

# SHARK-INFESTED SAFETY

All too often the health and safety profession is given a bad rap. It's time to change the game by seeing risk differently and by helping our organisations to find freedom from fear. Read on to find out more about Risk-Based Decision Making and how ANDREW SHARMAN finds the safer way to swim with sharks

**W**hile out for dinner in a fancy restaurant in Johannesburg not long ago, the conversation turned to business. When asked what I did for a living, I replied: "I work in safety."

My inquisitor responded promptly with: "Ah, I see. So you're that guy that stops people doing things, because they might be a little bit risky ..."

It seems that our reputation continues to precede us wherever we go. How many times have you – as a practitioner, advisor, manager or leader in occupational health and safety – found the profession at the centre of a joke that concludes that we are risk averse, action-stopping do-gooders?

Sure, while I am happy to see people enjoying a good laugh, there's a massive misconception here. If we are to truly do our job of protecting people, planet and profit, we must face towards risk, not away from it.

I was recently asked to give a TED\* talk to share my views on safety and risk. Using a very personal experience, my central point was that life is not about avoiding risk at all cost, but rather, it's about developing the confidence to manage risk appropriately and enable great things to happen. (You can watch the TED talk here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7-DQFvD5ck> or Google Andrew Sharman TED talk.)

“ Let's imagine a little more. Think outside the box. Let's not fear the sharks of safety, but, instead, step up bravely to the shoreline in our speedos and ask “What if we could...?”



### SAFER BUT LIVING IN FEAR

Despite the society in which many of us live being safer and more comfortable than ever before, we are surrounded by an ever-growing culture of fear that promotes hesitancy and over-caution.

We see this manifesting every day in our working lives. From organisational leaders anxious of anything and everything that has the most remote possibility of causing the slightest injury, to even our professional peers over-zealously ramming the “safety first” mentality to the top of corporate agendas, often causing great rifts as they jam safety head-to-head with productivity.

What happened? Fear. Our perspectives on risk have slid to a point where we often struggle to see the true picture. Media manipulation sideswipes objective thinking and skews robust decision-making.

Managers are reluctant to take decisions without having employees sign away their lives. And the audit companies, which we call to ask us to check how our organisations are doing with safety, send us 100-page reports telling us we need more polices, procedures and rules ...

### BUT WHAT IF?

Sure, there are serious incidents that occur – recall the pedestrian bridge collapse on the M1 in Sandton, in October 2015, which killed three people and injured many more.

We can, however, all think of stories about “how safety has stopped something” – whether it be hanging flower baskets taken down for fear of them falling on someone’s head, to children’s playgrounds razed to the ground in case the kids take a tumble and hurt themselves. The modern mantra associated with these “safety risks” is always “Ah yes, but what if ...?”. The response: over-precaution, red tape and a restriction on life as we know it.

Hang on a second; it is fear, not risk management, that has caused these reactions. Forty years ago, Hollywood released a movie that injected so much fear into society it still has millions of us panicked each time we go to the seaside. That familiar: “Du-dur. Du-dur. -Du-dur-du-du-du-du-durrrrr” tune plays through our heads as we swim out into deeper water – and then hastily splash back to the shore. Come on folks, *Jaws* was a movie!

Yes, I know that in Jeffreys Bay, Plett and elsewhere from KwaZulu-Natal down to Cape Point, there are moments where a shark bumps a surfer or two, but, statistically, there are more people killed by falling coconuts, or falling down stairs, or choking on boerewors and biltong, or while they are under the influence of a Klippiess and Coke. These don’t make the headlines, however, sharks do and the perception about these gracious creatures as “man eaters” continues.

### LET’S KEEP IT REAL

It’s exactly this type of paralysing fear that I speak of in my TED talk. Though perhaps, rather unusually, my fear is of the water itself, rather than what was in it. You see, from a very early age, I wasn’t scared of sharks, but indeed fascinated by them.

It was this fascination that led me to work on overcoming my fears of the water, and perhaps even drove me to become a risk management professional. It may be an unusual hobby for a safety person, but several times I year I come here, to my second home, South Africa.

Whether it’s the sardine run from Port St Johns, the ragged tooth sharks of Aliwal Shoal, the tigers at Amanzimtoti and Umkomaas, or the magnificent great whites of Gansbaai and False Bay, you’ll find me getting up close and personal with these gentle giants of our oceans.

Man eaters? More misunderstood, I say. I’m not denying the risk involved in diving without a cage with these wild animals, but I’m also not going to fall for the negative spin and misperceptions either.

### WE’RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER, SAFER BOAT

We all have fears, but if we let go of the media hype, once free of the elements that paralyse us, we become enabled >

to achieve goals that we previously may have thought unattainable.

The real value proposition for us as occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals, then, is our ability to take an inherently risky human endeavour – like shark diving, or the construction industry, mining, oil and gas, utilities, or, indeed, any modern business today – and use our unique skill set to enable success without loss.

How? We begin by changing our language. Stop asking “What if ... ?” and start saying “What if we could ...” Then demonstrate how we can manage the risks to an acceptable level. We engage employees and leaders in identifying actions that both decrease risk and increase the chance of success.

We precisely define the risk problem, then partner with our people to solve it and enable the satisfaction of organisational needs. We lead the effort to shift our corporate culture from polarised perspectives on risk to informed and balanced decision-making.


In the terms of our profession, we must become energetic advocates and facilitators of Risk Based Decision Making (RBDM). This is a decision-making process by which you systematically identify hazards, assess the degree of risk and determine the best course of action to achieve the goal with an acceptable level of risk.

The United States Department of Energy has come up with a slick acronym for its method of RBDM, which it calls S.A.F.E.R. Here are the five steps:

1. Summarise the critical steps in the work process.
2. Anticipate/discuss errors for each critical step and relevant error precursors.
3. Foresee the probable and worst-case consequences during each critical step.
4. Evaluate existing and proposed controls at each critical step to prevent, catch, and recover from errors and to reduce their consequences.
5. Review previous experiences, accidents, near misses and lessons learned relevant to the specific task and critical steps to see what else you can learn in order to make the task even safer.

### THE PASSIONATE PURSUIT OF SAFETY

Just thinking about risk will not overcome fear, but action will. It's time for a new approach in 2016. We must passionately lead our organisations to evolve from being fearful of risk to a point where they embrace functional practices that result in maximised organisational success with regard to people, planet and profit.

This “Triple Bottom Line” of workplace safety can be yours. Let's imagine a little more. Think outside the box. Let's not fear the sharks of safety, but, instead, step up bravely to the shoreline in our speedos and ask “What if we could...?” 

· TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is a global set of conferences run by the private non-profit Sapling Foundation, under the slogan “Ideas Worth Spreading”.



Sharman on Safety is a series of extracts that SHEQ MANAGEMENT is running this year, from Andrew Sharman's new book: From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and chief executive of RyderMarshSharman - consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at [www.rydermarshsharman.com](http://www.rydermarshsharman.com). SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers will receive 20 percent off the price of Sharman's book at: [www.fromaccidentstozero.com](http://www.fromaccidentstozero.com) using the code SHEQSA.

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