

Changing the Game in Safety Performance: The Leader's Role

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Introduction

Transforming safety performance starts with leadership. Leaders define organizational goals and attitudes with everything they do and say—whether they intend to or not. To change the game in safety performance, leaders must have a clear and unshakable commitment to safety. They need to go beyond initiatives and numbers, and make safety personal.

The most successful leaders understand that leading safety well means creating a culture of commitment that spans the entire business, motivating people to do what is right for everyone in the organization—even in the face of conflicting priorities. This requires moving priorities away from gimmicky programs that drain resources to a holistic approach that engages employees in exposure-reduction efforts, maximizes the time and expertise of site leaders to influence behavior, and develops relationships that will sustain long-term goals.

This paper explores how to apply the best practices of the world's top safety leaders to achieve dramatic safety performance improvement.

Changing the Game Means Changing the Culture

Across industries organizations depend on a high level of compliance with rules (personal safety) and regulations (process safety) to keep employees safe. Whether the rules govern personal protective equipment (e.g., goggles or special clothing) or pertain to process safety procedures (e.g., control of explosive properties, accidental release, emergency planning and response), ensuring consistent adherence requires a high level of oversight, procedural reinforcement, discipline, and persistent effort to change undesired behaviors.

Ensuring this level of compliance takes a lot of work, and efforts to build compliance don't always lead to the type of outcomes the organization wants. There are several barriers that compliance-based safety poses to advancing performance:

- **Injuries live in the past:** Historical injury data, from which we derive the bulk of regulations, are helpful for understanding the types of outcomes that *can* occur when working with particular materials, equipment, or processes. Historical data, however, can never anticipate every possible outcome. And ironically, when our primary source of exposure information is injury, the better we become at preventing injuries, the less information we have to work with. The key to getting in front of this situation is to stop chasing injuries and start focusing on exposure, using the *likelihood* for injury (leading indicator) rather than

actual injuries (lagging indicator) as the measure of performance and the trigger for change. Properly measured, exposure gives leaders a chance to intervene before injury occurs and gets them out of the rear mirror approach to safety.

- **When rules meets culture, culture wins:** Safety rules and processes don't exist in a vacuum. Like other business systems, they are interpreted through culture—the unwritten external guide on “how I should behave here.” Culture strongly influences how closely people follow explicit rules—or whether they follow them at all. For example, requiring a face shield when grinding may seem straightforward enough. Yet, in some workplaces it could be considered okay or even expected that workers opt out when the boss isn't around. Compliance-based organizations face an additional hurdle when rules based on prior injuries create blind spots. These are the rules that either mandate actions that don't apply to the work or that demand something that is difficult or impossible for the worker to do. Taking the face shield example, “blind spot” rules might require the use of PPE that is routinely stored 50 feet or more away from the grinding area or that may even be unavailable. Behavior, like electricity, follows the path of least resistance. Rules work best when they are aligned with cultural and organizational realities.
- **Being good at following the rules only means you're good at following the rules:** In many organizations the achievement of a low injury rate (or another single measure) is assumed to indicate that safety more generally (specifically including management of process safety) is well managed. In fact there is not necessarily any connection between good management of process safety and good management of personal safety. Further, there is not necessarily any connection between injury rates and actual exposure to injury events. Organizations need to be able to understand in real time what their exposure to risk looks like.
- **Compliance can't account for all the variables in a live workplace.** Rules are static and are usually based on our best understanding of likely exposure to risk in our current configuration of equipment and processes. But live workplaces change, events intersect, things happen. Employees trained to comply with the rules, without a sense of the bigger picture or the principles behind why we do what we do, are not positioned to respond when anomalies occur. Employees need to understand when exposure is increasing and know how to change their behavior in response. It's counterintuitive but employees do not put themselves at-risk unless they receive a positive consequence for doing so. Things like saving time, expending less effort, going home early, and meeting production quotas can often put pressure on rules compliance. We need to understand these pressures and ensure the consequences of compliance are much more positive than the consequences of non-compliance.

Culture, leadership, organizational systems and other factors make up a complex system that interacts with, influences, and guides workplace behavior. Aligning these factors is the key to developing the behavior reliability needed to ensure that the systems and rules already in place are used as intended. It is also a necessary step to create an adaptable workforce that can go beyond mere compliance and respond to risk when it changes. After all, rules cannot account for every variable in a dynamic work environment.

So how do organizations advance safety in the face of such complex and constantly changing realities? By developing an inherent organizational adaptability to change that extends to every employee in the organization. We call this the culture of commitment.

Commitment to Safety Starts with Leaders

Leaders are ultimately responsible for the culture of the organization, whether they've been there for 20 years or have just arrived. Do leaders promote a strong adaptive culture or do they inadvertently reinforce (or create) poor organizational functioning? Line employees cannot change the culture of the organization; that power is in the hands of the leaders. There are a core set of safety best practices as well as the leaders' transformational style that have a predictive relationship to the culture of an organization. The better leaders are at these, the better the culture—and the greater the commitment to safety.

It's easy for us as leaders to take the victim approach to the culture. Are we wallowing in the problems or are we understanding that we are the change agents for improving organizational functioning? Once we understand the strengths and gaps in our safety leadership behaviors, we can then start focusing on what we are doing well and reinforce these behaviors while understanding where we can improve. There are four steps leaders can take to change the game in safety performance.

The Four Leadership Competencies That Will Change the Game

To change the game in safety performance, organizations need to build a culture of commitment that is resilient and supports people's efforts to stay ahead of risks and the weak signals that indicate potential incidents. This requires steadfast leadership. There are four basic leadership competencies all leaders must develop to become great at safety:

1. Have the conviction to lead safety
2. Understand how safety works
3. Possess and practice great leadership skills
4. Have the ability to influence people

Have the Conviction to Lead Safety

Safety leadership isn't just initiatives and numbers—it's personal. An organization's employees receive and host the effects of the leader's personality, values, and behavioral standards—the products of his emotional commitment to safety. The leader's personal commitment influences safety decision making, interactions with employees, the priority placed on safety, and how he drives success.

Leaders build the culture of their organization with everything they say and do. All leaders respect the sanctity of human life, but if they cannot effectively convey the premium they place on safety, they will not succeed in sustaining the actions necessary to transform their organizations into front-runners in safety.

To get the most out of safety, leaders must engage the essential humanity of their employees and co-workers—a daunting task, to be sure. The good news is that leaders can discover and strengthen their ability to understand, perform, and communicate their personal commitment to safety in a way that will guide decisions, actions, and interactions in any situation, regardless of their personality or leadership style.

Developing the strength to do the right thing in critical moments (and in all the other ones) comes from having a clear and unshakable emotional commitment to safety. In other words, *to lead safety well, you first need to care about it*. And caring begins with what we value.

Changing the game in safety performance requires someone who will lead not because safety's on his list of goals or because there's a crisis, but because he has a deeply-held belief that it's the right thing to do. Leaders with a strong personal value and vision for safety are best equipped to navigate their teams through the noise that might otherwise create complacency or desensitization.

Understand How Safety Works

Effective safety leaders continually discuss exposure and risk and use metrics to provide feedback to their teams. A leader doesn't need to be an expert on safety, but she does need to know enough to detect patterns, assess information, and ask the right questions. To begin to develop a working knowledge of safety concepts and processes and build a culture that supports commitment, leaders can ask themselves the following questions:

- Do people throughout the organization understand the difference between personal safety and prevention of catastrophic events? If not, they may mistake good performance in personal safety with good control of the potential for catastrophic events.
- Do we have the right technical and management systems in place, and do they get implemented as intended (and how are they monitored)? Ultimately what happens day to day is more important than the design intent of these systems.
- Does our culture support consistent and rigorous use of safety-technical and management systems? Culture determines the way things are really done in the organization, and if the culture does not support key systems the systems are bound to break down.
- Do leaders act in ways that promote identification of exposure and reduction of risk? There are key leadership behaviors that can help ensure effective hazard recognition, evaluation, and control. If leaders are not aware of these and actively practicing them, technical and management systems are likely to be compromised.
- Do our "consequence management" systems support the activities critical to prevention of incidents? The way performance is assessed, promotions awarded, and recognition and rewards distributed are all examples of how key systems influence perceptions of what is truly important in an organization.
- Do we have the right skills available for supporting all aspects of safety? Do we assign roles and responsibilities in a way that ensures clarity, alignment, coordination, and communication? Prevention of injuries and catastrophic events is generally a multifunctional effort. This requires careful consideration of how the various participants interact and collaborate.
- Are the metrics in place to detect changes in exposure and ensure focus on key processes and procedures? Do leaders use leading data or are they only reacting to lagging indicators?

Possess and Practice Great Leadership Skills

We have all known, or known of, great leaders: those whose commitment, combined with excellence in leadership, has had an enormously positive influence on people and performance. If we understand what effective leaders do in concrete, behavioral terms, we can apply their successes to ourselves.

There are seven best practices for excellence in process safety leadership.

- Vision
- Credibility
- Action orientation
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Recognition and feedback
- Accountability

Although these practices enhance leadership generally, they are derived with safety in mind. Effective leaders of all stripes are also effective safety leaders *if* they value safety. These best practices demonstrate to employees the leader's commitment to safety, his personal concern for them as human beings, and the value he places on the health of the organization.

Vision

Many leaders either lack vision or have it but find it difficult to articulate. Others seem to be natural visionaries and take this ability for granted. A great safety leader holds a clear picture of the future state of safety in her organization and articulates that picture in a compelling way. She can "see" in some detail the desired future state and communicate this state to others. How does the desired future state differ from the way things are today? What kinds of things will people do and say that they don't now? How will decisions be made differently, and what assumptions underlie these decisions? If by some miracle we could instantly change the organization's culture today, how would tomorrow be different? A leader with vision:

- Behaves in a way that communicates high personal standards for safety
- Helps others question and rethink their assumptions about safety
- Communicates the organizational vision through word and action
- Demonstrates a willingness to consider and accept new ideas
- Helps people understand how their actions affect people's safety and impact the organization's culture
- Challenges and inspires people around the safety vision
- Describes a compelling picture of what the future could be

Credibility

Great safety leaders enjoy high credibility with direct reports, team members, workers, and with the larger organization. Expert knowledge and skill, though important, do not ensure a leader's credibility. People have to trust the leader. They have to have faith that he will follow through on promises and will tell the truth, especially when it is unpopular or difficult to say. The credible leader is perceived to be free of personal agendas. Most important, the leader's actions and words are seen as consistent. Such a leader is transparent with his decisions and plans for the organization. A leader with high credibility:

- Demonstrates personal concern for everyone in the organization
- Acknowledges his own limitations and errors
- Is believable, transparent, and trustworthy
- Speaks inconvenient truths about safety
- Follows through on her commitments

Action Orientation

Leaders that are capable of changing performance take action on behalf of safety issues and actively seek opportunities to do so. This propensity reinforces credibility and tends to flow naturally from it. Safety issues arise and the leader makes decisions: shut down the process or continue with it, do the maintenance task now or later, spend the resources necessary to address the hazard at its source or do something temporary to mitigate the problem. Action orientation means that the leader is persistent and innovative and feels a sense of urgency about safety. An action-oriented safety leader:

- Addresses issues proactively
- Seeks opportunities to make safety improvements
- Makes tough decisions with regard to safety
- Feels a sense of personal urgency about safety
- Is energetic about achieving excellence in safety

Collaboration

Collaboration means working together, much like the way scientists and academics cooperate in intellectual pursuits. Collaboration also means soliciting and taking into account the views of others before making decisions. Collaboration is critical to effective safety leadership because safety success requires the willing involvement of people throughout the organization.

Creating a culture that is committed to safety requires that every employee understand and embody the core concepts and related behaviors that constitute safety excellence. Participation and collaboration engender engagement; unilateral decision making shuts it down. To achieve meaningful engagement in safety the people involved in the process must feel they are important to its success. A safety leader who collaborates well:

- Inspires the willing involvement of others
- Engages others in safety decision making
- Works cooperatively with others to achieve safety goals
- Solicits the views of others before making decisions

Communication

Leaders who foster a culture of open communication enjoy the benefits of an informed workforce, including a stream of more reliable information that improves decision making. Increased communication supports cultural alignment and error-free productivity. Quality communication produces safety competence because it clearly details what the safety issues are, how they are being addressed, and the role each employee plays in mitigating risks and removing hazards. A safety leader with good communication skills:

- Supports the top-to-bottom transparency of safety concerns and outcomes
- Creates an atmosphere in which safety communication is expected and reinforced
- Shares safety-relevant information in a timely manner

Recognition and Feedback

The core principle behind the best practice called recognition and feedback is that performance improves when leadership notices positive change and acknowledges it. The acknowledgment doesn't need to be formal or financial, but it should be consistent and genuine, especially when new desired behaviors begin to emerge. Desired behaviors require reinforcement in order for them to become an established part of the culture.

The great safety leader is tuned into the behaviors of employees, sets the expectation that safety-critical practices will be followed, monitors safety behaviors regularly, and provides

immediate and constructive feedback. There is a time and place for negative feedback, but in the great majority of cases positive feedback is a better way to sustain desired behaviors. A safety leader skilled in the use of recognition and feedback:

- Notices and acknowledges positive changes in safety activity levels and hazard mitigation efforts
- Gives added organizational visibility to internal best practices in safety
- Provides consistent, accurate, and timely safety recognition
- Provides positive coaching and guidance as needed

Accountability

In successful organizations accountability means ongoing evaluation of performance relative to an established objective, target, or standard and providing feedback and other consequences based on that performance. Accountability includes objective evaluation of performance designed to help employees succeed. Accountability should focus on setting clear expectations and consequences regarding exposure-mitigation practices and upstream activities that produce safety outcomes.

Leaders who integrate the practice of accountability with the other leadership best practices are more likely to have a workforce that perceives the organization's decisions as transparent and fair. Employees who feel respected by management will be more engaged in building a lasting culture of safety excellence. A safety leader who is skilled in accountability:

- Employs accountability in the context of the other six leadership best practices
- Creates a company-wide attitude of personal responsibility for safety
- Bases accountability on exposure-mitigation practices and upstream activities

Ability to Influence People

For many leaders, becoming good at safety requires learning how to do things differently. A well-intentioned leader will talk to employees about the need to follow all safety protocols. An effective leader will recognize that doing everything it takes to prevent incidents looks very different in rush at the frontline than in the boardroom, and will know that she won't get anywhere without establishing her emotional commitment to employees first. The difference is transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership style is a way of inspiring employees to go above and beyond self-interest—to get them to harness their personal commitment to safety. Transformational leaders don't use their power to coerce people to follow the rules or do things a certain way. They use intrinsic values and an emotional commitment to inspire and influence people's behavior. A leader's ability to motivate, inspire, challenge, and engage people comes down to her ability to change the way employees view her. If she is perceived as credible and trustworthy, her influence will go much further than if she is seen as self-interested or unreliable.

The transformational leader's influence also hinges on the way employees view themselves: what they believe they are capable of and how they personally relate to safety. A leader who communicates with workers as mutual partners in safety, provides constructive feedback, positively reinforces desired behavior, and listens to people about worksite concerns instills self-confidence and commitment in his direct reports.

Transformational leadership plays out in many places, but it has its natural home in interventions—when leaders approach employees who are doing something that needs correction or reinforcement. To develop a more transformational style, a leader needs to ask three questions:

- *What do I want this person to think about me?* In other words, what are my intentions in this discussion, and how do I want to convey them? I may want the person to recognize the responsibility I have for him. I may want him to understand that while I don't know exactly how to proceed with our discussion, I will never ignore a hazard or allow a risk to persist.
- *What do I want this person to think about themselves?* Transformational leaders engage workers in the safety process; they don't lecture or place blame. This aspect of the transformational style is focused on helping the leader guide the employee's own emotional commitment to safety. Do you want the employee to feel she is being made an example or that she is someone you believe is capable of achieving her established goals?
- *What do I want that person to say to others about our interaction?* The reality is that few leaders can have meaningful interactions with everyone in the organization. It is also true that the discussions leaders do have will be relayed to others. Thinking about how a discussion with an employee may be passed on to others helps the leader frame a positive takeaway that will live on long after it is said.

Great leaders use a transformational style to engage people in the work. Leaders who want to change safety performance must create a culture that enables people to reliably execute safety processes, detect weak signals, question assumptions, and intervene when necessary. A great example of the need for influence is the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster. The foam breakage that contributed to the event was a known problem and was known to be outside of mission parameters. Yet, the culture allowed the deviations to persist (many times ahead of Columbia) because deviations hadn't yet resulted in a problem *and* people were discouraged from challenging the decision makers.

Conclusion

Leaders have the ability to transform their organization into a place that is truly committed to safety and excels at it. This transformation starts with a personal commitment—a conviction to make a change and the dedication to put it into action. Leaders who are guided by their values will expand their knowledge of the workings of safety systems and will develop their skills in the seven leadership best practices and transformational leadership style. By cultivating the four leadership competencies that support safety excellence, leaders demonstrate to employees what it means to look out for one another's wellbeing, inspiring and influencing people throughout the organization to find their own personal way to take ownership of safety.

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