

FIVE STEPS TO GALVANIZING INTERNAL SAFETY LEADERS

By Robert Pater

Have you wondered why people do not act more safely in their own interest? Wise leaders accept that resistance commonly rebounds against their expectations that tasks be done differently.

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Reflexive opposition often accompanies improvement processes as change always involves loss of some kind. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (2012) observes that paradigm shifts for solving problems progress through recognizable stages, defining “revolutions” as “changes of worldview.” While focused on step-ups in scientific thinking or approaches, Kuhn’s work reflects overall human nature, applying to any field where leaders seek to break through those mental ceilings that limit improvements. His work is about understanding the denial, resistance, grudging consideration and then embracement phases of changing mindsets, and much of it applies to rising performance and cultural safety.

Generally, I am excited when I am questioned or even-temperedly challenged about my presentations or writings; this is a great way to examine my own assumptions for biases or limited knowledge and to hopefully continue to hone my approaches. In fact, a clear purpose of this article series is to encourage ideas and generate reactions—hopefully toward shaking off the rust of “we’ve been doing it this way, even though it’s honestly not showing the results we’d like”—and moving toward ever-heightening actual safety.

I have found that leaders who are receptive to challenge consistently promote more creative solutions and heighten psychological safety. Defensive-ness or counterattacks shut down honest feedback and reports of near misses or “hidable” incidents. The key, especially in these times, is to listen with an open mind to receive others’ contrary perceptions and ideas with curiosity and calm, truly weighing them for what I might learn. As organizational leadership expert Gordon Lippitt (1982) explains, as a rule, the leader should look at the issues coldly and at the people involved warmly.

I received a comment after posting articles about our global experiences in developing internal safety catalysts (see Pater, 2023b). The comment stated:

The concept of unleashing internal safety leaders looks simple until organizational silos appear. I’ve noticed in infrastructure deployments that grassroots adoption stalls when middle layers lack authority to act. Curious how you balance empowerment with accountability when developing these leaders across different organizational levels without creating conflicting directives?

While I spent much time considering that question, it stimulated thinking. From our core work

with predominantly larger companies worldwide in numerous sectors, I have certainly found that nothing is simple when it comes to implementing and nurturing organizational change, especially when addressing or overcoming longstanding issues. Organizational leaders are smart and experienced overall. If making and sustaining lasting, significant changes were simple, this article would not be necessary. Persistent problems typically signify multiple, often underlying contributors. And in our experience, conflicting directives are par for the organizational course and can never be eliminated, only worked with, redirected, mediated or reduced as obstacles, among other interventions.

However, insightful and strategic change agents can make it easier for others to become more successful—in this case, helping heighten safety leadership system-wide. We have seen what we term “scissors leadership” serve as a highly efficient approach to upgrading safety performance or injury reductions along with culture. In this case, “scissors” means cutting through safety blockages not just by managers at various levels top-down, nor merely by empowering grassroots peer-leaders bottom-up, but both, akin to scissor blades coming together to efficiently slice through thick cardboard, simultaneously boosting safety leaders top-down and bottom-up.

Why Internal Safety Leaders?

We have found that creating safety leaders has two benefits: elevating performance (injury prevention) and cultivating culture. Recently, many companies have embraced this approach both within their executive ranks and with selected grassroots workers. There are many advantages to developing a core of internal safety catalysts to, in turn, train, converse with, or coach and sustainably reinforce workers that go well beyond the traditional, predominantly top-down model of safety implementation.

1) Continuously engender upgraded safety mindsets and transfer skill sets within the company. This encourages everyone to more willingly embrace, rather than just try to (sometimes reluctantly) memorize or follow safety directives they may not wholeheartedly embrace.

2) Ease of scheduling. This means not having to rely on the availability of outside resources that must also be expensed.

3) Provide flexibility. Reach those who many have missed initial training due to absence or inability to be released from work tasks. Internal safety catalysts are

also in place to onboard new hires or temporary workers, whether individually or in groups.

4) Efficient time usage. Generally, grassroots safety catalysts have more time to share, listen and influence peers than do those in higher positions (e.g., safety professionals, managers). Catalysts can serve as supports to busy supervisors. Often, catalyst or peer interactions occur informally in breakrooms, before meetings begin, while working alongside one another, and even in the parking lot. In many cases, workers are actually more open to influence at these times.

5) Develop workers as resources. This can both further retention and expand organizational capability. Developing select workers as catalysts strengthens their engagement and ability to increase their contributions to the company.

6) Spread safety's base. This can be done by offloading and supporting busy safety professionals and supervisors, especially where organizations have challenges with fully staffing their safety function.

7) Readily reinforce newly transferred skill sets. This is especially important in preventing personal injuries (e.g., strains or sprains, slips, trips, falls) where it is essential to upgrade others' often longtime default actions in daily activities (at work and at home). Changing repetitive or long-standing approaches often requires multiple exposures or reminders.

8) Upgrade safety culture. Work to upgrade the hidden safety culture that often exists outside the ken of supervisors and managers.

5 Steps to Developing High-Level Internal Safety Leaders

From our experience of developing internal safety leaders (catalysts) for more than 3 decades, we know that as external agents who neither work daily within our client companies nor hire or supervise their staff, we are limited in terms of our influence (and many internal EHS professionals may be in somewhat parallel circumstances). Additionally, myriad ever-changing forces may affect implementing or executing even the best-laid plans.

We are typically brought in after internal company leaders have tried everything that they can think of (or even after the trials of other outside resources have disappointed). With that said, we have seen remarkable successes, some more surprising than others, while working with companies globally.

Here is what we embrace as our role and goals. More important, this also clearly applies to those change agents who work full-time within a company. Like everything, working internally has both advantages and challenges. Some potential upsides include a higher level of knowledge of internal workings or culture, established relationships, access to smoothing needed logistics, and time to continuously work with and reinforce others. In contrast, some potential challenges may be that the change agents are more embroiled in organizational politics that

seem stifling; pay or job security is more dependent on one source, affecting willingness to challenge senior leaders; preexisting conflicts in relationships; others' limited perceptions of the safety professional; and affected cannot-do mindsets from previous frustrated attempts at improvement.

To address these advantages and challenges, these five stages can help develop high-level internal safety leaders.

1) Priming the ground. When growing plants, early preparation before sowing seeds increases the chances of the future plants surviving and producing a strong and tasty harvest. Initially selecting the right location (sun exposure and other complementary plants), softening the soil and adding the right nutrients can increase the likelihood of success.

Applying this concept to developing internal safety leaders, it is critical to unearth and nurture early support from multiple levels within the company (think of the scissors idea) to elevate potential receptivity to the proposed organizational change. This early buy-in process, like all others, must be adapted to each organization's history, concerns and culture. The subsequent roll-out must fit well and be in accordance with the company's timing and logistics (this, like all other elements, must be customized or the implementation is likely to fall flat).

An important aspect of this stage is setting positive but realistic expectations. This is done so that leaders do not later pull the plug when they do not see entrenched trailing indicators plummet in an expected time frame. While a safety professional may not be able to shut down leaders' harboring of impatient expectations, a brief discussion can be had later to remind them and tactfully offer perspective on timing.

2) Stimulate interest. After getting the initial attention of organizational leaders, it is critical to energize and activate strong personal and professional interest among a wide range of formal and informal leaders (e.g., bargaining unit reps, those grassroots leaders who have the ear and attention of peers, frontline supervisors, mid-managers and up). Doing so both builds culture and helps form a broad-based foundation for later adoption, especially assuming that later first steps may not be perfect (e.g., issues with logistics, release of workers, timing problems). My motto is that the first can often be the worst, but do not let that derail you.

Applying this concept to developing internal safety leaders, to encourage interest and garner support from executives, it is not enough to make a business case for this safety system implementation that selects and develops internal leaders. It takes energy and enthusiasm to drive such change, especially due to bureaucratic or other habitual resistances. A reason people and organizations persist with processes or approaches that repeatedly disappoint is that planned improvements are often overly intellectual (e.g., with phrases like "It's the right thing to do," "It makes sense," "It's a no-brainer") and do not have the fuel of true energy to help drive them. This can

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be like having an expensive car that does not run because it is out of fuel.

In general, we emphasize raising energy or enthusiasm for the forthcoming implementation by demonstrating the personal benefits of the process to all, individually or personally and to the company. We do this by combining rational approaches that are realistic and readily accepted by most with crucial, kinesthetic demonstrations that break through most mental resistance. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a kinesthetic feeling (demonstrably improved physical strength and coordination) is worth millions. To further personalize, we have also found it essential to weave in the personal or home benefits of safety to everyone (e.g., how it might help them support their family members, how it can improve their performance in favorite sports, hobbies or activities).

3) Anticipate potential organizational blockages to successful implementation. Also, make plans jointly with internal leaders to move past or through these blockages. Applying this concept to developing internal safety leaders, it is essential to first understand that these leaders, especially those from the floor or front line, can be seen as threatening to some supervisors and mid-managers or even to some safety professionals. Should conversations at your company indicate that this may be the case, it is critical to reassure those affected in advance that the role of a newly

minted internal safety leader is to support and even take some of the workload off of busy managers and EHS professionals, not to replace these people. It is critical that the preparation of these internal leaders sets expectations that are consistent with this stage. Second in this transformation, anticipate what could potentially go wrong or realistically get in the way of successful implementation, and work toward minimizing or averting possible obstacles.

4) Help internal leaders create and implement a realistic plan for rollout and ongoing sustainability. Applying this concept to developing internal safety leaders, first develop a range of leading indicators with their input. Next, select no more than three of these leading indicators to initially track. This process helps focus the attention of both internal safety leaders and higher-level organizational leaders on movement toward better safety performance, rather than focusing only on the final goal and only locking in to trailing results, which typically takes more time to move.

Second, plan for an early rollout, especially if this is a pilot program, to be sited where maximum likelihood of success can occur. We have found that those who need it the most are often the most unlikely to implement it. Essentially, there are reasons why certain sites, departments or shifts have safety issues (e.g., too thinly staffed, leaders who are not safety believers or give short shrift to safety while emphasizing productivity far above all else). While these challenging areas are understandably those we would most like to improve, resist the temptation or pressure to initially pilot a new safety intervention in these arenas. It is better to build a positive track record (and internal credibility) by starting with another group with greater preexisting leadership receptivity.

Lastly, time the release of internal safety leaders (whether they are to be training, coaching others or providing other assistance) to have them hit the ground running soon after their initial preparation. Often, delay can be detrimental.

5) Follow up with internal leaders to support and reinforce their efforts. Applying this concept to developing internal safety leaders, it is important to remember that few things are more dispiriting and disengaging than communicating high expectations of what a new safety leader is charged with and can accomplish and then not providing ongoing support and reinforcement, especially when they may face status-quo-maintaining pushback to change. Report back to everyone which leading indicators are being tracked as well as any progress on these. Also, gather feedback on what adjustments should be attempted to modify initial plans. Lastly, arrange for new internal leaders to meet (more frequently initially) to share successes and challenges. When possible, have some of these new internal leaders periodically report to C-suite and mid-level managers on what they have seen.

Internalizing Safety

In our experience, the highest expression of safety comes from within, both inside of each individual and within the company. This is supported by

DRIVING LASTING SAFETY IMPROVEMENT

•**Expect resistance to change.** Plan for skepticism and pushback as a normal part of improvement efforts, and address concerns with patience, realistic expectations and open communication rather than defensiveness.

•**Build support from the top and bottom.** Engage executives, managers, supervisors and influential frontline employees together to create aligned leadership that can remove barriers and reinforce safety initiatives.

•**Develop internal safety champions.** Train selected employees to coach peers, reinforce safe behaviors, onboard new workers and provide ongoing support between formal training sessions.

•**Prepare for obstacles before rollout.** Identify likely implementation challenges, reassure managers that safety leaders are there to support—not replace—them, and proactively develop strategies to overcome resistance.

•**Start small and measure progress.** Pilot new safety initiatives where success is most likely, track a few leading indicators instead of relying only on injury statistics and use early wins to build credibility.

•**Reinforce and sustain the effort.** Provide continuous coaching, feedback and opportunities for internal safety leaders to share lessons learned, report progress and refine the program over time.

aligned policies, procedures, budgeting, structures and logistics. Developing and unleashing high-level safety leaders has been shown to be a powerful method for more deeply internalizing safety overall. We know from long experience with a wide range of companies, in a slew of sectors and across numerous countries and cultures that these strategies are eminently practical and doable. Of course, “doable” does not mean “simple.” But the rewards in significant injury reductions along with cultural boosts are there for the taking. **PSJ**

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