



Complacency and Covid

Don't Trip on the Finish Line

SafeConnection Expert Panel Webinar Summary
by Mackenzie Wilson

"I can't believe we are here again" said Larry Wilson as he introduced the expert panelists... Dr Praveena Dorathi, Head HSSE JLL West Asia, Mr. Arun Subramanian, AVP-HSE – Coromandel International Limited, and Mr. Hector Salazar, General Manager Construction Safety – HPCL-Mittal Energy Limited.

The SafeConnection – Expert Panel Discussions began just over a year ago to bring experts together from all over the world to talk about Covid, and how leading companies were dealing with it. Since then the discussions have broadened to many other topics, like the one originally scheduled for this show which was, "Balancing Just Culture and Accountability". But now—just over a year later—Larry has invited these three seasoned panelists to talk about Covid once again for a "special edition" of SafeConnection brought on by the urgency of the second wave.

He goes on to say, "all over the world, despite the media hype and countless warnings, what has happened has almost exactly followed the complacency continuum (See figure #1). People start off paying a lot of attention but when nothing bad happens the first stage is error, we make a few Covid mistakes, and then, if nothing bad happens, eventually it will start to affect our decision-making, even when the variants are actually making it worse". He tells panelists that he knows they don't have magic

wands, but nevertheless, hearing about what some leading health and safety experts are doing to combat this new wave is or could be incredibly valuable in a time like this.

He begins with Dr. Praveena, who was on one of the first SafeConnection panels. She explains, that to support highly decentralised team, working from Client offices/sites, spread across the length and breadth of the country, a COVID command centre, was launched last year with the main purpose of providing information and support to employees and their families. It has remained active since the first wave, she shares, even when there were

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Dr Praveena Dorathi,
Head HSSE, West Asia in JLL



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Mr Arun Subramanian the AVP & Head HSE (Fert & Ssp) of Coromandel International Ltd noticed a gradual increase in non-compliance with airports and air travel and sensed a change in people.

days with no calls or emails. "The moment the number of calls started rising again it gave us a hint", Dr. Praveena says. The Command Center staff grew from 1 or 2 employees to around 10, the number of reaching out to the Command Center doubled when compared to the first wave.

Larry then turns to Arun, who says he noticed a correlation between time and people's complacency also. "During the first wave we had a lot of preparations and support, masks and sanitizers getting to market, advertisements on health and hygiene ... but then people started seeing that cases were not so much". He notes as well that he saw a gradual increase in non-compliance with airports and air travel, and sensed the feeling of people changing. "There was a lot of warning from medical bodies" he says, "but unless people get pinched, they don't react".

"I know things are really bad up north in Bathinda", Larry directs the conversation to Hector, "I think you told me you lost 10,000 workers because of Covid". "3 weeks ago we started to lose people" he explains, "we went from 23000 workers to 10000". He says that

he thinks feeling the effects of the second wave was delayed because the company had a crisis management system already in place and everyone was much more prepared. "Shopping centres were still open, banks had money, and hospitals had space ... but what we're facing now is 4x bigger than the crisis last year". He repeated that for emphasis: "4x bigger or worse!"

And yet, there are people who say, what more can we do?"

"So, what more can be done when so many measures are already in place, and the problem seems to be only getting worse?" Larry asks. Dr. Praveena shares that strong

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Mr Hector Salazar, General Manager Construction Safety at HPCLMittal Energy Dr Praveena Dorathi, Head HSSE, West Asia in JLL



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communication and empathy are of the utmost importance, which is being driven throughout the organisation starting from the Top Management. "When organizations show empathy, as an employee, it feels good to know that the organisation is there for you and might help to face the adversity in a better way". She further elaborates that closely monitoring all new and previous guidelines and providing employees with up-to-date and reliable information, as well as support, has also been really important.

Mr. Arun then explains Coromandel's 4-pronged approach consisting of medical, administrative, personal, and societal support. He shares that the company has taken on more medical experts, is driving for vaccinations, and is providing oxygen, ICU beds, and making Covid treatment medicines available to employees and their families. In terms of personal support, they have created a tele-consultation service and are providing Covid tests. Administrative support for the crisis management team and also societal support for communities and hospitals are also being pursued.

Hector adds to Arun's point about societal support. "What happens when basic utilities are putting communities around the company in a panic?", he says, "we have to partner with safety and utility companies nearby and see where they're standing in terms of crisis management and see if we can do something

to support them, because if one of these utilities fail then the crisis will go to the next level". He also shares that they have implemented a rotating worker split with 3 groups, two in rotation and one idle. "The idea", he says, "is that if you have one person test positive in a group you still have 2 other 'good' groups". He adds that they will keep this going until the end of the year when they are confident that things are normal.

So, certainly more can and has been done. But the big take away was empathy and support. The companies had set up or opened up reliable communication: the employees knew they could call them and they knew that they would be supported and treated with empathy. All three leading companies were focusing on these two things over and above all the hundreds of other little things they had to do. Larry then asks the panelists about a third wave. "People will be in a very big rush to get back to business or back to full-speed ahead mode." he says, "do you fear that people will be moving forward too quickly, or did everyone finally learn the lesson"?

"When will it end?" is a question that comes up again and again" Dr. Praveena says. "As safety professionals we ought to anticipate a third wave and prepare", she adds, "with the last wave we started celebrating early. Only when the situation is no longer declared a pandemic by the WHO or the local Government, can we begin to lighten up". Arun agrees, adding that

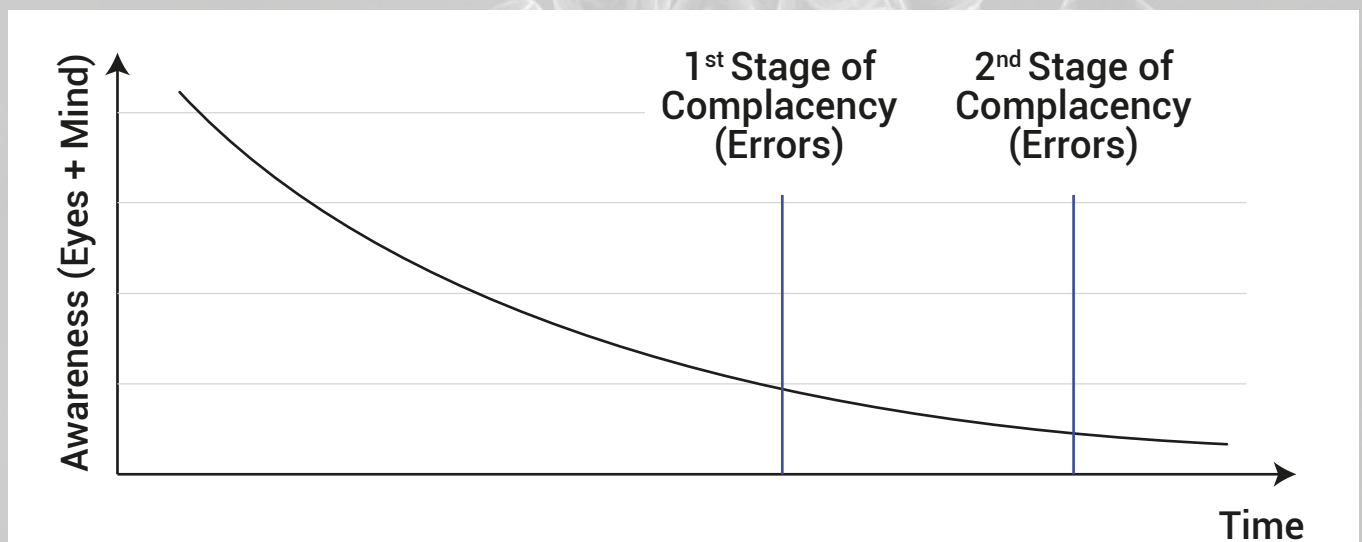


Figure 1: Complacency Continuum

"we cannot lower our guard until we're no longer in a pandemic". He reiterates that even vaccinated people have to continue distancing, wearing masks, and following protocols. Hector then explains that recovery is still going to be very slow from this wave. Not only does it take time for workers to be treated and recover, but once they return back to work, they still won't be 100% for a while. In thinking about future waves, he cautions businesses about shutting down completely: "if you can keep running even just at a minimum then coming back is easier".

After more than a year of Covid planning and protocols, it can be hard to imagine that there is anything more we can do. Nevertheless, Dr. Praveena, Mr. Arun and Mr. Salazar demonstrated how health and safety professions can rise to the occasion in such a challenging time. While certainly an unprecedented pandemic, complacency is quite predictable. So, as we tackle this next wave and begin to recover – because we will recover – we need to ensure that we have learned the lesson from this one. The end might be near, but we can't trip on the finish line.



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To view the full recording of the webinar, please visit our website or send a mail to asia@ssi.safestart.com

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed are those of the individual panellists and do not represent those of the companies where they work nor of SafeStart.



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