

## SAFETY SIDE EFFECTS

By Robert Pater

**The more powerful the medicine, the stronger its side effects. I know many people coping with the effects of potent treatments for recently diagnosed serious ailments who can unfortunately attest to this. Make-it-happen leaders should also keep this principle in mind.**

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**The more significant** the changes in potentially improved procedures, policies or programs, the greater the likelihood for unintended side effects. In other words, all treatments create other risks.

Need a laugh (that furthers this point)? Recommended during these interesting and turbulent times is Steve Martin's "Side Effects," a short piece that begins, "Dosage: take two tablets every 6 hours for joint pain. Side effects: This drug may cause joint pain," followed by a litany of satirical-but-hilarious side effects:

You may find yourself becoming lost or vague; this would be a good time to write a screenplay. If a fungus starts to grow between your eyebrows, call the Guinness Book of World Records. You may feel a powerful sense of impending doom; this is because you are about to die. You also may experience a growing dissatisfaction with life along with a deep sense of melancholy—join the club! Has been known to cause birth defects in the user retroactively. (Martin, 1998)

Sure, this seems exaggerated and purposely over the top. But perhaps not such a huge stretch when viewing any of the seemingly interminable print and broadcast commercials for prescription medications, always replete with sped-up attorney-driven voice or small-print warnings that have been parodied seemingly everywhere. And this potentially affects lots of people. According to the Health Policy Institute (n.d.) at Georgetown University, "More than 131 million people—66% of all adults in the U.S.—use prescription drugs."

Pharmacists and other healthcare providers are obligated to notify medication-takers of potential side effects (often with detailed print-outs). This doesn't mean people should avoid taking medications, just that there might be a price to be paid where, hopefully, the benefits greatly outweigh the downsides. But it seems there are always some downsides.

For example, consider studies that have analyzed the potential side effects of antidepressants. According to Nischal et al. (2012), "It is assumed that antidepressants are beneficial for all symptoms of depression, including suicidality. However, some evidence suggests that selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors may cause worsening of suicidal ideas in vulnerable patients."

Importantly, this concept also illuminates a critical but too-often overlooked leadership point: that every strategy, everything we do, every action we take has side effects. Battery-powered cars can save fuel, drive smoothly and almost soundlessly. The same is true for electric lift trucks. Their quietness can also pose safety hazards for pedestrians who are distracted or visually impaired and thereby aren't auditorily alerted to the vehicle bearing down nearby.

The aerial buckets or cherry pickers that utility line workers increasingly employ rather than having to climb poles have the side effects of making it less likely that they will be in better physical condition, which in turn may negatively affect their health. And we've seen that when a truck can't approach a rural back lot to deploy the aerial bucket, said line workers can be less practiced and in condition for the now-rarer times they do have to climb poles. Not to mention increasing other risks such as the boom contacting power lines, tipovers on uneven surfaces, or increased crushes and amputations from contact between the bucket and a solid object.

This isn't to say that technological and safety improvements are bad. Most companies deem the downside effects of aerial buckets as safer than the mangled ankles and knees of line workers and arborists who use climbing spurs. In the same vein, powerful prescription medications shouldn't be avoided, just that it is important to understand, and plan to reduce those potential side effects that everything poses. This calls on best leaders' anticipating, monitoring and then making allowances to reduce potential cascading side effects.

We've frequently run into this. Because we focus on high-energy, practical methods that wow and raise enthusiasm, clients have reported that our work can have the side effect of raising the bar for other aspects of their safety offerings ("How come our other training isn't interesting/involving?").

Falling in love with a "perfect plan" often entails squelching or ignoring foreseeing its potential side effects; this requires looking below the surface to move from the theoretical to the actual, to anticipate and make allowances for possible future pushbacks and side effects. Best leaders go beyond assuming best-case scenarios, where, upon whatever completion is, people will live and work happily, productively and safely ever after.



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There are always cascading reactions, always a price for any change. And should leaders assume that there won't be some side effects, these can come back and bite them, sabotaging their improvement efforts. Not seeing the price—or pretending one doesn't exist—doesn't mean you won't wind up paying it. It's often just the opposite. Blindly leaping into a strategy or plan makes it more likely that you'll stumble into trouble as you're less able to see looming potholes (and thereby be less able to evade them). It's kind of the essence of safety and effective leadership. As master change agent Paul McClellan says, “Contingencies are more important than the plan itself.”

Side effects can take time to develop. For example, studies show that, in addition to suffering injury from falling, some people develop a fear of falling that, in turn, can have the side effect of their chances of falling again 12.15 times higher due to increased tension that reduces their physical balance (Pena et al., 2019; Schoene et al., 2019).

Further, leaders have to be especially careful that the side effects don't torpedo their intended goals (e.g., “The surgery was successful, but the patient died”). This goes beyond the obvious lost opportunity effect, where, as Robert Frost termed it, the cost of anything we do is the road not taken, where, because our time and resources are limited, everything we choose to do simultaneously means deciding to not do something else. This applies to whom we choose to hire and whom to promote; which equipment we purchase and which we pass on; which interventions we incorporate and which we therefore don't.

### Thinking Beyond

Execution expert Ron Bowles reminds leaders to “think beyond the fix.” For example, heightening awareness that even when leaders remove a bottleneck to speed up a process (e.g., filling out and filing safety investigations), they should also envision in advance those other obstacles or issues

this newly proposed process might in turn create, such as pressuring people to fill out a report sooner rather than later, which might then lead to them pencil-whipping the form (i.e., getting it done for its own sake just to submit it rather than taking time to think through potential contributing factors or possible methods for averting the incident in the first place).

Why would leaders ignore or not anticipate potential side effects from their plans or actions? There could be several reasons that we've seen such as:

- Overwhelmed: They have too much work to think through the potential ripple effects of their actions.
- Impatience: Ron Bowles reflects, “Too many leaders tend to bite on too many things.” Attempts to do too much can lead to dispersing the time to more deeply plan, to anticipate potential side effects, so can get in the way of contingency planning for reducing these.
- Too Pollyanna-ish: They fall in love with a strategy that they hope and believe will fully fix their problems (“and they worked and lived happily and safely forever”).
- Desperation: They need or feel the pressure (from their company or other sources) to turn around injuries so quickly that they turn a blind eye to the potential consequences of their chosen actions.
- They are influenced by someone who has a stake in the personal or professional gain from instituting a “perfect” approach.
- Political conflict: This is where a leader becomes so tunnel-visioned on neutralizing a naysayer that they won't even admit to there being, much less cogently consider, any potential side effects to their chosen strategy. Or the desire to protect their fiefdom overcomes balanced strategic forward thinking. Craig Lewis has found, “There's typically inherent competition in organizations, between individuals, departments, budget lines and more. Each action anyone takes creates other concerns and demands.”

I'm not at all suggesting leaders get overinvolved in contingency planning/analysis-paralysis to the detriment of taking the actions that

actually foster change. Action is ultimately the bottom line of change.

And thinking beyond is not the same as standard contingency planning, which involves often plotting a wide range of alternate paths, and it is easy to get lost in unending possibilities. Thinking beyond assumes that there will always be some kind of side effects to any implementation or action. That it is critical to scope out the extent of these, and to then be willing and ready to make small and early interventions that reduce negative impacts that arise. You may not be able to prevent all side effects, but you can often reduce their negative consequences with mindful monitoring and adjustments.

By the way, although it is easy to equate side effects only with harmful responses, these can sometimes be positive. Saleh (2021) says, “according to the American Medical Association Manual of Style, a side effect is simply ‘a secondary consequence of therapy (usually drug-based) that is implemented to correct a medical condition’ and can thus be either beneficial or detrimental.”

For example, there are medicines that are now prescribed not for their original intention, but for the positive side effects they engendered. Minoxidil is used to grow hair, but this was an observed side effect to its original purpose as a blood pressure medication. And Saleh (2021) notes, “In addition to facilitating erections, Viagra may also have a very beneficial side effect of improving heart health.” And side effects aren’t only physical. According to Saleh, “Physicians, however, have only begun to examine the association between people taking levodopa and other dopamine agonists for Parkinson’s disease and the emergence of newfound creativity.” And Owens Healthcare (2013) indicates that aspirin, originally prescribed for heart attack prevention, has a beneficial side effect:

Higher survival rate of colon and prostate cancer. Men [who] took aspirin at least once a day and were diagnosed with prostate cancer had a 57% lower mortality rate than those who did not take aspirin regularly, according to a study published by the Journal of Clinical Oncology. Another study by the New England Journal of Medicine found that people who had survived colon cancer and presented with a unique mutation had a reduced risk of death if they took aspirin regularly as compared to those who didn’t. Speculation from these findings suggests that a protein activated by aspirin may restrict growth of cancer cells.

Strongest leaders don’t only look forward and ahead, they also scan to the sides to see and anticipate those mountain rocks bordering their chosen roadway before they roll down and block their road. Take small and appropriate actions that smooth the path toward ongoing improvements.

Owens Healthcare (2013) also cites the beneficial side effects of the common flu shot:

Research suggests that flu shots may actually reduce the risk of stroke or heart attack by almost 50%. According to Jacob A. Udell, M.D., getting a flu vaccination may “block the inflammatory response our bodies mount to combat a flu infection, which projects arterial plaques from rupturing.”

Beneficial and harmful side effects are both discovered by leaders who keenly observe and monitor the unintended fruits of their prescriptive actions. Sincerely

interviewing workers about their safety concerns to surface problems can also have the side effect of improving safety motivation and mindfulness. And transferring practical injury-prevention methods and techniques can have the positive side effect of improving employee relations and trust in organizational leadership.

## Potential Side Effects of Some Safety Leadership Strategies

As I mentioned, the more powerful a strategy or action, the stronger are its side effects. Note that as with medications not every individual or company will experience the exact same side effects. Strong, powerful leaders are also those who can engender strong negative reactions; I have seen that the most admired or respected leaders are also strongly disliked by some.

Most important, consider that while each of these have value, negative side effects are most likely to occur when there is an overemphasis, an unbalanced stressing of one of these approaches or actions.

- Overfocus on engagement without a similarly strong emphasis on injury-reduction skills. Craig Lewis says, “Empowerment activities often create pushback, even though many leaders say they want it.” And Ron Bowles has found that “Creating an expectation of engagement and empowerment when the organization or some levels of management are unwilling to give up ownership of ‘the way things have been done around here’ can have the side effect of undercutting engagement and reinforcing a perception of an actual lack of empowerment.”

- Overstressing injury statistics (e.g., lost-time injury rates) without expressing concern and support, actually can demotivate, transmitting the message, “We care less about you as an individual than as a number. What we mostly care about is not looking bad.”

- Employee suggestion surveys or programs without timely and concrete follow-up or corrective actions. When leaders ask what workers want, they are encouraging a tacit expectation that they will at least get back to employees about their ideas (much less do something to improve the situation).

- Emphasizing explicit, highly detailed safety investigation reports or policies and procedures completed quickly. Often, the more leaders expect of others, the less likely they'll do it. Some safety professionals have sought a balance between turn-it-in deadlines and thoroughness in reporting, knowing they can always go back for more information later where needed.

- Unbalanced focus on awareness, will or motivation while neglecting hazard controls and developing skills.

- Rewards, reinforcement or recognition for zero or few injury reports. All-too-common side effects are encouraging reduced reporting, especially with near-hits or anything easily hidden.

- PPE that isolates or disconnects, such as sealed hearing protection that blocks out almost all potential warning sounds, rather than those that build in a "transparent" mode that also allows coworker interaction. Or universal glove or back-belt policies for those not at risk that reinforces perceptions of safety as an unnecessary obstacle.

### Side-Effects-Related Questions

Some side-effects-related questions that leaders might ask themselves and their planning group include:

- How can we ferret out or elicit any side effects to our implementation?

- What are the potential side effects of our considered options? What do these look like? How likely are they?

- Are there any unanticipated or surprising positive side effects to what has been implemented?

- Who would know if there are potential side effects we might not be anticipating?

- What, if anything, are we missing? (Ask independent resources or benchmark.)

- Does putting this plan or action into place diminish or isolate anyone, and so induce disconnection or incur pushback? Have we asked employees, frontline leads and supervisors?

- What messages might implementing this plan send to our workers, leaders, customers and community?

- Does this undercut or neutralize any of our highly desired outcomes or objectives?

- How does this reflect on any of our other commitments or concerns? Or on our desired culture?

- What action changes should we consider to either head off negative side effects or enhance beneficial ones?

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bordering their chosen roadway before they roll down and block their road. Take small and appropriate actions that smooth the path toward ongoing improvements. **PSJ**

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