

Changing the **HIDDEN SAFETY CULTURE**

By Robert Pater

Even wise, perceptive and hardworking leaders know they don't see everything that's going on in their company's culture. There's a lot of constantly changing information that's not obvious, hidden under layers of protection or inaccessible due to distance.

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This is especially true in spread or large operations, and where the pace is high, when competitive pressures are ever-present. No matter the cause, what leaders don't see can put them in a position of reacting rather than actively leading, and, worse, can blindside them.

Yet, it's crucial that leaders know as much as possible about what's really going on. Whatever intelligent leaders do see, even when some of it can be disconcerting, they can accommodate, plan for or even redirect/harness toward positive safety and productivity. Note that nations use the term *intelligence* for discovering hidden strategic information.

My focus here? When a company is stuck on a performance plateau, leaders can drive higher-level safety progress by first striving to uncover their company's hidden safety culture, then developing and applying creative strategies that factor in the actual energies and dynamics of this concealed culture.

To start, the best leaders understand their mind-set is their most powerful hidden resource; they embrace the value of unearthing, examining and enlisting what's hidden from obvious sight. Granted, this can be uncomfortable. Some prefer to not look below the surface, especially if they expect they might see less-than-ideal forces at play. Perhaps that's why many weaker leaders seem to bury their heads in the sand, actively deny negative feedback or surround themselves with yes-men.

For example, I can recall several scenarios where managers and safety professionals who were in the presence of a senior executive had the courage to sincerely bring up safety concerns they thought the executive wasn't seeing. And I've watched the obvious "ouches" after their executive shot them down ("I'm so disappointed in you"; "talking that way shows disloyalty"; "despite what you say, we've improved safety and our record proves this") as well as the not so obvious ouches (e.g., dismissing or simply ignoring uncomfortable data and feedback). Not only were these executives defensively denying the hidden safety culture in their organizations, they torpedoed their own credibility. In actuality, they were promoting a safety culture of punishing the messenger, "better to cover your rear," "don't bring up anything real" and "what I don't tell an exec won't hurt me." No surprise, in every organization where there's denial of hidden safety culture, I've also seen below-average trailing indicators, as well as ongoing morale and trust issues. And workers are ironically engaged in politically protecting themselves by actively submerging issues that affect safety and work overall.

In the same vein, philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (2009) remarked that each one of us has two kinds of relationships, both with what's known and with what's unknown. He pointed out that our relationship with the unknown is the more important of the two because there's a greater amount of it. I've found that those purportedly omniscient leaders who are adamant that they know everything that's going on in their company and that they've got a handle on it all often just turn a blind eye to what they don't see. And this eventually backfires. For example, disregarding, glossing over and denying employee disgruntlement typically feeds their negativity such that it can spread, like letting rising waters flood a town. But by noting higher water levels at a relatively early stage, engineers can find ways to either safely channel this accumulation elsewhere or even divert the flow toward irrigation or generating hydroelectricity.

This directly applies to safety culture, much of which is either below the surface or removed from leaders' view. There has been relatively recent awareness that trailing indicators, what's clearly visible, are, at best, a snapshot of the past and that these alone often miss what's going on in safety and certainly do not reflect very recent changes.

How leaders contend with what they don't directly see naturally makes a huge difference in how they plan, act and can perform.

Hidden Safety

There are reasons why forces remain hidden. Safety issues may be murky below leaders' attentional water level when people don't report such issues, perhaps because they don't want to be embarrassed or look bad (especially true with unreported slips/trips/falls where someone pops up quickly, thinking, "I hope no one saw that"). Or are afraid of the consequences of reporting problems. Or when workers aren't trained in communicating what they see. Or if they accept as normal those risky conditions or actions that have been around for a long time, so these fade into the complacency spectrum. Or where complex time-consuming software or forms become an obstacle to quick and easy reporting. Or the culture dictates workers do not call out peers for safety transgressions, and more.

Then again, consider that on an individual level, people are contending daily with invisible-to-others (and often to themselves) personal issues. All kinds of fears, uncertainties and concerns, from budding or lingering illness, nagging injuries/weak spots, severe personal and work relationship problems, financial

worries, addiction to or dependency on opioids or other medications, and much more.

Yet, forces we don't see still affect us. For example, gas emissions that are invisible and odorless; potentially harmful radiation; sound vibrations above our hearing detection; exposures to small "insignificant" forces that can accumulate into potentially disabling strains and sprains; hypertension, sleep disorders; gravity (a strong contributing factor in all slips/trips/falls as well as soft-tissue injuries;) ongoing joint or other pain; taking prescription drugs to relieve problems/symptoms/illnesses often invisible to others. For example, according to the Mayo Clinic, "Almost 70% of Americans take at least one prescription drug, and more than half take two," (Elkins, 2018).

According to a recent study from CDC, "During 2011 to 2014, 12.7% of persons aged 12 and over, 8.6% of males, and 16.5% of females took antidepressant medication in the past month," about one in every eight Americans (Pratt, Brody & Gu, 2017). With the many known side effects of antidepressants and all other prescription medications, how might these affect the ability to direct attention, control mood, work with effective coordination and more that can impinge on safety performance? Even most over-the-counter cold/allergy medications have warnings about not operating machinery.

Think about yourself: Do you presently have any acute or ongoing conditions affecting you physically or mentally that no one at work likely knows about? Or even your own family? Consider that everyone else is likely the same.

Many unseen factors help form an early cultural warning system. My colleague and master change agent Paul McClellan, who has worked with a wide array of companies in a broad spectrum of industries and on every continent, says, "The most important culture is the one you're not seeing."

Not surprisingly, many organizational forces are either repressed or are subtle enough to fly under leaders' radar. McClellan terms these forces "below the threshold of visibility." These include:

- contributing factors that come from off-work exposures or from within a person, such as previously unknown preexisting conditions or weak spots;
- low level, nagging injuries that seem too insignificant to trigger a report/claim or dull pain/wear-down problems (cumulative trauma that often builds invisibly);
- sharp physical pain that hampers work efficiency or makes safe adjustments less likely (e.g., not being able to recover from a momentary loss of balance due to stiffness or pain) but that workers deem too private to publicly admit (or that they expect are just a price of aging);
- near-hits/close calls;
- distrust, dissatisfaction, disengagement or lack of leaders' credibility;
- fatigue related to understaffing or overtime (often combined with an aging workforce) or exerting significant effort in off-work activities;
- attention issues: loss of focus, daydreaming, dis-



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traction, inability to switch attention to high-demand risks when needed;

- unreported hazards or risks, or those that are reported but poorly investigated so true contributing factors are not unearthed, or where the mind of investigators is made up in advance (confirmation bias) about cause, or where emphasis is on attributing blame or venting frustration rather than determining root causes;

- leaders' unwillingness or inability to deal with or reveal their own limitations; or leaders not being aware of their own biases (e.g., assuming incidents are only caused by people's failures or that certain injuries are just faked) so they don't look for or ignore and gloss over other potential contributors to incidents; or leaders that have a proclamation expectation, just planning and directing something be done means to them that it's quickly and smoothly put into place. This comes from assuming instant buy in ("because I said so") or not following through on the progress of projects. For example, approving a purchase order for new PPE doesn't mean the product has actually arrived or has been deployed.

10 Performance & Cultural Driving Strategies

Even forces and factors that are hidden still affect both mind-set and physical performance. For example, most leaders who refer to "presenteeism" default

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toward employees being physically present at work but mentally disengaged. However, workers’ or managers’ spirits may be willing, but their body/levels of pain can get in the way or distract them from performing fully. Again, what leaders don’t see they can’t strategically change. Craig Lewis, a colleague and master strategic change leader with three decades of experience, advises on the first step to significant improvements, “You’ve got to think different.”

Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham developed a simple and well known social psychology graphic called the Johari window to illustrate four kinds of information: 1) what’s known to you and to others (public/obvious); 2) what’s known to you but not others (private/secretive); 3) what’s known to others but not you (your blind spot/how you unknowingly come across/what they privately think of you or say behind your back, cultural and other factors hidden to you but clear to them), and 4) What’s unknown to you as well as to them (e.g., the future, secretive competitor’s info.) Note that for leaders to elevate safety culture and performance, it’s essential they shrink their blind-spot area as much as possible. Leaders’ credibility diminishes when others are ridiculing or laughing at them behind their backs.

It takes courage to deal with difficult situations, to sincerely invite honest feedback, to willingly wade into the morass of mixed messages and to dispassionately examine “the way we’ve always done it here.” But that’s where the strongest leaders shine. Knowing that you can’t build a solid structure on rubble-laden land, they pull out their cultural tools to dig out what’s meaningful to change efforts but buried below outward appearances.

1) Start Fresh With Self Honesty

Recall that Shakespeare’s Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Assume there are contributing factors to your company’s safety performance and culture that you don’t see or know about. And that admitting this, at least initially to yourself, is a sign of leadership strength, not weakness. Conversely, in every case I’ve seen, presenting oneself as an all-knowing leader is a sign of insecurity and fragility, not of power. True, you can fool some of the people some of the time but, as professional athletes remark, “Ball don’t lie.” Pretense and image-consciousness don’t lead to sustainable safety improvements, they generally lead only to leaders scapegoating others for their own leadership failure. But making excuses for low performance and saddling others with blame rarely improves safety sustainably.

Instead, endeavor to discover more about the underlying dynamics and forces affecting your company’s safety performance and culture.

Leaders can maximize results by first focusing on what they can best shape as directly as possible: at-work concerns, accepted risks (Ron Bowles terms those hazards that people take for granted, but shouldn’t), organizational relationships that have soured and affect safety performance, effective mental and physical safety skills (including better directing attention and reducing distractions, as well as understanding layers of safety culture). Secondly, leaders can indirectly influence off-work skills and actions in order to high-grade safety habits and to reduce cumulative trauma buildup that could lead to work-related injuries.

2) Develop a Discomfort Strategy

If you wish to move toward global-class safety performance, practice the art of becoming comfortable with discomfort, being willing to unearth the moldy spots in your hidden safety culture. You might consider the lessons from Anil Mathur, CEO and President of Alaska Tanker company and now on ASSP’s Board of Directors. He talks, practices and encourages being curious about what is really going on under safety’s surface. This mind-set is critical to cleaning out what is no longer working. The references at the end of this article includes some articles that profile Mathur’s courageous and effective leadership principles.

3) Perceive Those Things That Cannot Be Seen

This is one of Miyamoto Musashi’s nine principles for leadership strategy in his guide, *A Book of Five Rings* (I wrote about this in depth for a three-part *Professional Safety* article, Pater, 2016a; b; c). Be determined to unearth hidden forces in the culture. Support a mindful approach. Here I mean nothing more esoteric than maintaining an ever-curious, inquiring, watchful frame of mind, understanding that forces and conditions are continually changing. Last year’s audit, no matter how thorough, may no longer cover what’s going on today.

Be on the lookout for those invisible factors that determine organizational reality: hidden agenda (notice which stories and tasks others keep returning to), unresolved/nagging conflicts, in what areas change is most resisted versus most welcomed, which tasks or jobs does not get done, who gets promoted and who doesn’t, environmental factors that affect productivity and morale (color, sound, use of space, lighting, temperature).

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4) Heed Renowned Quality Guru W. Edwards Deming

Statistician Deming warned managers to not overly rely upon statistics. If you extend your antennae and

stay in touch with the elements of your organization's culture, you may be able to sense loss of momentum, incipient customer dissatisfaction or when is the right time to act. By responding early, you'll save valuable time and address problems before they take firm hold. You'll also be able to seize opportunities as they appear.

5) Surface Hidden Mixed Messages & Reduce Them

Every organization I've seen over the past more than 30 years sends some mixed messages. These form a critical cultural underlie, broadcasting expectations about how to safely and productively perform.

For example, are you, like me, overloaded with safety professionals posting pictures (LinkedIn and elsewhere) of workers coming up with all kinds of creative but clearly unsafe ways to reach their jobs (painting, maintenance at difficult to access places), typically called out for being "stupid" or not caring about their own safety? There's another possibility: that these workers feel the pressures (from within or from their company) to "get it done, quickly." It's easy to mock and blame and look down on workers, harder to unpeel the onion to determine whether there are internal cultural forces at play that contribute to unsafe actions. It's easy to bandy about mottos such as "safety is number one" or "shut down the job

if it's unsafe," but doing so often just adds to mixed messages that workers perceive, especially when they get other communications under pressure that "productivity rules."

So launch and sustain a seek-and-reduce campaign to wean down mixed messages as much as possible. Seek input from different people in order to surface as many subtle but active mixed messages as possible. Then find ways to address and reduce as many of these as possible.

6) Look for Grassroots Fixes

These are hidden solutions that illuminate a hidden problem discovered or informally put into place by individual workers. Note where people make personal adjustments to perform their tasks with more comfort and safety. For example, when even a few employees pad sharp workstation surfaces, they are signaling that there's an issue to a perceptive leader, as well as potential low-cost solutions.

7) Practice Pattern Recognition

Look for themes in the reactions of others. Do people tend to tighten up or reflexively resist at first mention of schedule changes? Expect and look for reports of intertwining themes in safety/incident investigations. Ask others what common threads they see in your company's safety culture and leadership.



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8) Leverage Leadership

Leverage entails using relatively minimal efforts and resources to build disproportionately greater results. My experience is the stronger the leader, the more s/he understands and utilizes the principle that small changes can make large differences.

Hidden leadership operates in every company that's not position based. This emanates from grass-roots workers. Visible leadership is traditional, typically based on position and title, not necessarily on what that person can actually accomplish. Of course, many executives and managers are effective by going well beyond being entitled. In contrast, hidden leadership is usually based on winning others' regard and trust, and being able to make things happen within their sphere of influence.

Bring your secret-agent secret keepers out into the light. Solicit, don't just wait for them to come to you with concerns and complaints about safety. Too often, such "complainers," who are potentially a prime source of underlying intelligence, are shunned, disregarded, made fun of or shunted away. Don't assume that because a worker is disgruntled what s/he sees and says has no value. Think of him/her as hidden leadership gems. In more than 30 years of work with hundreds of companies, we've consistently found that all organizations have such diamonds in the rough. When organizations are discerning enough to "mine and refine" them (selecting, training and supporting hidden peer leaders), these hidden assets can be extremely effective in catalyzing dramatic improvements in safety performance and culture. This is highly replicable. Craig Lewis and Paul McClellan are experts at turning such difficult employees into staunch and highly influential safety deputies within numerous companies and pre-existing cultures.

9) Bring in Outside Perspectives

Perceptive and courageous outsiders will more likely be able to see the organizational forest for the trees. And because they are less invested in maintaining the status quo, they may surface longstanding cultural blockages that internal staff unquestioningly assume are untouchable or unchangeable ("we've always done it that way").

10) Continue to Ask the Right Questions

Really expect forthright answers that aren't just throw-aways. Write down what others say for a record and they'll see you're taking them seriously, valuing what they say. Discipline yourself to relax mentally when, not if, you begin to feel defensive about receiving negative, as in potentially helpful/recalibrating, feedback. Continue to ask. Make it easy for others to respond (which is influenced by where, when and how you ask, as well as who is visually around or overhearing).

To unearth the hidden safety culture, Paul McClellan suggests leaders ask of themselves and of others, "What do people do when the boss isn't looking?"; "What do managers, execs, supervisors, workers really believe about safety here?"; "How much/little enthusiasm is there for safety in our organization?"; "Are we trending up/down or sideways in our safety

culture?"; "Are there toxic relationships that are getting in the way of integrating safety communications and executing safety performance?"; "What is the hidden level of trust here that affects the receptivity to safety change?" and more.

Leadership always entails getting positive results by working with and through others. But, especially when leaders aim toward breaking through to higher-level safety, it's critical to detect and then maximize the positive parts of the hidden culture. Dredge out below-the-surface forces that are blocking the passage toward improving performance, make quick adjustments where you can and strategize for working toward mid-term changes that will provide the greatest impact for resources expended. Get others involved in this process early and throughout. Changing the hidden safety culture is a significant strategy for attaining and sustaining the highest level of safety performance and culture. **PSJ**

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