

DECODING THE NEW BLUEPRINT

From Theory to Transformational Safety Leadership

By Tim Page-Bottorff & Daniel G. Hopwood

The new blueprint for safety leadership is not a checklist, a compliance audit, or a training module to complete and file away. It is a living framework for becoming a safety leader who thinks differently, asks better questions and understands that the transformation begins with them.

The authors introduced the new blueprint for safety leadership in their article “A New Blueprint for the Future: A Framework for 12 Dimensions of Safety Leadership” (Page-Bottorff & Hopwood, 2025). That article articulated the conceptual, practical and action-oriented elements of the blueprint and highlighted its foundational elements as well as its dimensional aspects necessary for safety leadership transformation. This article frames considerations for putting the blueprint into action.

Something important must be said at the outset: This discussion is not about safety management. Safety management (e.g., hazard recognition and control, regulatory compliance, incident reporting) remains necessary. But the safety profession is past the point where management alone can drive meaningful progress. The industry saw 5,070 worker fatalities in 2024 (BLS, 2025); Management has not been enough.

The new blueprint is a safety leadership framework. The distinction is not semantic. Management focuses on planning, organizing, and controlling

systems and processes (Jones & George, 2024). Leadership—particularly transformational leadership—focuses on influencing, inspiring and fundamentally changing how people think, act and perform (Northouse, 2022). The two are not interchangeable, and the blueprint does not try to blend them; it is laser-focused on the latter.

The question this framework challenges every safety professional to ask is the kind theoretical physicist Michio Kaku (2015) might ask: not “Are we compliant?” but “Where will we be 50 years from now, and what are we doing today to get there?” Safety professionals must be like Kaku and ask the bold, imaginative, uncomfortable questions. This disposition of curiosity relentlessly aimed at the future is the opening move of every new blueprint leader. These questions are essential to operationalizing (i.e., activating) the blueprint. The blueprint is a living framework and to help one become transformational, it must be put into action.

What “Operationalizing” Actually Means

The word “operationalize” is often used loosely to mean “put into practice.” In the context of the new blueprint, it means something more precise: to make each of the 12 dimensions active, not passive or theoretical. Each dimension is action oriented. Each one demands that something positive, intentional and visible happens. A safety leader who understands aspiration conceptually but never articulates an aspirational vision to their team has not operationalized aspiration. The dimension remains dormant.

Decoding the blueprint, then, is understanding what activation looks like for each dimension and recognizing that activation is not a point-in-time event. Activation resides on a continuum. The new blueprint leader is always in motion within the framework, not passing through it once to check boxes.

It is essential to understand this process-driven nature. Progress is not measured by whether a leader has “done” articulation or “achieved” empowerment. It is measured by whether articulation and empowerment are consistently, authentically present in how the leader operates on a daily basis. The framework is a living practice, not a destination.

The Architecture: Building Blocks First, Always

Before a new blueprint leader can move through the dimensions, specific structural building blocks must be in place. These are not

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PUTTING THE NEW BLUEPRINT INTO PRACTICE

•**Ask bold questions.** Before major meetings, initiatives or decisions, challenge assumptions, identify the most important question to ask and consider what might be possible without familiar constraints.

•**Audit the foundation.** Regularly assess whether differential thinking, enabling strategy and intentional effort are visibly reflected in the safety professional's actions.

•**Name how you are leading.** Identify whether one is currently initiating, multiplying, expanding or sustaining—or combining these proficiencies—to create accountability and expose overreliance on one mode.

•**Develop two dimensions at a time.** Each month, intentionally strengthen two of the 12 dimensions that best fit current needs.

•**Make experimentation routine.** Do not wait for a perfect solution before acting. Turn imaginative ideas into small-scale pilots, gather feedback and iterate.

•**Invite challenges to your thinking.** Create an environment where people can safely voice dissent and question existing approaches, making positive disruption something that is received as well as initiated.

prerequisites to master and then set aside. They are foundational conditions that must always remain active, regardless of which dimensions a leader is deploying at any given moment. The three building blocks are differential thinking, enabling strategy and hyperfocus on intentional efforts (Figure 1):

- Differential thinking** is the capacity to approach problems through disruption, imagination and innovation. It is the refusal to default to how things have always been done. A leader practicing differential thinking hosts brainstorming sessions with no guardrails, invites wild ideas and treats the absence of easy answers as an invitation rather than a dead end.

- Enabling strategy** ensures that vision, alignment, articulation and aspiration translate into actual organizational movement. A strategy is enabling when it gives people the capacity to act—when it clears barriers, communicates direction clearly and connects individual roles to something larger and more meaningful.

- Hyperfocus on intentional efforts** means that the leader's energy is directed with intensity and purpose. Intentional effort is the opposite of reactive effort. It means designing interactions, conversations and initiatives to produce desired outcomes,

then sustaining that attention even when urgent matters pull the leader in other directions.

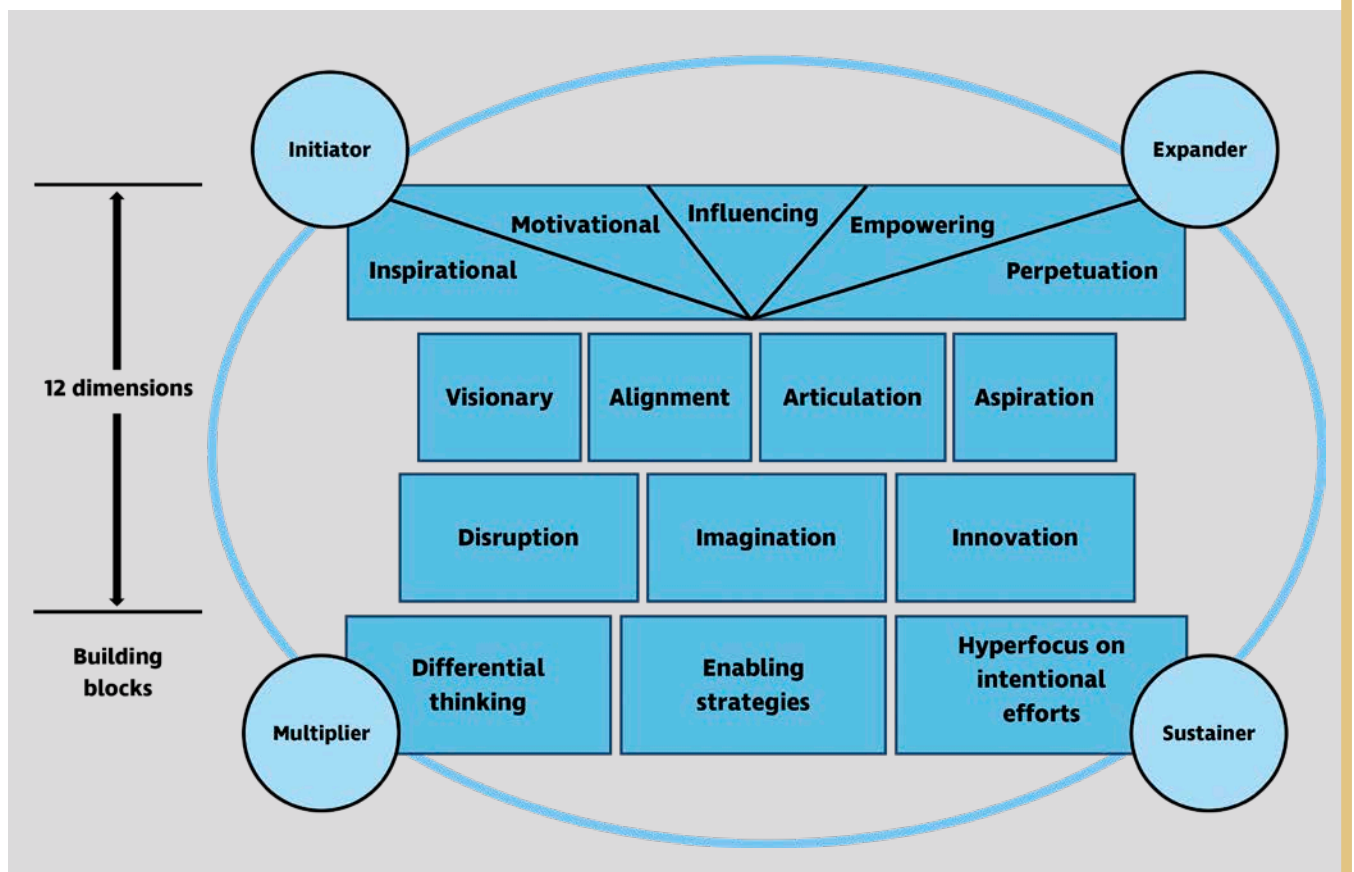
These three building blocks are the foundation. They do not rotate in and out of use. A leader who is focused on being a visionary but has abandoned enabling strategy has a cracked foundation. The architecture holds only when all three building blocks are present.

The Proficiencies: Always Present, Always Growing

The four proficiencies (Figure 1)—initiator, multiplier, expander and sustainer—sit above the building blocks and encircle the entire framework. This is not incidental, it is structural. The proficiencies are not a stage to pass through on the way to the dimensions; they are the lens through which every dimension is exercised. They must always be present, and, similar to electrons, they are always in motion encircling the building blocks and dimensions of the blueprint.

Importantly, movement among the proficiencies is not prescribed or linear. A leader does not begin as an initiator and graduate to a sustainer. A mature leader may need to return to initiating a new effort even while sustaining a dozen others. The proficiencies are simultaneously available and simultaneously demanded.

FIGURE 1
12 DIMENSIONS OF SAFETY LEADERSHIP



- An initiator seeks opportunities and is willing to disrupt (positively) to start something new. Initiating is not impulsive; it is prepared. Nothing in the new blueprint is achieved by winging it. The initiator has done the analytical work to know when and how to begin.

- A multiplier grows influence by growing others. The multiplier does not hold knowledge, they distribute it. They identify the differential capabilities of teammates and create conditions for those capabilities to compound.

- An expander refuses to work alone. The new blueprint explicitly rejects the lone-wolf model. An expander builds collaborative networks, brings more capable practitioners into the mission and actively extends the vision beyond their immediate sphere. Expanders simultaneously expand both the opportunities for and capabilities of those they lead.

- A sustainer makes excellence durable. Programs, cultures and commitments fade when leaders stop attending to them. The sustainer builds systems and relationships that perpetuate the mission beyond any individual's tenure.

When a new blueprint leader asks, "What am I doing right now?" the answer should always be traceable to one or more of these proficiencies. If an action cannot be located within the proficiency framework, it may be worth examining whether it belongs in the leader's portfolio at all.

Navigating the 12 Dimensions

The 12 dimensions are not a prescribed sequence. A leader does not march from disruption to imagination to innovation and then onward in order. Movement through the dimensions is responsive; it follows the needs of the leader's organization, team and strategic context at any given time. The new blueprint is adaptive by design.

What the dimensions share is their action orientation. Each one requires something to happen. The following is an introduction to what activation looks like across the three groupings.

Differential Thinking Dimensions: Disruption, Imagination, Innovation

Disruption is the first dimension, and it deserves special emphasis. Being a positive disruptor is not chaotic, it is organic. It is, as Crossley (2021) describes, the willingness to uproot and replant. The new blueprint leader disrupts by challenging leadership thinking they believe is insufficient, by proposing approaches that make people uncomfortable and by welcoming the discomfort of pushback. To operationalize disruption is to make it routine: to build a habit of asking "why do we do it this way?" sincerely enough to act on the answer.

Crucially, positive disruption is also the act of replanting and regrowing capabilities. It is not destruction for its own sake. The disruptive leader tears down what is no longer working and immediately begins building something more capable in its place.



Imagination is operationalized when a leader creates structured space for possibility thinking. This might look like a quarterly session where a team is asked to solve a persistent safety problem as if no constraints existed—no budget limits, no political barriers, no precedent. The leader's role in that session is not to evaluate ideas in real time but to generate them alongside the team and protect the generative space from premature criticism. Imagination is part and parcel to approach, policies, procedures and planning. Imagination can and should be present in all aspects of safety endeavors and leadership. Imagination includes asking "Kaku" questions (e.g., questions that are bold, imaginative or uncomfortable).

Innovation closes the loop between imagination and reality. An innovative leader does not wait for a perfect solution before piloting; they design small-scale experiments, collect feedback, iterate and build organizational confidence in the process of trying. The distinction between imagination and innovation is the distinction between envisioning and experimenting. Both are necessary. Neither replaces the other.

Enabling Strategy Dimensions: Visionary, Alignment, Articulation, Aspiration

Visionary leadership is often spoken of in vague terms (e.g., someone who "sees the future"). In practice, operationalizing the visionary dimension means creating and sharing a specific, compelling picture of where the organization should be and why it matters. The new blueprint leader does not simply have a vision; they communicate it through storytelling, examples and consistent alignment of daily decisions with the longer arc. Visionaries also design the pathways to achieve their vision.

Alignment is the disciplined work of ensuring that everyone in an organization is moving in the same direction. This means more than sharing a vision statement. It means mapping team goals explicitly to organizational mission, identifying where misalignment exists and addressing it before it quietly erodes progress. A leader who allows misalignment to persist, even subtly, has ceded control of the strategy to entropic forces.

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Articulation is perhaps the most undervalued of the 12 dimensions. A leader can be visionary and aspirational, but if they cannot translate those qualities into messages that different audiences can understand and act on, the vision stays in their head. Operationalizing articulation means developing a clear, adaptable core message, a “why” that can be communicated to a frontline crew, senior leadership team or regulatory body without losing its integrity. Articulation is verbal, functional and programmatic.

Aspiration is the dimension that prevents the blueprint from becoming comfortable. Aspirational goals stretch. They push teams beyond where they would go on their own. To operationalize aspiration, a leader must be willing to name goals that feel unreasonably ambitious and then provide the resources, encouragement and structural support to make those goals pursuable. Aspiration without support is just pressure. Aspiration with support is transformation.

Intentional Effort Dimensions: Inspirational, Motivational, Influencing, Empowerment, Perpetuation

Inspirational leadership is activated through authenticity and presence. The new blueprint leader does not inspire by reciting statistics about fatalities or recounting case studies from other organizations. They inspire by being visible, sharing their own experience of adversity and growth, and demonstrating that they believe in the people they lead. Inspiration is relational. It cannot be delivered at a distance.

Motivational leadership recognizes that different people are moved by different things. To operationalize motivation, a leader must know their team well enough to connect individual contributions to organizational purpose in ways that land personally, not generically. Examples of tools include public recognition in team meetings, private acknowledgment, meaningful work assignments and developmental opportunities.

Influencing is the capacity to shape outcomes and behaviors through trust and strategic communication rather than formal authority. This is the dimension most tested in the real world—when a new blueprint leader needs a senior executive to invest in a safety initiative they have not prioritized, or when they need to shift a team’s culture without the ability to mandate the change. Influencing requires that the leader be credible, that they listen as much as they speak and that they understand the concerns of the people they are trying to move.

Empowerment is operationalized through the deliberate transfer of decision-making authority. The new blueprint leader cannot do it all. Empowerment means identifying capable teammates, providing them with the context and coaching that they need to lead in their own right, and then stepping back enough to let them do so. Empowerment is not

abdication; it includes ongoing support, but it requires genuine trust.

Perpetuation is the dimension that ensures that the new blueprint outlasts any individual leader. It is operationalized through mentorship, succession planning and the development of organizational systems that carry the values and vision forward. A perpetuating leader is building their own replacements, not because they intend to leave, but because they understand that the mission is larger than any single person’s tenure.

Managing Uncertainty Through the Blueprint

One of the most significant practical benefits of the new blueprint is what it does to uncertainty. Traditional safety management often generates uncertainty (e.g., ambiguity about roles, expectations and authority; Page-Bottorff, 2024). The new blueprint does the opposite. A leader who has deeply internalized the dimensions, who knows which building blocks are in place and which of the proficiencies they are operating in at any given moment, has a framework for navigating ambiguity rather than being paralyzed by it.

This framework highlights a radical departure. Traditional safety management responds to uncertainty by adding procedures. The new blueprint responds by building leadership certainty, which is the leader’s confidence in their own capacity to assess a situation, choose a dimensional response and act with purpose. That certainty becomes contagious over time. Teams led by confident, purposeful leaders become more confident and purposeful themselves.

The movement through dimensions that this certainty enables is not linear or prescribed, but it is not random either. It follows the logic of the situation and the strategy, guided by a leader who has done the analytical work to understand what is needed and why.

A Note on What Success Looks Like

The new blueprint is not oriented toward traditional lagging indicators (e.g., incident rates, severity scores, regulatory citation counts). Those outcomes matter and will improve as the blueprint is successfully operationalized. But they are not the goal; they are the result.

The goal is to motivate, encourage and influence safety professionals to become new blueprint leaders—to adopt, internalize and consistently practice the 12 dimensions. Short-term success looks like a leader who asks different questions, disrupts positively, builds relationships that generate trust, communicates vision in ways that move people, empowers others and sustains the work over time.

Long-term success looks like organizations where safety leadership is not dependent on any single extraordinary individual because the new blueprint has multiplied, expanded and been perpetuated throughout the culture.

Practical Starting Points

Operationalizing the blueprint requires preparation. Every dimension, proficiency and building block can be developed, but development requires deliberate practice. Table 1 offers detailed practical steps. These entry points are offered for safety leaders at any stage of their careers.

•**Ask the right questions.** Before every significant meeting, initiative or decision, ask Kaku-like questions such as: What is the best question I could ask here? What assumption is everyone in the room making that might be wrong? What would this look like if we imagined it without constraints? These questions are the gateway to differential thinking.

•**Audit your building blocks.** At regular intervals (e.g., monthly, quarterly) ask honestly whether differential thinking, enabling strategy and hyperfocus on intentional efforts are genuinely present in your work. Not whether you believe in them, but whether they are visible in your actions.

•**Name your current proficiency work.** On any given week, a leader is initiating, multiplying, expanding, sustaining or some combination of these. Name it explicitly. Naming it creates accountability and helps a leader recognize when they are

operating only in one proficiency mode at the expense of others.

•**Choose two dimensions to develop intentionally this month.** The dimensions are not equal in every moment. A leader new to the blueprint might start with articulation—developing a clear, audience-adaptive message about a current safety priority—because articulation underlies so many of the others. A more experienced leader might focus on perpetuation, asking what they are building that will outlast them.

•**Welcome disruption directed at you.** The new blueprint leader is not only a disruptor. They must also be someone who receives disruption well, who creates, as Galloway (2025) describes, an environment where dissenting views are welcomed and people feel safe expressing perspectives that challenge the existing approach. Effectively managed disruption supports psychological safety. For example, it is not just a concept (Edmondson & Lei, 2014); it becomes a practical leadership output of the new blueprint.

Conclusion

The new blueprint is a radical framework by design. It asks safety professionals to move from the

TABLE 1

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE 12 DIMENSIONS

Dimension	Process	Practical leadership application example
Disruption	Challenging the status quo	Challenge senior leadership to move away from check-the-box audits and instead bring in employees to participate in a “fresh eyes” activity.
Imagination	Envisioning possibilities	Host a “blue sky” brainstorming session where machinery operators suggest radical or potentially impossible ways to eliminate a recurring hazard.
Innovation	Encouraging practical problem-solving	Take an imaginative idea from the shop floor and launch a 30-day trial of a new tool or ergonomic device to test its effectiveness.
Visionary	Strategic goal setting	Create a road map that illustrates a future where technology and human care eliminate serious injuries and fatalities, not just minor ones.
Alignment	Harmonizing values	Facilitate a session with maintenance and production managers to ensure that safety goals are integrated into production schedules, not added on top.
Articulation	Reinforcing clear communication	Develop a “safety why” message tailored for different shifts (e.g., night shift, day shift) that clearly explains the human reason behind a new protocol. Be descriptive in your personal why.
Aspiration	Growing ambition	Set a stretch goal for the facility to achieve 100% participation in a voluntary safety pledge program, providing resources to help them succeed.
Inspirational	Stimulating emotional connection	Share a personal story during a town hall about a time that you overcame a safety challenge, focusing on the emotional impact, or discuss a mistake you made to entice further conversation.
Motivational	Encouraging action	Implement a recognition program where workers are publicly praised for identifying near misses that could have led to a potential serious injury or fatality.
Influencing	Utilizing persuasion without authority	Use data and storytelling to convince the chief financial officer to invest in advanced safety telematics by highlighting the long-term human and financial benefits.
Empowerment	Granting autonomy	Delegate the authority to a safety committee of floor workers to shut down a line if they identify a critical hazard without the need for prior approval.
Perpetuation	Building a legacy	Establish a formal mentorship program where veteran safety leads train high-potential workers to ensure that leadership values continue after they retire.

familiar territory of management—where the rules are known, the outcomes are measurable and the tools are well-established—into the more demanding universe of transformational leadership—where the primary work is influencing human beings toward a different future.

That is not comfortable work. It requires positive disruption of one's own habits and seeks disruption in conventional thought and practice. It requires imagination about what safety leadership should look like at its best. It requires trying innovative approaches before there is certainty they will work. It requires vision, alignment, articulation and aspiration that are authentic rather than performative. It requires full presence and sustained commitment that inspiration, motivation, influence, empowerment and perpetuation demand.

This article defines our work ahead. This work is not a compliance audit nor an incident investigation. It is not regulatory training. Those efforts are all necessary, but they are not the mission. The mission is to lead and transform. The new blueprint shows the way. **PSJ**

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