

Building Community SERVANT LEADERSHIP

By David J. Sarkus

SERVANT LEADERSHIP was first linked to improvements in safety performance more than 25 years ago (Sarkus, 1996). The author's insights originated from Robert Greenleaf's leadership work (Frick & Spears, 1996; Peck, 1995), comprised of major themes such as vision, persuasion, caring, collaborating, inspiring followers to be servant leaders and building community. Greenleaf characterizes servant leadership in the following way:

The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. . . . The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant—first to make sure that other people's highest-priority needs are being served. The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society, will they benefit or, at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1970, as cited in Frick & Spears, 1996)

From a safety performance perspective, more recently, others have validated the strength and positive outcomes of servant leadership with empirical support (Cooper, 2015). However, little seems to have been written about the specific aspects of servant leadership that improve an organization's culture of safety, along with the reduction of undesirable events. One part of servant leadership—building community—holds promise in this regard.

Characteristics of Community

Community relates to what we have in common such as values, organizational commitment, cooperation and dependence upon one another. This association is relevant since workers

often share common personal and organizational values and support for each other, all of which should help to strengthen and align with an organization's values, vision and mission for success. In turn, this commonality extends to outcomes regarding safety, production, quality and morale. In terms of better understanding community, the term "psychological sense of community" often refers to shared emotional connections, safe and healthy relationships, and positive feelings that evolve from being part of a given group (Burroughs & Eby, 1998). Organizational community can also be considered a place where people recognize the need for each other and mutual support (Brown & Isaacs, 1994; Sarson, 1974).

Community emphasizes greater engagement, ownership, diverse views, cooperation, transparency in safety-related communications, empowerment and consensus building (Arnold et al., 2019). Furthermore, community is not simply about team-building or group-oriented activities; community is built from the inside out by its own members, where people may live close to each other in a larger community. Community is deeper and more durable in that members share common organizational values, attitudes and beliefs that help to produce larger forms of cooperation, civility, transparency, personal bonds and resiliency, particularly in the face of adversity (Nirenberg, 2007).

By creating more of a sense of community, leaders begin to help workers to take on a greater leadership role within their own work groups (Melchar & Bosco, 2010). Community is an important part of establishing a culture of safety, as openness in communications and psychological safety are essential to be able to speak freely about safety concerns, near-misses, or close calls to reduce and eliminate serious events, incidents and fatalities (Detert & Burris, 2007; Sarkus, 2019). As such, characteristics of a community should be considered as important aspects for better understanding our cultures of safety and how ongoing improvements can be sustained.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Little has been written about the specific aspects of servant leadership that improve an organization's culture of safety and reduce undesirable events. One part of servant leadership—building community—holds promise in this regard.
- A sense of community helps workers take on a greater leadership role within their work groups. Community is also an important part of establishing a culture of safety, as openness in communications and psychological safety are essential to be able to speak freely about safety concerns.
- By comparing two organizations through a safety perception survey, this article discusses five dimensions of community and safety-related outcomes. It also describes ways that leaders can examine these dimensions in their organizations to develop a greater sense of community through safety to achieve a greater sense of mission and trust, and improve relationships, productivity and quality.

Continuous Improvement

To achieve continuous improvement in safety, professionals should seek different ways to understand and build their cultures with a keen view toward adopting a greater psychological sense of community, one where workers recognize and feel they are an important part of a shared vision for safety (Cooper, 2001; Sarkus, 1996). Workers must also believe they are a part of a group of people who know they can improve safety performance and keep each other safe. Psychological sense of community also includes respect, engagement and civility among members (Arnold et al., 2019). To better characterize community, others have identified key aspects related to building organizational community, which have been adapted for a clearer understanding within the language of contemporary safety and health as: 1. commitment to a mission for safe production;

Community Through LEADERSHIP

2. diverse and inclusive opinions; 3. openness and honesty; 4. fairness and cooperation; and 5. consensus building (Brown & Isaacs, 1994; Buber, 1958, 1965; Peck, 1987).

Understanding the Five Dimensions of Community

To further address these five dimensions of community and safety-related outcomes, two moderate- to high-risk organizations were identified and compared through a validated safety perception survey. The survey contains 55 original statements that fit within 11 dimensions. For the purposes of measuring community alone, only 10 of the 55 statements were placed within the five dimensions cited. Company A had a total of 585 participants, 75 management respondents (13%) and 510 labor participants (87%). Company B had a total of 72 participants, 17 management respondents (24%) and 55 labor respondents (76%). Each statement used a four-point Likert response scale, where 1 = mostly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = mostly agree. For this article, the 1 and 2 response choices were combined into “disagree,” and the 3 and 4 response choices were combined into “agree.” Figures 1 through 5 (p. 26) show the levels of percent agreement from total participants within each community-oriented statement for Company A and B, as well as statistical significance levels of chi-square tests of differences between the two companies in agreement levels. At the time of each survey, neither company had knowledge of community-related efforts or dimensions that were later identified by this author.

Commitment to Mission

Astute organizational leaders realize the importance of safety leadership, accountability and pervasive communications at every level. Leaders should also know the value of setting expectations for each job from start to finish (Cooper, 2015; Sarkus, 2018). Organizations should have a strong sense of mission, purpose and emotional connection between workers, which then drives performance through a set of acceptable behavioral standards (Campbell & Yeung, 1991; Salih & Doll, 2013). Increasingly, environment, health and safety are often part of a company's core values, mission and vision for success (Cooper, 2001; Sarkus,

1996). As such, many organizational leaders embrace safety as an essential part of every project and within daily work activities. Project and construction management personnel are often quite familiar with their own strategic sense of mission, ensuring that each project has the right people, materials, tools and equipment to do the job efficiently, effectively and, of course, safely.

Many safety professionals would agree that various tools used for prejob briefings, behavioral observations and feedback, risk assessments, hazard analyses, time-outs, or even toolbox talks help to create a sense of mission and focus before a job begins and throughout a given workday (Connor



FIGURE 1
COMMITMENT TO MISSION



FIGURE 2
DIVERSE & INCLUSIVE OPINIONS

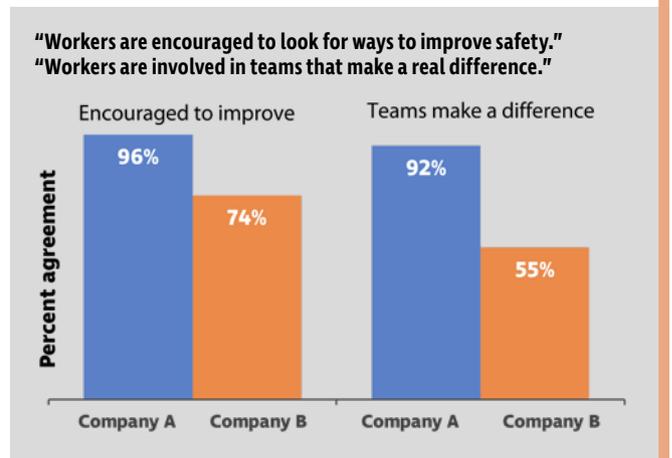


FIGURE 3
OPENNESS & HONESTY

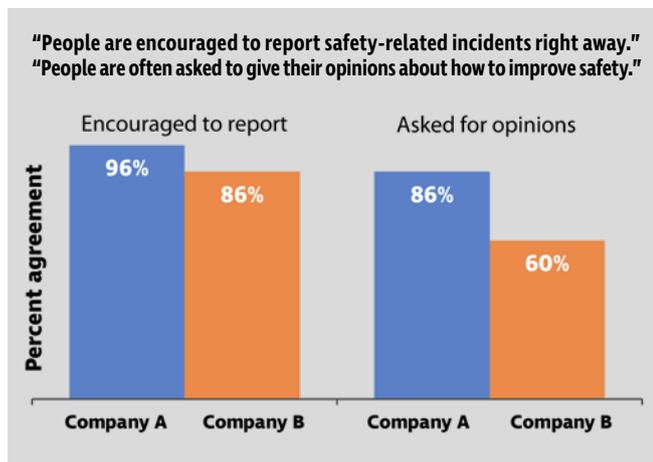


FIGURE 4
FAIRNESS & COOPERATION

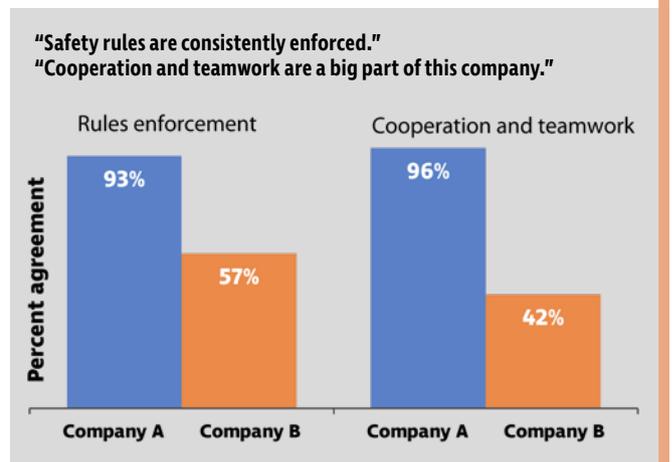
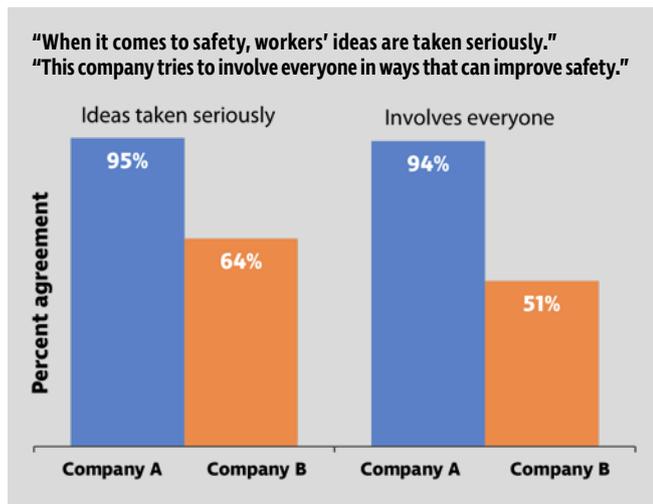


FIGURE 5
CONSENSUS BUILDING



As shown in Figure 1, Company A had 99% agreement when it came to workers feeling that they contribute to safety improvement, while Company B had 72% agreement. Regarding the second statement, Company A had 98% agreement pertaining to people believing that they are responsible for the safety of others, while Company B had 87% agreement.

Diverse & Inclusive Opinions

Good communities, those in which many individuals are willing to share different experiences and ideas, are built from diverse backgrounds, disciplines and views. Importantly, good leaders seek out diverse opinions from many people and nurture these types of views as foundational to effective problem-solving, enhanced engagement and performance improvement (Carmeli et al., 2010). A community of individuals at the organizational level builds upon the premise that no one should be excluded from the group, and everyone can contribute to sustainable improvement. People need a sense of belonging to a group and psychological safety to openly share their thoughts toward a common vision for improvement. Accordingly, leaders must be approachable and accessible to draw out such opinions and views (Swani & Isherwood, 2020). Within this context, diverse views may also lead to greater breakthroughs and innovation for safety improvement (Javed et al., 2019). When people with varied backgrounds, beliefs and values work together, their collective input and output for safety (performance) allow them to work toward higher levels of success. Good communities are, by their nature, inclusive—not exclusive. No one is left out because members appreciate the ability and need to

& Malloy, 2021; Hansen, 2006; Lingard et al., 2017; Lyon & Hollcroft, 2012; Petersen, 1975, 1991). These kinds of tools also help to ensure that everyone feels they are contributing to the improvement of safety as part of the overall mission and workers are responsible for the safety of each other. Both items help to support a given organization's commitment to its safety-related mission at the worker level.

share their unique beliefs, knowledge, perspectives and talents (Carmeli et al., 2010). Even more, inclusive organizations and groups are often enhanced and sustained by humble leaders who recognize their faults, failings and need to obtain greater input from their members (Hu et al., 2018).

As shown in Figure 2, Company A had 96% agreement when it came to workers feeling they are encouraged to look for ways to improve safety, while Company B had 74% agreement. Regarding the second statement, Company A had 92% agreement pertaining to workers being involved in teams that make a real difference, while Company B had 55% agreement.

Openness & Honesty

Good organizational leaders and their groups should also work toward creating greater openness and honesty regarding risks, the importance of specific safety-related activities, and helpful feedback among workers, including leaders and their safety-related efforts. Openness often leads to reciprocal openness, transparency, honesty, equity and trust as well as psychological safety, whereby people feel free to speak their minds without fear of rejection or retaliation (Seppälä et al., 2012; Shen et al., 2015). Trust is often based on good relationships and task-specific activities that leaders and workers are involved in on a regular basis. Trust is a constant exchange between the leader and group that involves work that requires candor (Brower et al., 2000). Openness builds trust and enables groups to work well together and avoid conflict. Workers should feel free to speak openly with each other without fear of being offensive or even hurtful. Honesty, openness and trust will help to build greater group unity as people move to new positions or leave the organization, and emerging leaders are sought out by the group, as individuals worthy to be followed (Crouch, 2013; Ogunfowora & Bourdage, 2014).

As shown in Figure 3, Company A had 96% agreement when it came to workers feeling they were encouraged to report incidents or near-misses, while Company B had 86% agreement. For the second statement, Company A had 86% agreement pertaining to workers believing they were often asked about their safety-related opinions, while Company B had 60% agreement.

Openness and honesty in moving toward a common vision of safety produce a collective foundation of support that can sustain a community-driven culture of safety even when it may seem that losing key members may cause a group or community to crumble. Such a degree of openness will bring about greater formal and informal leadership and communication, allowing the culture of safety to evolve to a higher level along with the capacity to survive ongoing change. As such, a change in formal leadership near the top, middle and frontline levels of the organization might not require work groups to start over or seek greater degrees of formal support thanks to strong in-group leadership and sustainable cohesiveness. Thus, change does not cause significant disruption in other ways when leadership within the community has already been developed and nurtured.

Fairness & Cooperation

Conflict may occur when there is a perceived lack of fairness and equity related to safety-related policies, procedures or discipline. Fairness and the possibility of conflict also extend to wages, workload, inadequate tools or poor working conditions. Both leaders and workers must be fair and cooperative in sustaining community through appropriate support (Meierhans et al., 2008). Conflict is part of every organization, but when conflict is healthy, everyone's attention can be drawn back to an

enhanced mission for safety improvement. Furthermore, when conflict does persist, there is a collective conscience to call upon to be guided by the organization's values, express fairness, and subsequently improve and maintain trust throughout (Seppälä et al., 2012). In a community-evolved culture, conflict can be handled appropriately if everyone's intentions are focused on equity, cooperation and the desire for ongoing safety improvement. Conflict must be viewed as a part of the improvement process and dealt with through a community of people who are fully aware of the boundaries for handling these obstacles. Overall, conflict should be addressed quickly, openly and civilly so future challenges related to the conflict do not cause the community to falter at some critical point in the future. Handling conflict well reduces the unwanted side effects that produce absenteeism, quality issues, morale challenges, and increases in errors and incidents (Meyer, 2004). Equity and cooperation work together to bring about larger degrees of commitment toward the leader, mission and goals of the organization (Amason, 1996; Krause, 2003; Tjosvold et al., 2003), along with greater collaboration, cooperation and participation (Sarkus, 1997).

As shown in Figure 4, Company A had 93% agreement when it came to workers feeling safety rules are consistently enforced, while Company B had only 57% agreement. Regarding the second statement, Company A had 96% agreement pertaining to workers believing cooperation and teamwork are big parts of their organization, while Company B had only 42% agreement. Many have already shown that leaders and organizations with a conscience and ethically driven leadership (and workers) produce better results thanks to enhanced organizational citizenship behavior or actions that go beyond one's ordinary responsibilities (Chan, 2017; Kanwal et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2016; Walumbwa et al., 2010).

Consensus Building

Consensus is important as it helps to bring about increased levels of problem-solving, learning and execution of work. It also leads to increased acceptance of appropriate mitigation strategies and how work will be performed well before it begins (Amason, 1996). This may be especially true at the worker level, where risks are identified and accepted, and decisions are made so work can begin and move forward efficiently (Walter et al., 2013). Although there may be differing viewpoints, through consensus, people are encouraged to listen to one another, act with decency, and move forward more effectively and with greater confidence. At times, differences will have to be challenged, confronted and worked through until they are adequately resolved. Consensus does not mean that a unanimous agreement must be reached, but it does mean that nearly everyone should be heard when necessary. Individuals may have to accept differing opinions and be willing to trust each other to do what is best for the safety of each other and the greater good of the organization. In building consensus, ongoing communication is often required. Policies, procedures and guidelines are kept in mind, and finally, workers commit to a path forward (Cormick et al., 1996). Depending on each other is near the core of effective collaboration (Sarkus, 1997). Consensus building around the objective of working safely and the way in which work will be accomplished are critically important (Bourgeois, 1980). Civility and cooperation play roles that necessitate treating others with dignity and respect as part of consensus building and the very foundation of community (Clark & Walsh, 2016). Communities work toward agreement of their members so they can progress as a unit and, more importantly, increase each other's personal safety.

As shown in Figure 5 (p. 26), Company A totaled 95% agreement when it came to workers feeling their ideas are taken seriously, while Company B totaled 64% agreement. Regarding the second statement, Company A had 94% agreement that the company tries to involve everyone in ways that can improve safety, while Company B had only 51% agreement.

Summary of Results

Differences at the Dimension Level

In addition to the item-level statistical comparisons shown in Figures 1 through 5 (p. 26), a series of chi-square analyses were also computed to assess the differences between Company A and Company B on the five overall dimensions that comprised the measure. As shown in Table 1, there are differences on all five dimensions ($p < .001$), and there is a greater level of agreement in Company A (94.5%) as compared to Company B (65.2%), $\chi^2(1) = 81.67, p < .001$.

Implications of Findings

The findings were consistent in Company A as there was agreement at a greater rate with each of the items, the five dimensions and the total score of the scale. All this provides a strong association (with greater than 99% confidence) that the differences between the companies and their forms of agreement did not happen by chance. When viewing these findings within the framework of total recordable injury rate (TRIR) and lost day incident rate (LDIR) for each company, one sees strong associations, if not correlations (see Table 2): Company A had greater agreement within the items, dimensions, and total score on the scale, and a TRIR of 34% below its respective industry average when this survey was conducted. Conversely, Company B had lower agreement and a TRIR of 4% above

TABLE 1
LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH EACH DIMENSION & TOTAL SCORE

Percentage of level of agreement with each dimension and total score of the measure.				
Dimension	Company A (%)	Company B (%)	χ^2	p
Mission	98.4	80.1	85.48	< .001
Diverse opinions	94.0	65.2	75.67	< .001
Openness and honesty	91.1	73.6	20.37	< .001
Fairness and cooperation	94.5	50.0	137.0	< .001
Consensus	94.5	59.0	98.28	< .001
Total score	94.5	65.2	81.67	< .001

TABLE 2
TOTAL SCORE & PERFORMANCE SCORE RELATIVE TO INDUSTRY AVERAGE

Measure	Company A	Company B
Total score	94.5%	65.2%
TRIR	34% below	4% above
LDIR	27% below	8% above

Note. The total score calculated in Table 1.

its industry average. Similar results were found for LDIR, with Company A's being 27% below its industry average, while Company B's being 8% above its particular industry average. Company A's TRIR and LDIR were both maintained or improved for several years following the survey. Results for Company B were not tracked.

Closing Thoughts

While a causal relationship cannot be established between the measures used and the TRIR and LDIR, these findings are of interest. In turn, if we want to improve our cultures of safety, we should understand how building community or psychological sense of community can be formed and evolved within any organization. Each of the five dimensions provides a starting point for further research, more exact assessment and application. Leaders from a broad array of functions would do well to:

- Examine each of the five dimensions of community and how respective organizational improvements could be made with these five dimensions in mind.
- Address each dimension of community with regard to making one's organization healthier, especially in a future state of excellence.
- Observe current safety processes, programs, and practices that would allow for ongoing incorporation of the various dimensions and elements of community.
- Provide training and performance feedback, particularly with frontline leadership based on the content addressed herein.

There are opportunities for safety professionals and organizational leaders to step out and begin to develop a greater sense of mission, higher levels of trust, and sense of urgency to improve relationships, productivity, and quality, all with a greater sense of community through safety. Those who are already deliberately and knowingly building a psychological sense of community through safety realize that such an organization will eventually have to show evidence of its own cost-effectiveness to further obtain or maintain support as a community. Furthermore, leaders can address the need for servant leadership and community building through safety and a new type of culture based on the dimensions addressed. Organizational culture is not dead as some may believe, but simply dormant and waiting for us to explore a greater depth and breadth of applied knowledge. Finally, as Greenleaf would suggest, as leaders, we are all here to serve—to keep others safe, which is the highest-priority need for every individual in the organization. **PSJ**

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