

PUWER Essentials: Leadership Responsibilities Explained

The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 (PUWER) form a cornerstone of occupational health and safety management in the United Kingdom. While PUWER is often treated as a technical or compliance-led requirement, its effectiveness is fundamentally shaped by leadership decisions, behaviours, and accountability.

This white paper reframes PUWER as a leadership responsibility, not merely an operational obligation. It explains what PUWER requires, why leadership involvement is critical, and how senior leaders, managers, and supervisors can actively fulfil their duties to protect people, assets, and organisational reputation.



What is PUWER?

PUWER applies to any organisation that owns, operates, controls, or manages work equipment. This includes machinery, tools, appliances, installations, and systems used at work. PUWER requires that work equipment is:

- Suitable for its intended use
- Safe for use, maintained, and inspected
- Used only by competent people
- Accompanied by appropriate information, instruction, and training
- Fitted with suitable safeguards and protective measures

While technical specialists may design and maintain equipment, leaders are accountable for ensuring the system around equipment use is effective.

Why PUWER is a Leadership Issue?

Leaders may delegate tasks, but legal and moral accountability remains with those who direct work and allocate resources. PUWER failures often stem not from faulty equipment, but from inadequate prioritisation of safety, insufficient resources for maintenance or training and pressure to bypass safeguards to meet deadlines.

Where leaders visibly value safety, PUWER compliance becomes embedded in daily behaviour. Where leaders focus solely on output, PUWER controls erode over time.



Key Leadership Responsibilities Under PUWER

Ensuring Equipment Suitability

Leaders must ensure that:

- Equipment is selected based on risk, not cost alone
- Changes in process or operating conditions trigger reassessment
- Procurement decisions consider lifecycle safety
- Equipment should still be suitable for how we actually use it today?

Providing Resources for Maintenance and Inspection

PUWER requires equipment to be maintained in a safe condition. Leadership should therefore take responsibility for approving budgets for inspection and preventive maintenance and ensuring inspection findings lead to action....and not just paperwork

otherwise you are accepting risk through inaction. Tie to this a common finding across many organisations is the deferment of critical maintenance to production pressures.

Ensuring Competence, Not Just Training

Training alone does not guarantee competence. Leaders should recognise that application of the training leads to competence which must be verified before any authorisations are approved. It is important to understand that only authorised and competent persons use equipment and that competence can decline and must therefore be verified and refreshed at appropriate times. All leaders should intervene when unsafe practices are observed.

Safeguarding and Risk Controls

PUWER requires appropriate guarding and protective devices. To ensure this is achieved, leaders have a responsibility to ensure safeguards are not removed, bypasses or defeated. Leaders should also support shutdowns when safety devices fail, and they should always back an employee or contractor who stops an unsafe job. The question needs to be 'What can I do to help you get the machine back to a condition for it to be safe to start and run' and not 'Why did you switch that machine off, and when is it going to be back up and running again'. Similar works although different perspectives and polar opposite reactions and mindset.

Information, Instruction, and Communication

This responsibility of leaders requires more than procedures – it requires clear, consistent leadership communication. Leaders must ensure that workers understand the equipment risk, know how to operate their equipment correct as well as know the safe operating limits and keep stakeholders up to date and fully informed of changes or new hazards. In essence, an effective management of change process.



PUWER and Risk-Based Leadership

PUWER becomes powerful when leaders treat it as a risk intelligence tool, not a compliance checklist.

<p>Effective PUWER leadership integrates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset risk management • Operational discipline • Human factors and behaviour 	<p>Leaders should routinely ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are we relying on experience instead of controls? • Where are safeguards routinely overridden? • Where are inspections identifying repeat findings?
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Good Practice: What Effective Leaders Do

Effective PUWER leaders create an environment where safe equipment use is non-negotiable. They do this through asking informed questions about equipment risk, visiting the workplace and observing how equipment is used. They need to act decisively on PUWER assessments and inspection finding and encourage and resolve reporting of faults, near misses or incidents. Leaders must continually reinforce that safety overrides production and never given instructions, or convey any intent that production can be the priority

Linking PUWER to Organisational Performance

Safety-led leadership consistently correlates with operational excellence. Effective PUWER leadership delivers:

- Reduced incidents and downtime
- Improved asset reliability
- Higher workforce trust and engagement
- Protection from legal and reputational damage