

HOW TO ACTUALLY CHANGE ACTIONS

Five Critical Steps

By Robert Pater

No doubt, there's at least one thing that most leaders want. They want to know what they (we) can do to help others improve their actions: how they assess hazards before starting a task and how they communicate and coordinate effectively with coworkers.

They want to know what they can do to help others understand and follow procedures, align with organizational objectives, raise their ability to scan for potential risks, make better decisions and, ultimately, act more effectively and safer on many simultaneous levels. This is clearly a big ask, maybe even more so during topsy-turvy times, but not too big to be unreachable.

There are indeed super leaders capable of spurring and sustaining others to change their actions. These change masters have honed their ability to help others swim across a choppy current toward a safer, harvestable shore. This separates them from just OK or average leaders who can successfully tread water in place, mostly holding on to previous gains but not progressing toward the golden land of global-class performance, or from those who just cannot get important things done. The worst of the worst of these (and I have seen too many here) are more than inept at swimming; their inability to lead effectively can direct others off course and into stronger currents, resulting in the entire team foundering.

How can you transit toward the change mastery realm, steering away from organizational riptides? Best leadership results are consistently characterized by being sustained and building, rather than hit or miss. Such lasting improvements are invariably built in continuous steps, rarely in one big leap up. But do not assume that step-change means interminably slow change; steps can be relatively quick if done well.

Clearly, results-oriented leadership seldom hangs on a single proclamation, reward, punishment, video, story, motivational presentation, training or new piece of equipment; in this complicated world, rarely does a single intervention transform into eye-popping and lasting changes in actions.

Improvements that do come from one leap can frequently fall back off the cliff. I'd take a consistent leader anytime over one who is a "gunner" or a "glory hound," a big-hit-or-miss one. While the latter may get more attention, these individuals are also less reliable. Because reliability is one of the two main requirements for trusting someone (the other being the ability to actually do what you say you're going to), a hit-or-miss leader's team is less likely to trust them as much to come through in the clutch.

Then there is "easy come, easy go," being capable of maintaining any gains. I'd bet you have seen those who go on an extreme crash diet, determined to lose 30 lb. But extreme isn't sustainable. If you desire to lose this number of pounds and to maintain

this new weight, you'd be more likely to do this step-wise, shedding 1 lb per week over 7 months without going on an only-eat-grapefruit type diet or exercise regimen that you'd never keep up.

Have you seen instances where leaders' impatience can lead to self-sabotage? You know: the desperate press to make things happen yesterday, to force the issue, to make others change overnight. I've found this kind of approach typically leads to increased frustration, hit-and-miss change, push-back or loss of leadership credibility. Change master extraordinaire Kurt Lewin, father of force-field analysis and a demonstrated expert at fostering difficult changes that lasted, pointed to such poorly executed impatient "pushing" change as being usually impermanent and often resulting in backfire movement toward the opposite direction of what leaders wanted (Pater, 2011).

In contrast, the best changes seem as though they happened quickly when looking back on them but feel gradual and reasonable to those in the midst of experiencing them. A tip: my colleague, change master Ron Bowles, says:

It's important to establish markers of what "was" because when change is gradual it often seems like nothing is changing. However, charting the before/old benchmarks can help provide contrast to the "after." For instance, at one wood products plant, we were focusing on access issues, so we took photos of equipment prior to making any modifications. Then we posted those old pictures alongside the photos of all the steps, handholds that we had added, creating a wall of change. The effect was significantly impactful, and it went a long way to creating buy-in to the idea that conditions could and would improve.

It's likewise helpful to establish leading indicators in advance as "road markers" of driving ever nearer toward desired objectives (Pater, 2018c).

Five Critical Steps for Spurring Significant Changes in Actions

Breakthrough leadership aims for solid and progressive step changes. Whatever a leader's orientation or philosophy, I suggest that one bottom-line question best leaders ask themselves is "What does it really take to change behavior?"

With this in mind, we've found there are five steps that form a bridge to cross from the land of old and just OK ways to the shore of superior performance.

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Some of these are not likely new to your view. But what may be new is including each step and implementing them in order, neither skipping nor just cursorily skimming over any one. Just as in baking delicious and nourishing bread, the yeast, flour, water, salt and the right heat are all necessary for a delicious loaf that others want to eat.

Bear in mind that bypassing or just glossing over any single ingredient or step likely creates a gap through which movement toward change will plummet to the ground. We've seen this happen too many times. It's less "for want of a nail the war was lost," than "for superficially attaching a foundational pylon the building collapsed."

I encourage your healthy skepticism. In a world replete with people dispensing leadership advice, it would be more than reasonable to ask, "How do I know this approach actually works, that it's not just yet another well-intended theory?" Science, in fact, separates potential solutions that work in vitro (in highly controlled, "artificial" laboratory conditions) from those that actually work in vivo (out in the "real," less-controlled world). This approach, one of our "secrets," has been successfully applied numerous times going on 4 decades, globally, in companies that have implemented our MoveSMART system to engender up to 85% reductions in targeted persistent injuries (soft-tissue/strains/sprains, slips/trips/fall and hand injuries). Many of these Fortune 1000 companies had previously believed they'd tried everything.

Granted, these targeted safety issues are "personal" injuries that may more lend themselves to this personal approach to change. But aren't many other injuries also personal, as in having strong individual mental and physical contributing factors? Examples include struck by, repetitive motion, caught in/between, struck by/against and motor vehicle incidents [see Liberty Mutual's (n.d.) latest workplace safety index].

Here's what we've found from seeing such dramatic statistical and cultural results in a wide array of companies worldwide. Because nothing lasts forever on its own; these steps can and should be reset into place so that results build and do not evaporate or erode. Not one and done. I've not seen any one-shot way to perpetually immunize someone from getting injured; we all need boosters.

In my experience, there are five key ingredients that all must be mixed into the baking of new, nourishing behaviors:

1. They have to want it. This entails leaders first shifting their mindset toward being participant focused rather than leader self-centered. It matters less whether you expect to see new skills in place; people have to be interested in and want these for themselves. This is the chocolate versus lima beans principle: The leader's initial job is to create hunger, an attraction, for the new actions, rather than guilt or obligation that workers (or even managers) should taste, chew and swallow the new food.

In the safety arena, go beyond a tired approach of preaching prevention and avoidance of terrible out-

comes that others don't believe or want to consider would ever happen to them. Instead, deftly apply the art of positive motivation, enlisting identification, personal benefits, off-work improvements, relevance to family and more to pique their interest and excitement toward trying something new.

How do you invite people to want something such as the ability to better protect themselves, to use PPE the right way and when, to apply best judgment and safest methods? First off, here's what not to do: Don't position this as a must. Nor as how this will help the company look good or make more money. Don't attempt to guilt them into accepting this ("If you really cared about your own safety, you would . . ."), nor threaten how they'd better adopt new methods or they'll get in trouble, written up, have forced unpaid time off, shunned or fired.

Instead, offer them a range of benefits. We've found this approach works with almost everyone in literal scores of countries worldwide, of all ages and backgrounds. How the proposed change can help them get more of what they already value (not what the leader values, nor what the leader believes others should think is important). For example, in our system, we talk about their becoming better at their favorite sports or preferred hobbies, becoming stronger as well as more relaxed, having more available energy, helping those they care about do better in a multitude of ways, and more.

Consistent with this, Ron reveals, "My strategy for this is to give away ownership for elements of any initiatives so that associates are motivated by ownership rather than compelled to change. This reduces pushback and fosters interest and buy-in."

2. They have to believe it's possible for them. This may be the biggest hole that leaders fail to bridge over (so I'll spend the most space on this step). And it's a crucial part of internalizing safety toward becoming what people want to do for themselves and to think for themselves, both at work and home, rather than being dependent on being told what to do or reactive to rules and regulations.

You can demand anything you want, demonstrate impressive attributes or describe the loftiest qualities. But people will seriously attempt only what is within the realm of what they believe is actually possible for them. Yes, they may go through the motions otherwise, but I've found their attempts at changing tend to be half-hearted and readily abandoned when things don't immediately work out for the best. For example, I personally know of someone who has battled being overweight for most of her life. She has seemingly spent decades trying different diets, fads, support groups and more for brief periods, changing quickly with no appreciable improvements. But when questioned, she admitted that she thought she had a thyroid problem (which hasn't been detected by any medical tests). So, she continued to overload her plates at all-you-can-eat restaurants, didn't exercise at all and continued to smoke. At that point, it would be a waste of time, effort and resources to offer her more or different

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methods for weight reduction; because she inherently doubted anything would work for her, she was not likely to actually practice what was needed to effectuate change.

Like this individual, many people have unrealistic views of themselves. For whatever reasons, they often hold onto beliefs about their own capabilities that aren't factually true. "I've always been this way," "I've never been coordinated or athletic," "I'm an accident waiting to happen," "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" and so much more.

My point: self-limiting beliefs are, in real life, among the biggest blockage to real change. This is why people are looped into doing the same old ineffective things, don't learn, don't improve their personal safety actions.

Changing beliefs is more than positive thinking. More than merely repeating self-improvement aphorisms. An essential piece of a leader's job is to project the confidence and sureness that what the leader expects is learnable and doable. But positive talk is certainly not enough; if it were, will and strong-mindedness would be the only things required. (Too many leaders fall down here in over-relying on these.)

So how can leaders nurture the belief that people can change, so that they actually believe that this is possible?

Many ways and, because no single approach works for every individual any more than one type of diet suits everyone, it is important to incorporate several. Here are several proven methods to consider:

- Lead by example. Leaders can and should tell stories from their own lives of challenges overcome, being careful not to always tell stories where they had all the answers or were the hero.
- Show examples or models of others like them who have indeed changed. Older athletes in the worker's age range who are accomplishing significant feats. Even better, ordinary people doing the same (the internet is replete with these stories).
- Ask for and elicit examples in your workforce of what coworkers have accomplished in their own lives, in their hobbies, the obstacles they've encountered and dealt with ("Have you ever headed off a condition or situation that at first looked really bad?"). Personal stories communicate a narrative that others may want to be part of. Collect and share these (with permission, of course).

These don't have to be earth-shattering, just instances of trials people faced: Ongoing conditions they or close acquaintances or relatives successfully live with, physical limitations they have not allowed to define their lives, safety stories where potentially bad incidents were turned into close

calls, minor incidents where good use of mental or physical methods redirected these from becoming worse. Just as good, ask them if they know someone who has successfully embraced and taken on new, unexpected ways.

- Promote introspection. Transfer skills at self-monitoring, so they can check in with their own levels of strength, tension or soreness. This helps move people away from their older mindsets that are often self-limiting if they are no longer accurate ("I just can't maintain strong balance because of that injury 5 years ago") toward present-day self-assessment of their capability to improve.

- Allow and even encourage them to surface objections, such as why they don't really believe they could do things differently, without pushback or trying to talk them out of it, to why they can't do something new. This often moves their internal blocking fears out into the open for self-examination and more possible adjustment.

- Expect less, especially in the beginning. Design changes in bite-sized pieces. The more you expect others to change, the less likely they will believe they can do so. It's critical to make changes easy to incorporate, sequenced into progressive, bite-sized pieces that they believe they can apply easily with relatively little time commitment.

- Cultivate and enlist the power of curiosity combined with couching a change as temporary ("Just as an experiment for a short time, would you try this on to see how it might work?"). Later, ask what, if anything, they discovered in trying this and if they made any changes to make it work better for them. I have found that the biggest actual changer of beliefs and attitudes is being successful, even to a small degree. As in, "I believe I might be able to do this because I've already successfully done something similar."

- Create pilots. One structured way of others believing in new methods is for them to see how it might work in a temporary or trial situation. This has proven effective in many companies.

- Offer positive feedback on any accomplishments or movement they've made toward a desired direction, even if small. This reminds them that they can change and adopt even an initial part of something new.

- Harness discovery. Let them feel it. Have them experience a change so they can see they've actually done something, especially so that they taste success, doing better. This enlists positive surprise, which we've found highly energizing for breaking through doubts and old resistance.

Craig Lewis is a master change agent. In his work with companies worldwide, he trains "instructor

catalysts” (peer trainers) to in turn first train fellow coworkers on new methods for injury prevention, then coach them both formally and informally, then reinforce new mental and physical safety methodology throughout their portion of the company. His take on a main way to foster belief in their own ability to improve:

Instead of telling them what to do and ordering them to go do it, we get them to feel the difference with selected demonstrations that they experience, then we facilitate a process for them to decide where, when and how this new approach is most useful for them individually, as a group and as a company. We hear from clients all over the world that this approach is something they’ve never experienced before. Both the uniqueness of this approach and high degree of participation where they can decide what really works for them, which seems to dramatically reduce defensiveness and resistance to what they’ve been used to: someone who’s not been doing their job telling them what’s wrong and what they should be doing differently. Their thinking seems to be reformatted toward trying new methods out for themselves in a safe atmosphere. It’s very powerful.

I’d heard that one of the peer instructor-catalysts Craig trained frequently ended his initial seminars to coworkers by asking, “How many of you have just been able to do some things that you’d never thought you could do?” Then, after getting many positive responses, “Now think of other things that you’d like to do that you hadn’t considered possible before.”

Helping people practically believe in themselves around safety has shown to create a strong foundation, time and again, in scores of companies in numerous industries to lead to significant turnarounds in performance and culture. If, that is, the other three steps are implemented.

3. They have to know how. The bottom line is doing something different. Leaders have to know and show how to implement real, powerful skills and strategies more specific than awareness reminders such as “think before you act” or “watch what you’re doing,” or vague pointers such as “lift with your legs” (How do you actually do this?).

To change actions that last even when, and especially when safety leaders aren’t watching, people have to understand why and what they are trying to do, and know how to do this for themselves in a wide variety of situations they

might encounter, both at work and at home. So, this entails leaders conveying both principles so they think, judge and can direct attention to what they’re attempting and then a range of acceptable variations on methods that will help them accomplish their tasks.

No matter how busy we as leaders get, we have to make time to periodically say thanks and to recognize and celebrate incremental improvements that build the skills critical for significant changes.

4. They have to practice. Few people, if any, exchange preexisting former ways for new ones after just one trial. It’s essential that leaders go well beyond expecting one “Make it so!” exposure to result in lasting change. Even if people do want to improve and know how, they will only make modifications in their actions when they reform previous habits into new defaults. We’ve seen several highly successful approaches for practicing desired behaviors, including enlisting peer

change agents toward creating a grassroots culture of targeted actions, coaching, applications to off-work hobbies and interests, and carefully done behavioral auditing.

People are most likely to continue those behaviors they see require relatively little effort for big payback. Because they know the importance of creating positive momentum, breakthrough leaders concentrate on easy-to-learn skills that show significant improvements, especially in the beginning of skills change interventions.

5. New actions have to be set and reinforced. Plan to strengthen the use of newly grown behaviors. Significant changes are based on improvements in individuals’ skills, along with consistent organizational backing for change. Perhaps due to production overload, many organizations misstep in their behavioral reinforcement efforts. By themselves, freshly crafted procedures, executive proclamations or one-exposure training are not enough to produce lasting behavioral change.

In addition, we’ve found that emphasizing self-monitoring skills for work and home can demonstrably enable people to make ongoing recalibrations and reinforce new behaviors. This way, leaders help others internalize safety, where self-check-ins (e.g., “Good! There’s very little physical stress on my back after moving that”) help others self-reinforce newly acquired changes.

Other vehicles for supporting just-acquired skills include recognition (vs. reward) systems, workers participating in developing, charting and reporting back on a range of leading indicators, spot coaching and more. It’s important to create a multiple path reinforcement plan and continue walking it (Bowles et al., 2020; Pater, 2019b).

And don’t take this for granted, Ron reminds. “No matter how busy we as leaders get, we have to

make time to periodically say thanks and to recognize and celebrate incremental improvements that build the skills critical for significant changes.” Perhaps due to production overload, many organizations miss this step in their behavioral reinforcement efforts. Without acknowledgment, the extra effort it takes to change will often outweigh the short-term benefits of learning new skills and adopting new behaviors. Don’t underestimate the reinforcement impact of sincere thanks and appreciation.

Do not neglect the importance of getting a “three-fer” by reinforcing safety methods and techniques with at-home applications. This does several things: 1. it reaches those who are primarily interested in those hobbies and activities they voluntarily choose; 2. it helps build strong default habits whenever they practice these methods off work; and 3. it helps reduce cumulative trauma that might also build stemming from at-home tasks.

Highest-level leaders know that it’s possible to make significant changes when people are self-motivated, have the opportunity to learn easily applied skills, can see a positive difference from acting in new ways, and are reminded of their successes and positively challenged to keep moving ahead.

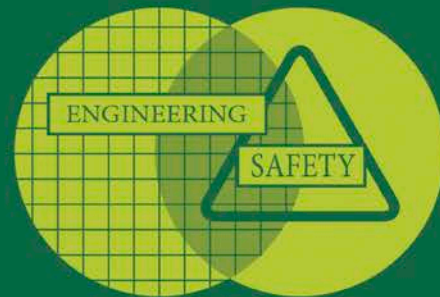
Even in some initially highly resistant workforces, we’ve seen positive habits replace older, limited ones, and miraculous results bloom in both actions and trailing indicators. **PSJ**

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