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Getting to Zero Injuries

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Abstract

More and more organizations are talking about and striving for a zero-incident or injury-free safety culture. Many senior leaders have heard this phrase and have understood its meaning and taken it on as an objective. Some have a clear-cut vision of what a zero-incident safety culture really looks like. More often the vision is somewhat blurred, but the general idea is quite appealing. If you ask senior leaders what they mean by zero-incident safety culture they will say they mean an organization that has a high value for safety and that has very low incident frequency rates. At the same time other leaders, given the opportunity to be straightforward, will say that it would be nice to have a zero-incident safety culture, but in reality some number of incidents are inevitable and that it is overly optimistic to think that injuries can be eliminated all together.

Introduction

For the past 20 years the author and his associates have worked with over 1,600 organizations to improve safety performance. In the course of that work, we have discovered that organizations optimize their efforts when they provide and support strong roles at each of three core roles: the front-line employee, supervisory and senior manager levels. These three roles, when appropriately engaged, make up a cord of three strands that is not easily broken.

Of these three areas, the leadership role has proved to be both the most impactful for safety improvement, as well as the most complex to understand and influence. One striking example of this is seen in the study of sites using the same improvement methodology. Even when compared by industry, site size, and systems, some organizations achieve steady improvement while others consistently struggle. More than any other factor, the quality of the organization's leadership, in particular its influence on the organizational culture, determined the level of success achieved.

While it is generally recognized that leadership is important to performance, the "how" of that leadership is often debated. What makes a leader effective at influencing and improving safety? What are the qualities of such a leader? What are the key tasks that a leader must perform in order to generate desired results?

While this paper will focus on these questions as it pertains to senior leaders, the principles discussed are applicable to any level in the organization.

How Leadership Influences Safety

How is it that safety leadership assures performance improvement?

The primary activi ty of safety initiatives, whether at the site or corporate level, is to reduce the amount of exposure that occurs in the workplace. While not all exposure is equal in terms of severity potential, all incidents result from exposure to hazards and reducing exposure is the primary mechanism of safety improvement. Exposure arises from management and work system problems and the pressures of the organizational climate. These lead to hazards in the workplace and worker exposure. Leaders directly and

indirectly impact systems and climate, and thereby hazards and exposure.

In order to understand these connections, the following sections present findings from ongoing research that answer some of the critical questions surrounding safety leadership.

The Four Elements of Successful Safety Leadership

At its most basic, leadership is about establishing a direction and helping people to move in that direction. Practically speaking, leadership comes down to two tasks:

- Getting subordinates to do the right work the right way, and
- Maintaining a successful relationship with the people doing that work.

In many organizations, particularly in the area of safety, the two tasks appear to be at odds with each other. Oftentimes leaders believe that doing one well means sacrificing the other. While there is undeniably a tension that must be balanced between these two tasks, we have found that the leaders in organizations who perform both of these tasks well are able to maintain a healthy and appropriate balance. And these leaders are more effective at fostering high levels of safety performance.

The successful realization of this balance, both on the interpersonal level and on a level that impacts the whole organization, starts with who the leader is and what is important to him or her. It radiates out from there in how the leader goes about influencing others concerning what's important to the organization. Then it expresses itself in what things the leader does day-to-day and especially in how he or she does them. And it ends by shaping nine elements of the organization's culture and safety climate, elements that play out directly in safety performance.

Personality & Values

The leader's personality and values are at the core of who the leader is, and consequently at the core of his or her effectiveness as a safety leader. These two elements strongly influence what the leader will tend to focus on and the likelihood that the leader will favor or use the most effective influencing style for safety and the best safety leadership practices.

How the Leader Influences

Leaders differ in their style of influencing others. The influence style describes how the leader interacts with subordinates to enlist their energy in an enterprise. Research shows that a transformational leadership style is characteristic of the most effective safety leaders.

What Leaders Do

The leader enacts his or her personality, values and leadership style in daily practices. These are the day-to-day behaviors through which the leader effectively (or not) influences the vigor of the safety climate and builds strong safety systems.

Organizational Culture

The safety climate is the readily measurable, more accessible and more rapidly changed aspects of the organizational safety culture. It is the place where the leader has leverage to impact the culture, or "how we do things around here." Research indicates that there are specific aspects of the organization's culture and safety climate that are predictive of high safety performance.

Personality & Values

At the very core of who a leader is, and consequently how he or she acts and responds as a leader, are personality and values. Studies have identified a strong link between a leader's personality and many dimensions of employee performance. Personality describes the stable attributes of the person on five dimensions, known in the research literature as the Big Five. The Big Five dimensions are:

- Extroversion - involves warmth towards others, outgoingness, assertiveness, level of activity, seeking excitement, optimism and positive emotions.
- Agreeableness -involves trusting others, being straightforward, consideration for others, compliance with standards, modesty, and sympathy.
- Conscientiousness - involves a sense of competence, orderliness, sense of responsibility, need to achieve, self-discipline, and deliberateness.
- Emotional Stability - involves confidence in self and others, an upbeat approach to challenges, and the ability to handle stress well.
- Openness to Experience - involves a sense of curiosity, an exploratory approach to challenges and an imaginative mindset.

In addition, the leader's values need to be compatible with those required for the job. In our experience, the most successful safety leaders have a high value for service to others, problem solving and quality as well as a low tolerance for exposing others to risk. The makeup of a leader's personalities and values dispose them to their influence style, and the likelihood that they will engage in the practices identified as optimal for producing a high-performing organizational safety culture.

While a personality is well-formed by adulthood and its Big Five dimensions are stable over time, the important point is that leaders gain flexibility and breadth of options through insight into their own values and personality structure. Effective leaders understand their values and personalities and are able to develop highly effective ways for bringing their assets to the forefront

and offsetting their liabilities.

How the Leader Influences

There are a number of influence styles that leaders use. The research shows that leaders who have a strong transformational leadership style typically have groups that perform better in various ways, including safety outcomes.

Transformational leadership has four dimensions. The first is **charisma**. Does the leader provide vision and a sense of mission, instill pride, gain respect and trust and increase optimism? The second is **inspiration**, which is sometimes grouped with charisma. Essentially, it defines whether the leader acts as a model, communicates a vision, sets high standards, and uses symbols to focus efforts. The third is **individual attention**. Does the leader coach, mentor, provide feedback, link the individuals' needs to the organization's mission, and provide personal attention? The fourth dimension is **intellectual challenge**. Does the leader provide subordinates with a flow of challenging new ideas aimed at rethinking old ways of doing things, challenge dysfunctional paradigms, promote rationality and careful problem solving?

Interestingly, leaders who have high levels of transformational leadership are not dependent on their bosses to place a high priority on safety. Their safety best practices are strong whether or not there is an external emphasis on safety. It is likely that this is related to who the leader is: a transformational leader is more likely to demonstrate a value for the well being of his or her subordinates, and this motivation to protect employees comes from a different—and more interior—place than organizational authority. Another finding related to transformational leadership is that its relationship to safety outcomes is entirely mediated by preventative action. In other words, it's not just the leader's influence style that matters, but also what the leader does: supervisors with strong relationships with workers (transformational style) talk and listen to them and take action about safety (preventative action) and that leads to lower injury rates.

What a Leader Does: Best Practices

What a leader does and how he or she does it is a manifestation of the leader's personality, values influence style and level of insight or understanding of his or her own personality. The leader's typical behaviors or practices in turn strongly influence the organizational safety climate and ultimately the culture.

The author and his colleagues have identified several best safety leadership practices. In our work we noted that certain management and leadership practices recur across those organizations with high-performing cultures. Comparing that experience with existing literature on leadership influences on safety and organizational culture the author and his colleagues came to the conclusion that there are at least eight definable leadership practices connected to the development and support of a high-performing safety culture. These are Vision, Credibility, Collaboration, Feedback and Recognition, Accountability, Communication, Values Safety, and Action Oriented.

- **Vision** – The effective leader has identified the strategic role of safety performance to his or her organization, is able to "see" what such performance excellence would look like, and can convey that vision in a compelling way to the organization.
- **Credibility** – The effective leader is credible to other people in the organization, is willing to admit his or her mistakes to others, "goes to bat" for direct reports and the interests of the group, and gives honest information about safety even it if is not well received.
- **Collaboration** – The effective leader works well with other people, promotes cooperation and collaboration in safety, actively seeks input from people on issues that affect them, and encourages others to implement their decisions and solutions for improving safety.
- **Feedback & Recognition** – The effective leader is good at providing feedback and recognizing people for their accomplishments. This person publicly recognizes the contributions of others, uses praise more often than criticism, gives positive feedback and recognition for good performance, and finds ways to celebrate accomplishments in safety.
- **Accountability** – The effective leader gives people a fair appraisal of the efforts and results in safety, clearly communicates people's roles in the safety effort, and fosters the sense that every person is responsible for the level of safety in their organizational unit.
- **Communication** – The effective leader is a great communicator. He or she encourages people to give honest and complete information about safety even if the information is unfavorable. This leader keeps people informed about the big picture in safety, and communicates frequently and effectively up, down, and across the organization.
- **Action-Orientation** – The effective leader is proactive rather than reactive in addressing safety issues. This leader gives timely, considered responses for safety concerns, demonstrates a sense of personal urgency and energy to achieve safety results, and demonstrates a performance-driven focus by delivering results with speed and excellence.

The Organizational Culture and Safety Climate the Leader Creates

Our experience working with organizations interested in performance improvement, and subsequent ongoing research, have highlighted the fact that far from being an ambiguous facet of organizational life, organizational culture and safety climate are definable and measurable in very practical terms. High-performing organizations consistently show high trust, good communication, management credibility, and organizational value for safety. Low-performing organizations tend to show the opposite. We have identified nine characteristics of organizational culture that are predictive of successful safety outcomes. These are:

- **Teamwork**–the effectiveness of workgroups in meeting targets and deadlines. It is clear how the leadership best practice of collaboration and feedback can build teamwork. Transformational leadership can build teamwork when the transformational leader directs attention to the team and uses it to develop and implement safety solutions.
- **Workgroup relations**–the degree to which coworkers respect each other. Transformational leadership instills pride, gains respect and trust, increases optimism among members of a workgroup and collaborates practices increasing the likelihood that team members will reciprocate these things with each other.
- **Procedural justice**–the level that workers rate the fairness of first-level supervisors. When transformational leadership is strong in a leader, the individual attention is shared across subordinates, not focused on particular favorites, which supports this procedural justice. But procedural justice also requires action-oriented practices: systems and procedures need to be aligned to visibly support fairness.
- **Perceived organizational support**–the level to which employees feel the organization is concerned for their overall well-being. This factor in particular requires the transformational style and follow-up action oriented practices. Part of the definition of transformational leadership is individual attention, which influences Perceived Organizational Support only when the leader actually does things to demonstrate the concern for employees' well-being and interests.
- **Leader-member exchange**–the strength of the two-way relationship that workers feel they have with their supervisors. Strong perceptions of leader-member exchange require that the leader follow-up his or her individual attention, intellectual challenge, and inspiring words with behaviors and practices, for example actually going to bat for employees when needed. This requires not only action-oriented practices, but also those needed for good communications and

credibility.
- **Management credibility**–the perception of consistency and fairness of management in dealing with workers. Part of the definition of transformational leadership is that the leader gains respect and trust of employees, and acts as a model. This dovetails with leadership best practices needed for credibility. When the majority of leaders are successful in this, overall management credibility will be improved.
- **Organizational value for safety**–this is often called 'safety climate,' the perceived level of the organization's commitment to safety. Interestingly, this factor matters less if the leader has the right values. This means that even when the organization itself is not supporting safety at a high level, the individual transformational leader can effectively support it. Conversely, if the leader's style does not include strong transformational elements, the leader is more dependent on the organization's support for safety performance.
- **Upward communication**–the adequacy of upward messages about safety. Listening to subordinates is an action that needs to accompany transformational leadership for it to be effective. But when both are in place, upward communication is positively impacted.
- **Approaching others**–the probability that workers will speak to each other about safety issues. In a feedback-rich environment, modeled by the leader, people are more likely to approach each other.

Companies with cultures that are high in these nine characteristics tend to be more successful in initiatives they undertake, generate change more rapidly, and achieve higher performance overall in critical business functions than companies that score low on these factors.

Leadership Roles for Every Level

So how do the four elements of successful safety leadership apply to each level of the organization?

Front-Line Employees – In many organizations, BBS offers the first real opportunity for front-line employees to contribute to safety. Typically front-line employees are responsible for running the process, from conducting observations to running meetings to data analysis and action plan completion. Successful organizations ensure that key individuals have adequate training for their role. This training is typically interaction skills and behavior-based principles for observers and more specific time management and organization skills for team facilitators.

Supervisors & Team Leaders – Supervisors have the most influence over day-to-day activities

that affect performance outcomes. While some sites do allow supervisors to conduct observations, most have supervisors take a supporting role, providing work coverage so employees can conduct observations, and assisting in barrier removal action plans. Some organizations are providing supervisors and team leaders with training in performance management skills to help them work with employees to meet overall safety objectives.

Senior Leaders & Managers – Research shows that one of the most critical factors in the success of BBS is leadership. Through what they choose to focus on and how they go about doing the things they do, leaders telegraph what is really important to the organization. Typically not engaged in on-the-floor observations or barrier removal, senior leaders can still set the stage for BBS success by fostering a healthy organizational culture. Site managers can get more directly involved by becoming process champions or by helping with action plans to remove barriers to safe behavior. Many leaders and managers are also engaging in directed coaching that helps them leverage their actions for optimum effect throughout the organization.

Conclusion

Organizational culture and safety climate are strongly influenced by the quality and type of leadership enacted throughout the organization and this in turn impacts safety performance. Leaders can gain insight into their own values and personality structures and how these play out in their influence style and practices. Understanding how these factors interact enables leaders to use their own behavior as a central leverage point for safety. It shows them what to do to build strong safety performance.