

BRIDGING SAFETY LEADERSHIP, PART 2

Potent Persuasion Principles & Practices

By Karly St. Aubin and Robert Pater

No surprise, you rarely realize great results from minimal approaches. So sterling safety leaders go well beyond the necessary technical basics to reach, then strengthen others' beliefs, perceptions, decisions and actions.

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To accomplish this, high-level leaders rise above cajoling, forcing, guilt or forcefully “motivating” toward actually engaging, magnetizing, activating and energizing everyone from bottom to top within their organization. This high art of leadership focuses on getting workers, supervisors, managers, and executives toward deeply internalizing safety and acting accordingly for themselves and one another, at work and away, even when they know no one else is watching.

Leaders' skill sets of credibility, trust and persuasion are intrinsic to their developing sparkling results. Part 1 of this article (*PSJ* September 2021, pp. 18-21) concentrated on the first two of these essential elements. Part 2 offers strategies for practically elevating safety persuasion from two ends of the safety leadership spectrum: Karly, an accomplished safety professional relatively new to the field, with formal academic safety training (a B.S. in safety), who has technically applied her certifications in underground storage and radiation safety to her work; and Robert, with an M.A. in industrial psychology (human factors) and a B.A. in organizational development/leadership, nearly 4 decades of working to elevate companies' safety performance and culture by weaving his academic learning (plus decades of internal martial arts practice and other sources) into his cultural/leadership work, and into the MoveSMART system for preventing soft-tissue injuries, slips/trips/falls and hand injuries.

Despite our marked differences, both of us are climbing toward the same summit. And in our minds, there's no question that a leader's credibility and ability to engender trust underlay all attempts at raising people to higher safety ground. Persuasion is the flywheel that engages the gears of positive action, helping people drive from merely believing in a leader to becoming internally convinced that they actually want and are determined to expend efforts to take extra steps or precautions, doing so for themselves. From our experiences, there are practical strategies and methods for accomplishing this that are often bypassed.

In contrast, we've seen that the history of safety persuasion has been overly reliant on motivating workers through fear or threats: “Work safe or you'll have terrible consequences/you won't be able to enjoy your retirement/you'll get written up/in trouble/fired/be called out and embarrassed/let your coworkers down.” We find it ironic that safety, founded on reducing threats, has often heavily en-

listed other threats to attempt to sharp-spur changes in attention and action. Yet, this default approach persists despite many leaders consuming and verbally espousing numerous “you catch more flies with honey than vinegar” leadership books, seminars and memes. Our approach is less “try this to appear nice or to be liked” and more “this is what actually helps people truly embrace safety in real life.” It's based on our combined breadth of experience.

Seven Persuasion Principles

Good leadership is intentional, usually beginning with crafting an initial plan of action. With that in mind, we suggest starting by thinking through persuasion objectives and leading indicators to map strategies for becoming more safety influential. Deciding what you specifically want to accomplish makes it easier to direct energy and other resources.

1. Consider Your Persuasion Objectives

A critical underlying question: While most leaders arguably acknowledge the importance of persuasion, what do they/we mean by this? Here are some possible persuasion objectives to consider:

a. Persuade everyone (from workers through executives) to:

- Focus their intention to support overall safety in their lives, both at work and home (shown in conversations about PPE and procedures they employ in hobbies and more).
- Be more willing to modify long-standing habits.
- Adopt a stronger prevention mindset rather than assuming that “incidents will happen, it's a matter of fate,” “soft-tissue injuries or pain are inevitable when doing this job over time,” “nothing I can do, it just comes with getting older.”
- Embrace a default of their taking greater personal control of their own safety at work. Personal control equates to their taking responsibility for safety at work; this approach often yields results of people being more interested in working safely because it becomes their autonomous choice rather than a demand from an authority source (which they might resist or rebel against).
- Transfer an internalized focus on taking personal control of safety to off-work hobbies and daily activities. Incorporating safety into day-to-day life makes it a default habit rather than an additional task that they might resent as an unnecessary obstacle. This entails helping them develop skills and information

that they can and want to share with their coworkers, families and friends.

- Harness discovery to help increase receptivity to considering other alternatives to their default ways of initially approaching tasks and perceiving potential risks as well as recognizing them on potential hazards of which they might not otherwise be aware.
 - Provide safe practice opportunities where they can try out new and different methods, skills or PPE for accomplishing tasks they've previously performed countless times.
 - Monitor themselves for potentially unsafe activity before their actions become too far gone.
 - Make small positive, safer adjustments at the earliest possible level.
 - See themselves as an integral part of a committed safety team and, thus, be more motivated to perform safely for the team's sake.
- b. Persuade managers and executives to:**
- Actively support safety through being visible (e.g., attend safety meetings, participate in safety training, personally introduce safety initiatives) and in word and messaging (beyond communicating about statistics).
 - Champion at least one aspect of safety focus.
 - Move from "keeping others 100% safe" (an impossibility) to encouraging workers to take greater personal control of their own safety.
 - Lend tangible logistics support for safety efforts.
 - Provide adequate resources for actual safety improvement.
 - Be increasingly available to discuss safety objectives and obstacles.
 - Communicate messages about the personal importance of safety to them in their own lives.
 - Use required PPE and follow safety guidelines when visiting and traversing work sites.
 - Discuss or ask about safety with workers during "watercooler" meetings
 - Hold their direct reports accountable for effectively leading safety. Make active and effective safety leadership a criterion for recognition and promotion.

2. Choose Your (Successful) Persuasion Leading Indicators

Based on your chosen persuasion objectives, develop your leading indicators that dovetail with and serve as markers toward what you wish to accomplish. While it's important that each leader decide on their own set—and the process of doing so will further hone persuasion abilities by clarifying your focus—here are some sample "road signs" to consider:

- Others ask questions or even challenge strategies, or make suggestions in a curious or reflective way, rather than being dismissive.
- Safety discussions are spread (without the leader dominating or doing most of the talking). Safety leadership master Anil Mathur has referred to this measurement as "the quality of our safety conversations."
- People indicate receptivity by maintaining an appropriate level of eye contact.

- People notably interact and engage with energy, rather than just indicating that they are forced to respond, are under duress to participate or are going through the motions to avoid pressure or embarrassment.
- Others initiate contact regarding a safety topic outside of a formal toolbox meeting or training.
- People willingly share positive reports and examples of how they've changed their approach to personal or organizational safety, either at work or at home.
- Reports that people have passed along safety tips, methods or techniques to others (e.g., coworkers, friends, family).
- Workers are observed to incorporate newly transferred safety methods.
- Safety initiatives selected by committees at times end up with an objective or perspective different from what managers or leaders expected (this displays the courage and willingness to be creative in crafting approaches).
- Workers report near misses and incidents to the safety leader as soon as feasible.
- Workers suggest continuous improvement methods.
- There is less pushback on implementing necessary controls and more working together between workers and safety leadership.
- People volunteer for safety assignments (e.g., safety committees).

3. Think From a 360° Perspective

The waters of persuasion seek their own level. That is, if leaders want to be able to influence others, they also must be willing to be influenced themselves. That means going beyond just stopping talking to listen for a few moments and moving toward actively eliciting opinions as well as objections. It also means seeing situations from others' points of view rather than expecting them to think or act as the safety leader would. Case in point: Because we as leaders are intrinsically committed to safety, it's easy to assume that everyone feels the same. But often, they don't. It's critical to remind ourselves that others may not be as risk averse as we are (or that they see exposures and consequences differently).

Changing beliefs is based on people willingly volunteering to become their own safety proponents, rather than them being assigned, ordered or "volunteered" against their true assent. Trying to convince others is less powerful and certainly less sustainable than helping others discover the benefits of working and living safely themselves. Self-discovery leads to self-convincing, the most powerful result of effective persuasion. This isn't theoretical. Creating real excitement and interest in and commitment to safety is not only doable, it's being done in many companies.

Truly taking the time and giving one's full attention to listen to others is possibly the best way to validate and connect with them. "Listening to workers is a great way to learn about yourself as a leader," Karly says. "I remind myself to take a moment to really listen to what the workers are or aren't saying. How can I elicit a better response?"

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"Safety professionals live and breathe safety," she continues. "Especially during the pandemic, we have been so familiar with the latest CDC guidelines and OSHA interim regulations. Some of us forget that our employees have other important work that does not revolve around safety as a technical skill, and therefore are 'in the dark' on many things that we find second nature. Safety professionals need to make sure we are communicating to employees in a concise and easy to understand manner. Instead of citing '29 CFR 1910 point you name it,' have a conversation that gets the message across clearly. Especially in times of significant stress, employees need leadership that's both empathetic to their not having this knowledge at their fingertips and willing to help them walk through it."

4. Be Relational

We believe this can't be emphasized enough: Leaders are most able to reach those with whom they've previously formed a strong connection. Depending on several factors, connections can be built personally (one-on-one finding out more about an individual's personal likes or concerns), with groups (through two-way communications that simultaneously convey concern while displaying information or informing changes) or even remotely (being sure to acknowledge that any new strategies, even highly anticipated ones, have potential upsides and downsides). This enhances credibility while aligning with to then balance off others' fears of change and loss (as one leader contended, "Change always involves loss of some kind").

Yet we consistently see leaders, in safety and elsewhere, try to steamroll, dictate or go through the motions of appearing concerned while mandating new policies, procedures or other changes. This often backfires, creating greater disconnection, suspicion or pushback—the opposite of what the leaders most wanted.

Note that authoritarian leadership (which, in our experience, will never result in superior and sustaining safety performance or culture) takes less time on the front end, but invariably costs significantly more time on the back end, as pushback inhibits or halts buy-in and adoption of change.

Some things to watch for (to potentially reduce):

- Rather than asking for people's trust, ask for their input/concerns and suggestions.
- Be careful to not look down on those who haven't yet fully embraced safety methods as being "stupid" or "not caring about their own safety." Don't assume older workers are so set in their ways that they won't ever change. Robert has been working with long-term employees and has found that the approaches included here can work wonders in helping them change long-standing beliefs and actions, resulting in improvements in safety performance and culture.
- Don't assume younger workers don't know or are "typical" or arrogant. Rather, help younger workers apply their personal practices and passions toward safety (e.g., safety apps, in their hobbies) and help younger

safety professionals ground their personal background or academic theory with practical applications.

- Explain without condescending. It's important to watch tone of voice at least as much as the words we communicate.

Karly has found that "persuasion is convincing and empowering workers to make best and safest decisions. This is based on knowing your groups and their work but also by being open, positive and non-judgmental. Making safety fun."

Participating persuades. Be sure to structure in engagement. Giving workers responsibility for their own safety really shifts the culture. Suddenly you have people becoming more interested in safety. But it doesn't work by saying, "you are responsible for your own safety." We as safety professionals must motivate and encourage people to be responsible for their own safety. How can we do this?

- Get workers involved in safety committees and audits.
- Encourage reporting of near misses and unsafe acts or conditions. These things are good and can be fixed, which makes the worker more willing and interested in talking about safety and interacting with safety leaders. Look out for opportunities to engage with these, as opposed to only focusing on injuries where workers are concerned they might get in trouble. Move together with them from fearing to fixing.
- Give workers opportunities and responsibility for training coworkers in safety and in mentoring new and young workers (for more, see Pater & Remmo, 2012).

5. Connect With Compassion

Karly strongly contends, "An important piece of persuasion is compassion. Seeing the situation from the other person's perspective is paramount in effective persuasion. Why? Because you need to speak the language of your audience. Like public speaking, you need to speak to and for the person you're talking to. If you come to me and try to persuade me in French to buy a car, I'm not likely going to buy the car because I can't speak French. Similarly, if I go to workers and try to persuade them to wear safety glasses in 'compliance speak,' chances are good that many won't wear the safety glasses. They don't speak compliance. But I've found that if I try to persuade a worker using compassion (i.e., addressing the importance of their family to them that they've previously spoken about or bringing up a relevant story), they'll be more likely to wear the glasses. Bottom line: part of persuasion is speaking the right language, and as safety professionals, our language needs to be compassion."

"There's a lot written and said about empathy, which is undoubtedly an enormously important piece of persuasion; but compassion deserves a seat at the table as well," she continues. "To feel concern for others in a genuine way speaks volumes not only through our words, but also through our body language. I've found time and again that when a safety leader sincerely, heartfully opens up about the suffering of a worker—whether it be a fatality statistic

or otherwise—everything changes. When someone detects that you truly feel concerned with their suffering, they are more willing to let you into it. In turn, they are more willing to talk about the things that induce their safety problems.”

She says, “You have to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and feel what they are feeling. Am I speaking to them too aggressively? Am I being demanding and unreasonable? When I get frustrated, I try to imagine how the other person is feeling and this helps me empathize with them, which in turn helps ease my frustration.”

“Compassion is a soothing salve for the ‘tough guy’ syndrome,” she says. “It is the unapologetic cousin to empathy. Being compassionate is a significant key to creating intentionally good relationships between the safety leader and workers.”

6. Control Your Power

Like internal martial artist adepts, high-level leaders master self-control. After all, how can they effectively influence others if they can’t even control themselves to not overreact, get overly defensive or withdraw, or shut down under pressure? Like everything discussed in this article, this attribute is a combination of mindset, skill set and tool set. But it begins with leaders’ determination to remain as

calm and attentionally available as possible when the heat turns up, and not become so lulled into leadership complacency that they avoid seeing and considering looming bumps in their path. Start with: “Have I noticed myself reacting with more force than needed? Blurting out a response? Seeing others become surprised or shocked by the intensity of my reaction?” Then: “What might I do to avert this?” (e.g., remind yourself to take a breath in and slowly out before responding to a challenging question, or negotiating even a small amount of time “to think about this and get back to you” as a default).

Seek to persuade more by drawing than by pushing. Draw by offering benefits that people truly want (in MoveSMART, Robert demonstrates how certain techniques help people become considerably better in their favorite sports and activities, as well as prevent workplace injuries).

Persuading by overpowering is limited. Remind yourself that neither just telling them what to do nor blitzing them with positive thinking equates to actually persuading them, and can often result in unwanted pushback. As former Intel CEO Andrew Grove contended, “Fear never creates peak performance, only minimal performance.”

It’s easy and understandable for some of us safety leaders to become impatient with others persist-



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Safety leaders can considerably help move people in that direction by honing highly effective persuasion mindsets, skill sets and tool sets.

ing with what we see as overly risky actions. It's important to remind ourselves that people don't all change at the same pace. Persuasion isn't about the leader's instant gratification for seeing others quickly change. It's about longer-term improvements and being sure to not stratify resistance to those changes the leader most wishes to see implemented. Lately, we've been seeing incidences of these well-intentioned but potentially backfiring safety and health leadership approaches.

Let them see that you know you don't know everything. It takes courage to admit limitations. Robert believes that, ironically, while a major thread in all safety is reducing vulnerability, when a safety professional reveals their humanity and real concerns about another, this actually strengthens, not weakens, relationships and potential to reach others. Acknowledging what we don't know actually strengthens, not weakens, credibility for that information I communicate we do know a lot about.

Karly says that acknowledging not knowing it all is huge in her book. "Young safety professionals will be questioned and challenged, so it's important for them to demonstrate confidence. However, there is a delineation between confidence and arrogance. Acting like a 'know-it-all' to the employee who's been doing the job for 30 years is not going to get you far. The key is this: wanting to learn more and asking the worker. In my experience, people who have been in their field for many years are passionate about it and happy to share their experiences. Ask them about the job, learn about it and in the process you may start to identify potential hazards and areas of improvement. The best thing you can do in this situation is to also ask them, 'what's dangerous about this job?' Many employees have safety stories that they are eager to share and may help you to do your job more effectively."

We remind ourselves that persuading safety change is often a gradual, not instantaneous, process but impactful long term.

7. Shine Your Beacon

Many leaders report facing a conundrum: How to nurture enthusiasm for mission and change, even when surrounded by lulling or jaded forces. We've found that such changes have to begin within leaders ourselves. We must first lead ourselves, especially during difficult times or when there may be minimal support. And many of us are facing unprecedented situations as circumstances in our world seem to dramatically change.

Connect with and show your passion. Strong leaders know that energy is critical for change, getting out of a rut, moving out of default beliefs and less-functional habits. And energy is also essential for sustaining and setting change.

So, what are you truly excited about? For your own enthusiastic commitment to come across, it has to be radiant in the first place. Going through "rah-rah" motions is often overbearing and loses connection with others and credibility, and just

doesn't cut it. Surely all activities have some kind of safety component. How can you tie in your personal passion with messaging about PPE, procedures, safe mindset and skills?

Be sure to not neglect or underestimate the crucial persuasion driver of controlled energy or enthusiasm. There is no perpetual motion machine. With that in mind, how do you renew your own passion, especially in the face of ongoing "assaults" on best-laid plans? What is it most important to remind yourself about?

Passion is powerful, but, as in all things, control your powers. Be careful to not overwhelm others with your enthusiasm for safety so those who are initially skeptical (often the people you most wish to reach) write you off as a safety cult member.

While there's a lot to this, the bottom line is to be sure to refresh and renew yourself first before trying to energize others.

Conclusion

So, from our two sides of the safety spectrum—relatively new to worked around the world—this is what we realize: Even the most safety-oriented companies will never be able to eliminate all the daily and intermittent risks people face at work and at home. To reach the highest level of safety, their systematic beliefs must be willingly embraced by each company member. Safety leaders can considerably help move people in that direction by honing highly effective persuasion mindsets, skill sets and tool sets. This will ultimately benefit their company's safety performance as well as the morale and productivity of all their people. **PSJ**

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