

Safe and Secure: Supporting International Staff



By

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The safety and well being of employees is generally a top-of-mind concern for nonprofit leaders. When an organization deploys its staff internationally, additional uncertainty enters the already complex risk landscape. Deployed staff members may work in limited resource environments or in conditions of cultural and political instability. Issues that might seem routine at home (preventative or minor medical care, travel-related incidents) require additional resources when dealt with in many international settings. Stakes escalate considerably in the event of emerging natural or man-made crises (weather disasters, epidemics, random or planned physical violence).

The *Duty of Care and Travel Risk Management Global Benchmarking Study* (2011) conducted by International SOS identified members of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector as being highly aware of travel-related threats and vulnerability to harm. Despite that awareness, a perennial challenge is translating general concern about staff safety into practical, sustainable strategies to address perceptions as well as real vulnerability to harm.

Culture Counts

The starting point of addressing safety and security of staff is the culture of the organization. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) encourages employers to develop a strong safety culture, as it might have the single greatest impact on incident reduction, compared to other safety initiatives. According to OSHA, a safety culture consists of shared safety beliefs, attitudes and practices that exist at a workplace. This type of operating mindset can influence how employees behave at work, better enabling them to focus on maintaining a safe environment. Though culture takes time to change, NGO leaders can work to support these key elements of a safety culture:

- **Staff members place personal safety above the preservation of assets:** Any smart nonprofit leader recognizes that employees are the organization's most valuable assets. Teach your employees to think this way, and ensure that everyone places personal safety above the preservation of the nonprofit's property, including cash, supplies, vehicles and other equipment. If a safety incident arises, employees should first protect themselves and their colleagues, and only then worry about personal and organization property.
- **Staff members trust their own appetite for travel- and safety-related risks:** Though international travel might be at the core of your mission, always trust a staff member's gut if s/he tells you s/he isn't comfortable going on the next trip. Staff and volunteers should have the right to refuse any travel assignments or specific duties based on concerns about safety and security. Reporting these concerns should be voluntary and protected, so that an employee can communicate tolerance for travel risk without risking status at your organization.

- **Financial considerations are never the primary driver for decisions about safety:** The safety of employees and volunteers must always come first—even above financial considerations. If you do not have the resources to invest in safety and security for a new program, then the program should probably remain in limbo until resources become available.
- **The organization regularly assesses the safety risks present in all of the countries, offices and regions where staff members work:** Invest in continual monitoring of the safety and security landscape in each country you work in. If you plan to deploy staff to new locales, begin risk assessments early on to get a better understanding of unique safety and security challenges you might face. Whenever possible, involve local security agencies or local staff in risk assessments; the on-the-ground perspective is essential to include and will likely offer you a more practical, realistic grasp of pressing safety and security issues.
- **Safety incidents become teachable moments, not punishable moments:** In some instances, a safety incident or near miss might warrant discipline if an employee was clearly behaving callously or was snubbing safety protocols. In other cases, safety and security incidents arise from a series of errors, poor decisions, or inaction taken by more than one person. Rather than looking for a safety scapegoat to take the blame when things go wrong, ensure that every safety incident becomes a teachable moment for your entire team. Communicate the results of incident investigations, involve diverse staff in brainstorming necessary changes to safety protocols, and reinforce the concept that reporting hazards and safety concerns is encouraged, voluntary, and protected.
- **Leaders take safety seriously:** ‘Tone at the top’ is a tried and true concept that can make a huge impact on your safety culture. Employees are more likely to follow the safety and security processes you put in place if senior leaders live by them too. If even one senior leader rejects a safety measure, that behavior speaks volumes to staff members. Ensure that your leaders take safety seriously and are held accountable for decisions that undermine your safety culture and protocols.
- **Safety is simple and stress-free:** Safety and security protocols often feel onerous to staff members, and onerous administrative tasks can be easily ignored or skirted around in favor of mission-focused work. Whenever possible, implement safety and security protocols that are simple and stress-free, and do not present undue burden on your staff members. For staff members who work in high-risk areas frequently, or for local staff who work in their home environment, remember that safety and security risk might feel like part of a regular day. Safety protocols should also feel as organic as possible.

Putting It All Together

Supporting and integrating the key elements of a safety culture can be time-consuming if your organization hasn't made it a priority in the past. However, to begin the process of integrating safety culture into the fundamental culture of your organization, there are several steps you can take. Some tips for integrating safety culture include:

- **Spread the Philosophy** — The understanding that safety is a priority and safety requirements are to be taken seriously is an important message to convey to individuals at all levels of the organization. In addition, every individual staff member or volunteer should feel empowered to take actions related to increasing safety and security and making these issues the highest priority. Personal responsibility and action are the foundation of effective safety and security efforts.
- **Write it Down** — Along with a spoken philosophy on increasing safety in your organization, policies should be put in place to ensure that staff know what they are expected to do, and what supports are in place to help them do it. If your organization does work in different countries, consider modifying your policies to specifically reflect the safety and security needs of each location. Make sure that your policies are reviewed and revised regularly to reflect information provided by on-site staff related to the changing safety and security conditions.
- **Team Up** — Consider creating Security Committees or Security Teams in each country where your organization does work. These teams might be responsible for reviewing incidents that have occurred and determining what changes need to be made based on lessons learned from them. Security Committees might also be tasked with reviewing and revising the safety policies on a periodic basis.
- **Simplify Reporting** — Make sure that all staff members understand that it is part of their job to report safety incidents or potential threats to safety. Make reporting as easy as possible by creating a reporting form. Many organizations choose to make their reporting form accessible online. That way reports can be

consolidated and reviewed by headquarters, even if they are being dealt with by in-country teams. Allowing anonymous reporting may also serve to increase reporting compliance.

- **Outline Emergency Procedures** — Whether included in each in-country policy or outlined in a separate document, make sure that staff have access to information on how to respond in an emergency. Emergency guidelines might include evacuation procedures, a complete list of current staff, and contact information for individuals who will be able to assist with the response.
- **Resolve to Stay in Touch** — Many NGOs have in-country operations with locally-based staff, and also use US-based staff who travel internationally. For those staff members who are traveling to a foreign country, it is especially important to ensure that they are familiar with the safety and security protocols of each country to which they travel. Creating an introductory kit that includes all written policies and contact information for assistance in emergencies is one way to help bring those staff members up to speed on the safety environment. Your organization might also schedule one or more check-ins with traveling staff members to ensure that they are safe and have the information they need.

Prioritize Safety

Once your organization begins working internationally, it is important to recognize that obtaining diverse perspectives, especially from on-the-ground staff members, will be essential in creating useful and practical safety and security protocols. Team members from different functions or departments may play a role in supporting your efforts and helping creating the most effective materials possible.

As your organization expands operations into new countries, also remember that safety and security must be integrated into the culture, the policies, and the services you provide. Reflecting on organizational culture as you work to create a safe and secure environment will ensure a smoother commencement of operations, and most importantly, help staff be safe while providing services on behalf of your organization.

Eric Henkel is a former Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.

RESOURCES

Duty of Care and Travel Risk Management Global Benchmarking Study (2011), International SOS, www.internationalsos.com/duty-of-care

U.S. State Department International Travel Warnings and Alerts, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings.html>

U.S. State Department Traveler's Checklist, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/go.html>

Global Risk News, by Joe Gleason, www.ahtins.com/blogs/globalrisknews