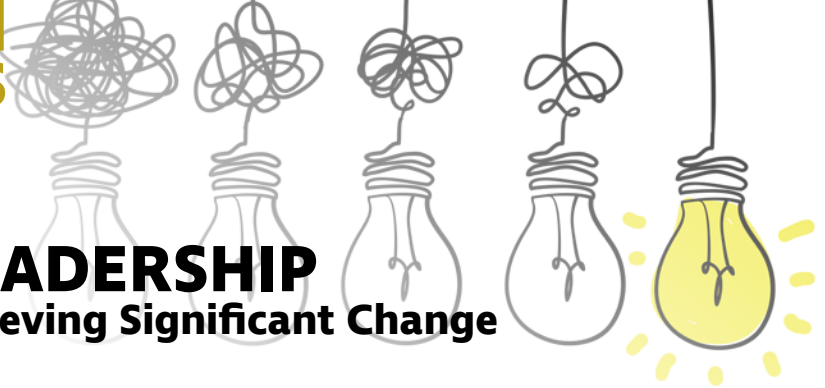

MINDFUL LEADERSHIP

A Strategy for Achieving Significant Change

By Robert Pater

Do you aspire to become a more potent, a more powerful leader that can actually make the right things happen, especially in highly challenging circumstances? Mindful differentiation can be key to doing this. Going back to a source can lead to great power.

Robert Pater
Robert Pater, M.A., is managing director and founder of MoveSMART (www.movesmart.com). Clients include Amtrak, ArcelorMittal, BHP Billiton, BMW, BorgWarner, BP, Cummins, Domtar, DuPont, Hawaiian Airlines, HD Supply, Honda, Marathon Oil, MSC Industrial Supply, Nissan, Northrop Grumman, ONE Gas, Rio Tinto, S&C Electric, United Airlines, U.S. Steel, Wacker and WestRock. Pater is a professional member of ASSP's Columbia-Willamette Chapter.

For example, many leaders have been embracing mindfulness as a useful approach to enhancing safety and performance. One of the ancient fonts of the importance of mindfulness was Buddha, who spread methods for living relaxed and healthy both in body and mind. Although not a religion in itself, these teachings are in tune with those of many religions.

Simply put, here is Buddha's formula: "Right outlook" leads to "right thinking," which then leads to "right actions." According to one Zen master (who seems aligned with many other experts), "right" is not "a synonym of good (as in good vs. evil), it has no moral significance. Instead, 'right' is characteristic of action, words or thoughts that generate happiness, inner peace" (Fuyu, 2020). I believe that this approach also aligns with high-level safety performance and culture.

I have found that one thing that leads many well-intentioned and informed leaders astray is a tendency to broadly mix together elements that aren't really the same. Consider that our outlook is comprised of the way we perceive what is going on around us, our biases about the motivations of others, the obstacles we as leaders have to deal with, and more. Psychologists indicate that these are dramatically influenced by "common fallacies" (six of them, according to one source), each of which is defined as "a systematic error in . . . formulating, connecting and establishing the reasons for your conclusions" (Mayes, 2007). In other words, no surprise, many of us are prone to mistakes, misperceptions, internal biases, or are inclined toward perceiving situations as duplicating what might have previously occurred instead of what they freshly are. In other words, many are not being mindful, not perceiving the uniqueness of a current situation or problem, not gleaning what's happening now.

Since I am writing about the power of differentiating, of not falsely mixing up two elements as if they were the exact same, let's distinguish between mindset and mindfulness, two important but complementary aspects of effecting significant change. The way we approach problems and all situations (i.e., our mindset) funnels into how we initially enter into a situation, what we carry over from past experiences and thoughts, which then colors, influences or leads to what we assume is true, how we first enter into planning and execution. This then has direct effects on how and what we perceive, communicate, how and where we allocate resources to improving safety, how we respond to unexpected or unplanned scenarios and, broadly, how we set up our systems overall. In other words, mindset directly leads to safety culture. This is what I think of as "right outlook," whereas mindfulness means noting and monitoring the ever-changing uniqueness of each situation. It is the polar opposite of being complacent or lulled into seeing the world as "same-old." Mindfulness is reflected by "right thinking."

One without the other will limit how right the actions are that grow from leadership strategy and planning. For example, if a leader carries the belief that employees are trying their utmost to get out of working in an approved safe way, that leader will likely selectively perceive and think about the "evidence" they see of shirking, which in turn can frequently lead to an initial first resort action of disciplining. This is but one of a large number of such possible chains from approach/mindset to thinking and sensing/mindfulness to action. I have seen safety cultures that, from my findings, have tripped over their own feet largely due to the underlying paradigms/beliefs/mindsets of having to berate or force "bad" workers to work safer. In fact, in my experience, pretty much any company that focuses on enforcing compliance is already working off a highly limited mindset, where the bar is too low and the setup for increasing buyout in safety is high.

On the flip side, take another leader who has a mindset of including worker participation in safety, of supporting rather than summarily resorting to forcing, of raising safety interest and energy as opposed to repeating same-old adjurations (all of which can be effective). But if this leader is all-in on "right mindset" but not on "right thinking" (i.e., doesn't mindfully monitor or adjust to preexisting employee distrust or disgruntlement), it is more likely than not that there will be a disconnect with workers, that the leader and the company will be seen as pie-in-the-sky, sending mixed messages or being out of touch, with bottom-line "right actions" unlikely to emerge.

Conflations, Human Error & Safety, Oh My!

Overall, there are clearly many types of human error. Not strategically understanding what separates different states or actions can make a big deal when it comes to leadership, planning and performance.

In essence, I'm referring here to conflation (defined as the merging of two or more sets of information, texts or ideas into one), which affects safety leadership and approach. This is not merely an intellectual exercise, just as mindset is not the same as mindfulness, and makes a huge difference in results-oriented execution.

There are real reasons why people conflate approaches, such as:

- not fully understanding the strengths and limitations of each method
- being influenced by effective marketing that positions one solution as the only way to address a prob-

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lem, or merely attempts to oversimplify a complex issue to make it easier to grasp

•automatically associating one thing with another (see "Strains and sprains" bullet) by acquired habit

•identifying or becoming so used to one method to the extent that others that are out of the box seem uncomfortable ("I've always done it that way"), can be perceived as entailing extra work, or rocking the safety boat

•feeling under pressure to get things done as inexpensively and quickly as possible, leading some to persuade themselves that what is convenient is also sufficiently good enough

These are some of the reasons that organizations get stuck on plateaus of safety performance and culture, where improvements seem few or short-lived and where culture appears to just merry-go-round in place. Clear movement, just not upwards.

But strategic leaders are those who think for themselves, nurture an outlook of not accepting the limits that others place combined with the mindfulness to scan for and consider options that best fit their own situations.

Here are some examples of other conflations in safety that can potentially stymie higher-level performance and culture. Have you seen any of these within your own safety culture?

•Strains and sprains: Although it is common to hear strains and sprains joined together as if they were one and the same, they are not. Sprains are tears to the less-soft, less-stretchy tissue of ligaments that lash joints together; strains are tears to muscles or the tendons that connect muscles to bones. Differentiating between these sets the stage for improved recovery, more effective return-to-work strategies and, perhaps even more important, a raft of proven methods for considerably preventing these injuries in the first place.

•Slips, trips and falls are also discussed as if they were joined at the hip, or are all the same. Remember that, when walking forward, someone can slip (foot slides ahead of center of body mass) or trip (foot is momentarily slowed or stopped as momentum carries upper body mass ahead of lower body), yet still recover so this incident need not result in a fall. There is a lot to this, and many easily transferred techniques that work in the real world. Again, where you look and what you assume leads both to actions you take and to those you don't even consider.

•Accident repeaters. Yet another mindset issue, this label implies the joining of injuries and those workers who are somehow inadequate, either don't pay attention or don't care enough about their own safety, are even just looking to shirk from doing work or have other personal problems. I have heard these same people alternately labeled as "frequent flyers," "recidivists" or "repeat offenders" (as in, equated with criminals).

This outlook naturally lends itself to punitive responses, which I've seen. Hard-line, blame-the-worker interventions have backfired big-time in several companies, fueling bargaining unit or worker rage and worsening employee relations. But experience working in reducing incident repetition with many companies offers a different story, one that has led to relatively quickly instituted approaches to breaking chains of repetitive injuries while elevating personal responsibility and culture. The underlying secret? Start by recalibrating mindset to understand that there are many types of repeaters, that an ongoing chain of such problems is typically systemic rather than just an individual problem-employee issue, and that shifting mindset of leaders and employees has and can then lead to sizable improvements.

•"Ergonomics means design." No, it doesn't. The word "ergonomics" literally comes from the Greek words "*ergon*" (work) and "*nomos*" (laws), essentially, the laws or science of work. Its focus, in my interpretation, is improving the fit between a person and their tasks to improve efficiency, effectiveness and safety.

Don't take my word for it. According to International Ergonomics Association (IEA, n.d.), ergonomics is "the scientific discipline concerned with the understanding of interactions among humans and other elements."

Of course, design and redesign are critical aspects of improving fit, but that is not the entire story or discipline. Yet how many safety leaders conflate ergonomics only with design or purchasing specialized adaptable equipment, bypassing even investigating other methods for reducing cumulative trauma and other ergonomics-related problems? Again, limited outlook can lead to weighing limited perceptions ("how can we design out ergonomic risks in our workers' homes?"), then to less-than-effective actions.

•Equating behavior-based safety exactly and only as a process of checklist monitoring by a trained observer, whereas in actuality, any system that changes actions is indeed behavior-based. But if changing behavior is considered identical to one specific process, no matter how effective, then this mindset may limit leaders from looking at other potentially useful strategies for improving safety performance.

•"Education equals training." Some thoughts here out of decades of experience providing each of these:

Paul McClellan, director of MoveSMART Training Systems, has implemented education, training and reinforcement within numerous Fortune 500 companies worldwide since 1989. Craig Lewis, director of strategy, is another master change agent with a rich repertoire of education, skills training and negotiation in the organizational safety realm.

McClellan sees education as:

> an intellectual approach to what to do, why to do it and the theory of how to approach this. This helps move workers past 'don't think, just do what you're told,' which often leads to confusion at best and pushback at worst. It highlights principles but is light on practices. Done well, education can motivate and provide a framework for understanding, to help people think through the demands and risks of a task, and to consider options.

Lewis adds that:

> Education often has to change attitudes, covers the need for changing what some-

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All plans, programs, interventions, or actions start off in the mind. But so, too, do biases, unfounded assumptions, misperceptions, same-old thinking and more.

one does, becoming aware of different options for achieving this, as well as identifying the strengths and limitations of each option. It can plow the ground, increase receptivity, setting the stage for training to take, but doesn't replace it. And an often-overlooked education objective is to raise participants' confidence that they can indeed change, do something differently and more effectively.

This process aims to help people think differently (modifying their outlook/mindset).

Education primarily enlists visual and auditory senses: watching and hearing. Successful education, whether by video, internet, lecture or demonstration, usually results in more people wanting to try new actions and also understanding why and how to try these. Education is often a predominantly subject-expert-to-participant process. The ultimate product of good education? Understanding and readiness to improve.

In contrast, according to McClellan, "Training specifically emphasizes the transfer of skills, so that people actually improve what they do. It focuses on practical application of principles." McClellan has found that for this to occur, training has to enlist kinesthetic/tactile senses in addition to the auditory and visual. "Training participants have to actually practice, usually multiple times with different drills, what you want them to be able to do differently after training (or as close to this as possible)." Lewis further clarifies such drills as "mindful repetition, trying different 'angles', not just robotically doing the skill in the exact same way. The test of good training? Being mentally and physically able to accomplish targeted tasks more effectively."

Training is therefore more of a participant-practice-driven process. Both McClellan and Lewis emphasize that training must be interesting enough to motivate participants to practice. People have to want to do it after the seed has been planted for them to apply new skills to their tasks; if they don't relate these back to what they value, if they see these new methods as eroding what's important to them, they will only apply them as minimally as possible at best, usually when they know they're being observed. And now we've stepped back into the mediocre province of bare compliance.

Let's take a common example: telling workers they should lift with their legs. While this is certainly good theory and information, and it is indeed helpful to engage leg muscles in manual material handling (rather than attempting to primarily or totally muscle a load with upper body strength), educational reminders alone do not provide methods for actually applying this principle, especially in an array of real-world situations. What about one-handed lifting? With objects that are bulky versus those whose weight is more concentrated? With loads that have to be handled by two people at the same time? Where space is restricted? Explaining why to lift with your legs alone doesn't train people to actually apply this in the real world of work, so, taken by itself, has limited impact on sizably preventing injuries.

This distinction is important even in nonphysical activities. A math professor might expertly explain and demonstrate how to solve a type of algebra equation. But, for students to acquire this skill, they will have to work on sample problems on their own until they understand it. This is why videos, lectures, readings and written directions can have value for educating workers and leaders in safety but cannot replace proficiency-driven, learning-by-actually-doing training if the leader's goal is to see safer actions, not just workers being able to answer questions about what they should be doing.

Strategic Summary

A major key to increase success is to match the cure to the problem. An antibiotic that will eliminate one type of bacterial infection may not even dent a different strain, or do anything to a viral attack (other than generate unnecessary and discomforting side effects).

Defining targeted aims and objectives is important for moving toward a desired direction. Just aiming to "Go West, young man" from Washington, DC, may have you end up anywhere from Vancouver, Canada, to San Diego, CA (not the optimal result if you were hoping to arrive in Anchorage, AK). No matter what terms they use, strategic leaders know that right outlook/mindset combined with right thinking/mindfulness are both necessary precursors to right action. That muddily conflating objectives, approaches and directions makes it less likely to achieve targeted results.

All plans, programs, interventions, or actions start off in the mind. But so, too, do biases, unfounded assumptions, misperceptions, same-old thinking and more. By mindfully differentiating between varying approaches, by matching the solution with the need, leaders can make the right things happen at the right time, in the right ways. **PSJ**

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