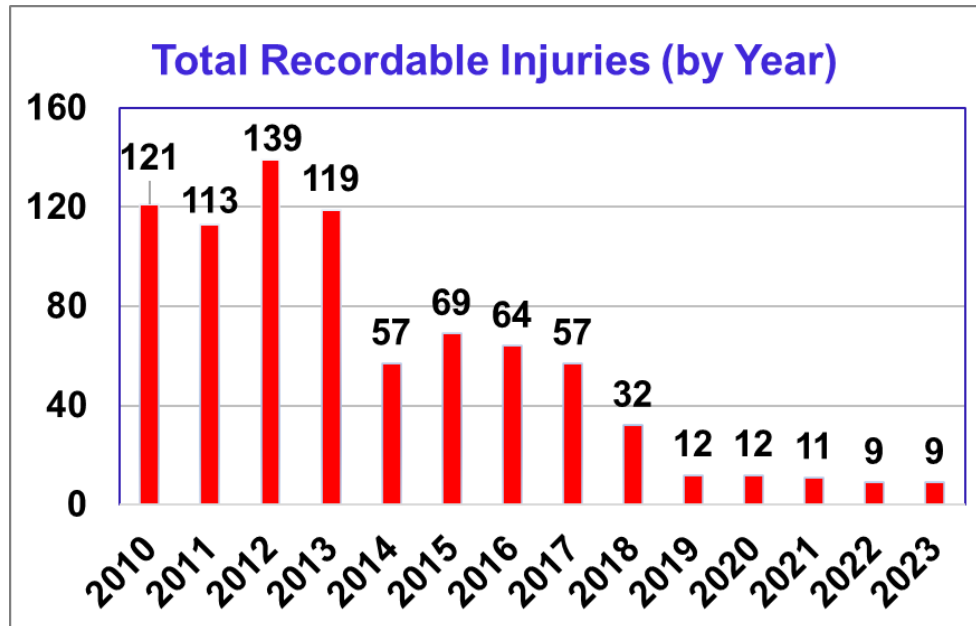


Figure 3. Alba Total recordable injuries 2010 – 2023.

5. What Makes You Successful at One Level Is Not What Makes You Successful at the Next

If you ask me what my greatest achievement was in Alba, I will tell you without hesitation it was the transformation of the safety culture. As a young manager prior to my Alba days I was given a great piece of advice after a promotion, my boss at the time said to me always remember “What makes you successful at one level is NOT what makes you successful at the next”. The lesson being what made me good in my last role (i.e. what got me promoted) is not what will make me successful in my new role.

When I was promoted to CEO this was an invaluable piece of advice as I was faced with an immediate crisis to fix safety and stop people from dying in the plant. I had to shift my mindset and remember what made me a successful CFO was not what would make me the CEO who could turn around the Alba safety culture. I was very fortunate to have a great team in Alba who supported this transformation and embraced my crazy ideas.

During my time in Alba as CEO there were no fatalities and this trend has continued under the leadership of the current CEO, Mr Ali Al Baqali. Safety continues to be the number one priority and Alba continues to set safety benchmarks in the Aluminium industry.

6. References

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