

SAFETY ENERGETICS MATTERS

By Robert Pater

What really matters? Is it only what's solid and concrete in our everyday lives such as our home, car, work equipment, family, friends and coworkers? According to eminent physicists, the reality is that what we think of as tangible matter is anything but.

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Take it from two genius physicists, Albert Einstein (who purportedly declared, “Concerning matter, we have been all wrong. What we have called matter is energy”) and Niels Bohr (“Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real”). When it comes to leadership and cultural change, my experience is that Einstein was spot on: energetics rule.

But energetics is too often given short shrift in leadership planning and execution, regrettably too often in safety leadership. I have written about how change efforts frequently fall flat when leaders are too mechanical in their planning and implementations, tending to disregard the critical role of energy in stimulating and sustaining deflections or step-ups from status-quo ways of operating. By mechanical, I am referring to leaders essentially thinking of and treating workers as mindless checkerboard pieces to be moved about at the leader's whim and will (“Just do it!”), as predominantly physical beings (as in, overemphasis on writing more policies and procedures, prescribing body mechanics that all should memorize and incorporate exactly same way). Or listlessly repeating same-old messages or training as was done numerous times in the past (and then wondering why workers are the ones who have become complacent about safety). Or expecting others to change when leaders themselves don't take the lead to adapt their approaches to different individuals, groups, subcultures, situations and times. While all this might sound efficient and appealing in theory (after all, wouldn't it be easy if everyone just did exactly what they were told?), practice repeatedly shows that this does not work, and often backfires into worker disconnection, distrust or disdain.

I'm not advocating for just acting caring, humane or enlightened as a leader. Being approved of and liked is ultimately far less important (at least to me) than being effective in helping others live and work safely. But failing to glean and fully incorporate energetics into safety leadership efforts leads to perspectives, plans and programs that tend to bear disappointingly small or sour fruit. A master gardener sees the cascading energetic connection between tilling, sowing, and adjusting water and feeding to a plant's changing energy needs. Similarly, leaders cultivating trust, a critical organizational intangible with deep energetic roots, grows worker and executive buy-in, which then blossoms into wiser, more self-protective decisions, which in turn bears safer actions and overall performance.

Because “energetic” can be a loaded term, let me clarify what I don't mean by it. Safety (or other) leaders certainly don't have to be energetic in the superficial sense of assuming some kind of hyperactive persona, whether shouting “sis boom rah” or tyrannically raging on. But clearly, this kind of approach draws many would-be

“make-it-happens.” Like gorging on sugar, it provides short-term energy at best and often deteriorates health. In my experience, a “more force is better” mindset is a misperception based on a limited view of the energetic world. Change guru Kurt Lewin (who had a long track record of successfully applying principles of energy physics to individual and organizational change), labeled these individuals as “superchargers,” or hard chargers who press and push for results. These range on the spectrum from adamant “you can do it!” cheerleading all the way to relentlessly pressuring, coercing and bullying. Lewin consistently discovered that these high-volume forcers only seemed to effectively impact a few others when they were close to them (basically overwhelming with their immediate presence). But as soon as these overcharged leaders left the playing field, their impact tended to evaporate and often backfired. Out of sight, out of obeying mind. Further, their lasting legacy was creating resentment, resistance and push-back, while sucking away personal initiative and worker buy-in, like the proverbial oxygen from the room.

My experience echoes Lewin's research, that a frenetic range of leadership styles only occasionally results in significant improvements and that these rarely last; rather, over-salesy hypes or domineering forcers seem to appeal only to a limited group of people and, even to these, only for a relatively short time. I have seen this in general leadership and also very much so in safety leadership.

Four Elements Needed to Create & Sustain Energy

Becoming adept at energetics is essential to mastering leadership and change. There are always four needed elements in lighting and sustaining a flame:

1. Fuel. This is the raw material used to create energy. Ultimately this emanates from within. I have found that for the strongest and most self-sustaining “fuel,” leaders should look at what already exists within others; their interests and concerns are potentially potent kindling for dramatically improving safety processes.

According to change master Ron Bowles:

Passion, self-interest, dissatisfaction . . . these can be the fuel for transforming from apathy, complacency or anger toward significant improvements. To fuel an energetics blaze, look for what already interests your group. What do they feel strongly about, both positively and negatively. Notice and feed these (“I agree, we do need to get better at new employee training. What gaps do you see? Would you help us develop a plan?”).

2. Oxygen. Cultural change requires a supportive surround system with elements that are not readily vis-

ible. Organizationally, this means readiness for slightly different approaches from the top, a level of willingness from mid-managers and supervisors, and a breath of fresh ideas from workers, contractors or those outside.

You likely know that green plants cycle carbon dioxide into oxygen; similarly, you can build an oxygen-rich atmosphere by eliciting perceived mixed messages from disaffected workers and then working to transform these into positive catalysts for change. I have seen this magic many times in companies worldwide. Senior managers can oxygenate culture by allocating tangible resources to effectively pilot new interventions, as well as scheduling small regular periods to check in and get updated on leading returns.

Ron Bowles explains:

A key source of energetic “oxygen” is acknowledgment. A leader who makes the time to personally acknowledge even the least contributions can heat up the change process, just as bellows do to a flame. In contrast, without acknowledgment, most change processes will smolder and ultimately self-extinguish.

Seek out and reduce energy sappers; every organization I have seen has at least some of these oxygen-depleters. And definitely don’t opt for including more. While policies, procedures and rules are clearly necessary, make sure to rebalance these with interesting, exciting personally useful safety approaches that raise energy, interest and enthusiasm.

3. Spark. Energy is necessary for ignition. This is often where leaders have to do something to break the same-old inertia. Novelist Erin Morganstern (2011) wrote, “Because everything requires energy . . . we must put effort and energy into everything we wish to change.”

Sparking can come from trying new and exciting things, retiring tired programs, seeing even budding successes, helping others’ actions improve through tactful yet honest feedback, and transferring safety methods that enable people to do better in personally important activities at work and at home. And from having leaders who increasingly grasp the full range of benefits from higher safety culture, well beyond cost reductions.

Ron Bowles provides insight:

In order to spark an energetics blaze, provide opportunities for discovery and problem solving, allow for others to identify and own critical elements of the change process. When you provide opportunities for their energy to create a spark, it will take less of the leader’s own, and limited, energy to create change.

The main key to sparking comes from energized involvement on all levels. Aim to engage everyone in some way. Best leaders continually consider creative ways to invite and enlist as many people as they can as much as possible without becoming burdensome.

4. Refuel. Replenishment is required whenever energy is expended, whether sustaining heat or extending a car’s range. No matter how extensive, one fill-up or electrical charge only lasts so long. There are no perpetual motion machines or one-

shot cultural interventions that continue unabated without refueling, so energy-aware leaders include recharging in their planning. Some leaders employ challenge and competition to refuel an ebbing flame.

Ron Bowles says:

Collect and publicize small wins, slowly offer more opportunities for others to increasingly own process elements, and recognize that the activities required to make change are not always the same as the ones needed to sustain and continue to fuel the fire.

And be sure not to go to the opposite extreme of smothering growing energy with too many demands too quickly. Once the fire of safety culture grows stronger, it will be as hard to extinguish as it was to initially light; and if it is put out, it is likely even harder to reignite, like a campfire after a sudden downpour. So, to get sustaining results, continue to feed the flame, don’t rest on laurels, but continue to add fuel when needed.

Four Attributes of Energy-Adept Leaders

What I mean by “energetics” has four dimensions:

1. Valuing the impact of energy in focus, motivation and change. This is a mindset akin to moving from a state of not realizing or accepting the important role of energetics in change (“unconscious incompetent”) toward seeing its vital value, even if not initially competent at adjusting or redirecting energies from discontent or disconnection to engagement and effectiveness (“conscious incompetent”).

This entails understanding that the gravitational attraction between objects is governed by their distance from one another (Newton’s law of universal gravitation: The force of attraction between two masses is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between their centers). Similarly, influential energy is affected by emotional distance, meaning there is a persuasion hierarchy:

- a. face-to-face communications have greater “gravitational pull” than . . .
- b. visual face time via a live web connection, which is more energized than . . .
- c. phone calls, which have greater impact than . . .
- d. live in-the-moment text, which is more powerful than . . .
- e. broadcast letter/email/text.

All else being equal, live-and-in-the-moment connections have the greatest energy and therefore offer the greatest potential for fostering change. This is why even a sometimes-flawed live performance typically moves people more than even the best filmed or broadcast one.

2. Understanding that organizational energy is never static but continually changing.

This also requires a mindset upgrade. Ron Bowles says:

As important as seeing that everything changes in the material world, it’s as crucial for energy-aware leaders to develop a default mindset developing an appreciation for the critical role of energy forms the founda-

By mechanical, I am referring to leaders essentially thinking of and treating workers as mindless checkerboard pieces to be moved about at the leader’s whim and will.

tion for being able to navigate significant and lasting improvements in safety.

Energy-adept leaders recognize that nothing stands still, that their organization's energy is continually moving and changing. There is little likelihood, much less a guarantee, that the employee energy state you observed at the end of yesterday will start off the same tomorrow. You can't "leave your work at work and home at home"; saying so just reduces leadership credibility. Each of us is continually affected by personal and off-the-job factors (e.g., community health concerns, natural disasters, a family member's physical limitations, change in weather, conflicts at home), as well as by work dynamics, welcome or negative (e.g., unpopular procedural change, process bottlenecks, a serious injury, recognition of a job well done).

As I write this, the U.S. west coast is suffering through a horrendous fire season. For a week, our sky has been filled with smoke and particulates. This starkly reminds us how air quality is a prominent example of the continuous shift of change, literally varying between moments with the winds. Distant, out-of-sight incidents can shift what is happening locally, which, even though invisible, still affects people's breathing, energy, safety and overall well-being.

3. Developing and applying tools for modifying or adjusting levels of energy. This moves toward skill sets and tool sets. But it is founded on the strategy of homeostatically (think thermostat) raising energy when people become complacent, listless or inattentive to safety, and lowering it when they become too "hot" (i.e., angry, distracted, conflicting) to the point that this threatens their focus on safety or ability to employ best methods in their tasks. Then leaders continue to monitor this to see when and where they should next intervene.

When guiding change, it's important to read and adjust the level of organizational energy. Too much or too little at the wrong time can incite resistance on one hand or complacency on the other. I have found that many leaders automatically only equate adjusting energy with raising it, as in, more is better. Understandable, in that so much safety tends toward the muted side on the excitement scale.

Start by reading your company's "energy curves," or changes around your organization's safety activities. Do people roll their eyes or seem to go numb when safety issues are brought up? Do safety presentations wind up being low-energy lectures with listless involvement at best (where people slump and collapse into their chairs)? Does it seem that managers glaze over or begin to multitask when safety is discussed? Most important, what is the trend? Have signs of low energy remained about the same, gotten better or become worse within the past 1, 2 and 5 years?

Reading energy levels and states is a skill that most leaders can cultivate. There is a lot to this, but I know this starts from first embracing its importance and then practicing developing the visual, auditory and even kinesthetic skills for monitoring.

Leaders are ultimately their own best source of dialing energy up or down. They can do so by controlling their demeanor. According to Andrew Grove, former CEO and chair of Intel, leaders' demeanor usually draws attention and tends to have a rippling-out effect (Grove referred to a depressed manager spreading listlessness among workers).

What if energy in a group is running too high, overly tense or anxious? The leader should remain calm and present when others are overly ramped up (hint: "sink" the breathing as deep into the torso as possible, one inch lower with every exhalation, slowly relax the shoulders so they aren't held too high, notice contact between soles of feet and the ground, slow down pace of breathing and speech volume). What if the energy in a group is low, depressed, listless or complacent? Make visual contact with others, then gradually ramp up respiration rate (but not hyperventilating), or slowly increase talking speed. Of course, while quite effective, this approach requires practice in self-control and shouldn't be overdone (like adding spices to food, a little goes a long way). However, I contend that best leaders practice self-control knowing this affects how well they can influence others. In fact, there is an ancient internal martial arts maxim, "Be rock, not water. Be water, not rock." In other words, when those around are becoming frantic (like rushing water), be rock: still, firm, calm and in place. Contrarily, when those around are resisting, fearful, stiff, immobile, be water: moving around resistance and unstoppable.

Organizationally, leaders can also modulate energy levels by checking in and influencing those individual "energy leaders" who are setting the tone in directions the leader deems out of balance. Calming those who are frantic, angry, or afraid and inspiring or energizing those who have checked out.

In our practice, we have found that looking for and then further developing or training select workers as catalysts amplifies energy around safety in their peers. Ron Bowles says, "A leader who develops influence with these amplifiers can promote and even significantly alter energetics by concentrating their communications and mirroring with these few catalysts. In essence, they become 'deputies' who further affect many others."

By the way, we've found in work with organizations throughout the world that movement, when practically applied, can break through energy logjams. While everyone has their own developed methods, I suggest looking for ways to get people moving, out of their chairs and away from statically standing around in one place; apply this for eliciting honest concerns, increasing usable ideas and for transferring higher-level safety performance methods.

4. Transforming one form of energy into another. As the first law of thermodynamics states, energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another.

Ron Bowles explains, "Energy-aware leaders should learn to nudge cultural energy into effective forms, transforming it from one form of energy into another." For example, they welcome conflicts that naturally occur; they don't ignore or attempt to squelch

them. Recognizing that the source of most conflicts are likely legitimate core issues allows you to work toward understanding and possible resolution. Best leaders view conflict energetically; it raises and potentially releases energy that can fuel creative approaches (think “conflict of ideas”). They redirect this force away from threat or anger to bring out real concerns, misgivings or fears so these don’t fester under the surface, thereby putrefying cultural improvement efforts. Have you seen instances where unspoken doubts cemented into a wall of resistance that blocked people from even giving new methods, equipment, procedures or personnel a fair shot of succeeding?

Energizing the Right Kinds & Levels of Safety

Shifting the energy of safety from the external to the internal is among the most powerful strategies leaders can employ. It entails moving motivation from “do it for the company” realm to the “take personal control of yourself” domain. In a sense, this is turning all workers into self-directed leaders of their own safety. And with 35 years of experience worldwide with a wide range of industries and people, I can tell you this is not just theoretical. It’s doable, practical and reaps demonstrable benefits.

The highest, most sustaining and self-renewing energy comes from within. The ultimate key to engaging people in safety is to have this become internalized.

While it is necessary to have externalized safety systems, metrics or procedures, most companies are overbalanced here. Many companies too often say, “This is what you have to do”; “these are your rewards for working safely”; “we’ve determined the job safety analysis you are required to follow to the letter”; or “here’s the PPE you have to use doing this task.”

Leaders can also emphasize internalizing an alternate “P&P,” principles and practices, where people actually question and understand what they are trying to do and why, as well as how to apply these principles to a wide range of tasks at work and home. Companies can focus less on outside motivation and more on internal, such as determining where workers are already motivated and what they enjoy doing in their free time. Overall, there is too much focus on “Do this so our safety statistics don’t take a hit” and not enough focus on “I’m concerned about you personally.” Moving from “Do it the way we’ve determined is best” toward “Here are some possible ways to apply these safety principles, hoping you’ll select the one that works best for you” can go a long way.

Embracing an internalized, personal approach to safety is most essential when workers are doing tasks that are not closely supervised: out in the field, working from home, remotely on their own, and at dispersed sites where off-work cumulative trauma and habits form. Also, this approach is effective with those who are skeptical and resistant to just following orders because they are told to.

We’ve all probably heard that when leaders activate workers’ energies, rather than encouraging or settling for them being passive, the latter are more likely to recall and apply best methods, more willing to participate in safety initiatives and more likely to make

useful suggestions. But engagement, important as it is, isn’t enough, especially the way it is too-commonly envisioned. Too often, managers or supervisors just scratch the surface of potentially deeper engagement.

Because perceptions, beliefs and paradigms funnel into strategy and planning, I suggest considering engagement as more than just a mental event. It’s certainly not just the semblance of participating. Haven’t you seen some would-be leaders try to force this by calling out people to individually respond in a group setting? Or by volunteering others for a project or task force? Similarly, by only engaging others verbally but not physically?

The best engagements get people moving and physically trying something new. One example is having workers put on and check out newly proposed PPE. Another is having workers sample a new and different lifting technique that simultaneously heightens usable strength while reducing forces in the lower back and other vulnerable areas.

Too much safety is overloaded onto low-energy or even energy-depleting approaches. Identify those “black holes” in your safety culture, programming and actions, such as proforma messaging done without enthusiasm, repeated in pretty much the exact same way because some think they “have to,” expecting blind adherence to rules that people don’t understand, maintaining old routines just because, uninspiring messaging, planning and talking without actually taking any real actions to improve problematic situations.

Energy is critical for initiating, expanding and sustaining improvements. Unleashing the right level energy to all aspects of safety is needed for directing attention in the best ways as well as necessary for incorporating safest and most effective actions. **PSJ**

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