BRIDGING SAFETY LEADERSHIP, PART 1
Overcoming Similar Challenges
By Karly St. Aubin and Robert Pater

Many safety professionals are committed to continually elevating their leadership. While there are various paths to becoming an ever-better safety leader, this article focuses on a different kind of safety pyramid that builds the ability to strongly and lastingly change others' beliefs and actions.

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Between us, Robert Pater, an experienced consultant in the field of safety and leadership, and Karly St. Aubin, an up-and-coming safety professional, we have discovered a leadership dynamic that is complementary to the traditional leadership approach and critical to success as a leader. In this two-part article, we'll explore the core characteristics that every safety leader who aspires to go beyond compliance should consider strengthening, regardless of individual style.

What reflexively comes to mind when thinking of a high-level safety leader? Whatever the image, refresh your mental canvas to become a more effective leader yourself, a more persuasive promoter of safety within your sphere and a more potent force for progressing our profession overall.

As new generations enter the workforce, along with them come changes in attitudes and beliefs about safety and safety leadership. While leadership in industrial settings was long associated with a certain type of person and gender, these demographics—and the profession overall—have been undergoing a shift in perspectives, performance objectives and composition.

Recognizing this is vital (as in energizing). First, high-level leadership begins with perception, unearthing and acknowledging forces and factors that block improvement (i.e., akin to physical, mental or organizational risk recognition). Followed, of course, by crafting, selecting or implementing modifications that overcome, avert or even make use of potential impediments, toward desired safer and other higher outcomes. Just as the right blend of spices in cooking can turn ordinary or same-old dishes into tasty, nutritious meals, so can stirring in differing backgrounds and viewpoints into (ordinary) safety leadership and culture enhance creative problem-solving and provide access to a wider range of people, including their broad range of perspectives and experience, and their ability to relate more closely with other generations.

Second, the changing face of leadership is a demographic reality. If your organization is like many with an aging workforce, it stands to reason that it must incorporate newer and younger workers. This changeover of composition means that an employee age map might look more like a double- or even triple-humped camel than a homogenous straight-line shift toward "graydom." Oh yes, along with a mix of older, experienced leaders.

But this generational shift necessitates that leaders adapt both their mindset and communication skill sets to best reach the range of changing employees (current and into the future) to heighten their receptivity and transfer needed skills in high-level safety. With both highly experienced and younger generations, we've found that we can no longer rely on "tell them and expect them to make it so" assumptions.

This demographic change can present challenges to both newer and seasoned safety leaders. We've seen how some long-experienced organizational members have at times looked down on younger leaders (e.g., "What do you know?" "What have you actually done?" "You're as young as my kid, why should I or anyone else even listen to you?" "Your ideas just come from book learning and not from the real world." "You won't find the solution on your cell phone." "You expect to get paid premium but don't have any real experience.").

In turnabout, some younger associates and leaders may disparage more grizzled safety professionals (e.g., "You don't have nearly as much academic education as I do." "You wouldn't be qualified for your own job if you had to apply for it now." "You're just stuck in your old and clearly mediocre ways." "You stubbornly persist with ways that aren't working." "If you know so much, why are we still seeing a lot of the same injuries?" "You have no clue about what's in the minds of workers who aren't in your generation." "You can't even use technology or social media effectively.").

The authors have experienced both ends of this spectrum. We have not met, are of different generations and have widely different backgrounds. But through written and phone conversations, we have discovered we share similar challenges, approaches, concerns and objectives. The thrust of this two-part article is to offer perspective and support for other safety leaders with similar challenges.

Our discussions have reaffirmed that high-level leadership is more related to a person's mindset, skill set and tool set than to the individual's birth set. Rather than being correlated with gender, race, size or age, highly effective leadership is based on principles that apply to all leaders.

We know that, while technical knowledge has its importance, it is minimally beneficial unless it is actually applied in daily work and life. To add value, this knowledge must be considered and respected by managers and used in tasks. In other words, the name of the ultimate test of safety leadership is improvement; whether based on education or experience, they mean little without the wherewithal to catalyze change.

Further complicating our mission, few safety leaders have supervisory control over the much larger numbers

of workers, managers and executives we want to affect. So, how can we convince people to believe in safety and act safer, with greater ongoing awareness, decisions, skills, and actions at work and home? To personally commit to expending the time and other resources needed for themselves, their families and others? This lack of direct control can even apply to those with "Global VP, EHS" in their title. This lack of control is further amplified as companies have thinned out their supervisory ranks and as employees work remotely.

Karly knows this well, not having done many of those tasks that she is influencing others to do more safely. The same with Robert, who in more than 3 decades of on-site consulting and training with a wide array of companies and a multitude of workers, has often been asked to address risk exposures in environments and tasks that he has not performed himself on a regular basis.

Perhaps this is not a challenge for only us. The same may also be the case for many safety professionals. Some workplace veterans, even if they rose through the ranks, might not have been doing actual tasks daily for some time, or haven't performed all of the specific jobs of workers throughout the company. And this is no secret: everyone in the company knows how much or how recent our actual experience has been, potentially affecting credibility. (For example, Robert has heard electrical technicians bragging about how they mocked safety professionals tasked with monitoring or certifying them on climbing poles in back lots when they knew the safety people had never themselves climbed one.)

Whether a "been-around-the-block" professional like Robert or an energetic, committed younger leader like Karly, we all must answer similar questions: How can I better relate to others who aren't like me? From a different background, generation, culture or mindset? Advising on work I'm not doing or have never done? Or those who (likely) are not as committed to safety as I am?

While it may be obvious with Karly and Robert, in a sense, all safety professionals are outsiders to some degree, trying to make an effect without much direct power. Our profession is too frequently seen both by workers and managers as an obstacle to getting actual work done (often as too picky or at odds with the "real job" of efficient and profitable production). Or perceived as having a too-narrow view of what is important either to workers or managers. Perhaps seen as theoretical rule-based rather than reality-oriented. Maybe judgmental rather than supportive ("If you really cared about your own safety, you would. . . .").

A challenge from a broader perspective is, how can we lead up, down and sideways in the face of these challenges, even (or especially) without a title where we cannot even pretend to persuade others what to do or not do?

Three Dimensions of the Safety Leadership Pyramid: Credibility, Trust & Persuasion

Of course, on its most basic level, safety focuses on crafting controls, policies and procedures, limiting exposures through PPE, recording, reporting, investigating and other mechanisms. But, time and again, we have seen that, while these are critical to start, they will not propel an organization beyond a certain lev-el of safety performance. We have seen that those who aspire toward achieving great, global-class, eye-opening safety performance and culture must engage, activate and energize everyone on all levels, not just prescribe and procure. Ultimately, safety leadership revolves around the high art of gelling humans toward internalizing safety and acting accordingly, even when they know that no one is monitoring them.

The safety leader's tools for accomplishing this involve credibility, trust and persuasion. This article will focus on the interrelated elements of credibility and trust. The next article offers strategies for practically elevating safety persuasion.

Credibility

Credibility is critical to building a case for encouraging others to adopt better safety mindsets, skill sets and tool sets. It is a prerequisite for developing trust. Lack of credibility in others' minds usually becomes an obstacle to their considering or even simply receiving methods that might help them work and live safer, so they wind up perpetuating same-old less-safe habits and ways.

Workers (or managers) who are inclined to be change-resistant often look for a reason to discount a leader's would-be efforts at persuading them to try on new safety methods. Writing off a safety leader as "young," "academic," "know-nothing," "inexperienced," "out of touch," "out of date," "from a different industry," "only worked on a site that didn't do it *our* way" or "not one of us" can reassure resisters' minds as a comfortable way to disqualify the message and those who try to get them to change.

Karly found that her biggest initial challenge as a young professional was proving herself. She has seen how many others, no matter their age or experience, tend to second-guess younger leaders and not take them as seriously. This is a critical obstacle to overcome; if any individual she is working with does not believe in her ability to help keep them safe, then there is no reason for them to listen to her and act on her suggestions.

She believes, "This is natural human behavior. It's similar to the analogy, 'If someone asked you to jump off a roof, would you?' Most people would say, 'well, no!' But what if a firefighter told you to jump off a roof because the building was on fire and there's a life net below? Some still might say no, but I'd be willing to bet that most people would follow the firefighter rather than someone waving a diploma. The challenge is proving that you have the technical skill to lead workers from a dangerous situation to a safer one."

She says, "To mitigate these challenges, I had to demonstrate my ability and competence to the people I work with. This came with time. I always ensured that I was confident in my answers to questions and when making suggestions on how to work safer. I also made sure to be honest and humble about my limitations; if I don't immediately know the answer to something, I would tell the individual that I would look into it and come back to them."

Robert has experienced similar issues, but for different reasons. He has decades of experience working serially

on a company's sites short term, offering methods for preventing tenacious personal injuries. His focus has been demonstrating methods for preventing soft-tissue injuries, slips, trips and falls, and hand injuries for which many adamantly thought they had already tried everything. And traveling to parts of the U.S. where he's never lived, not to mention working in other countries where he's been met with strong skepticism starting off due to assumptions about "superior" Americans. And more.

Knowledge can provide credibility. So can experience in an outside field that a leader can apply to safety, no matter the arena. After all, almost all activities, from woodworking to fishing to hunting to individual and team sports, have safety applications. For example, Robert has adapted principles from his multidecade practice of select internal martial arts principles (for directing attention and boosting balance, force direction and applied strength) to preventing injuries; he has relied in part on physically demonstrating and transferring these to overcome skepticism. Think about what you know and are good at, and how you might apply your existing personal knowledge and experience to safety, not only to vary your message and get people's attention, but also to offer a different perspective.

Like trust, credibility is built over time. This partially entails overcoming others' biases so that they will at least initially consider what we say. Or neutralizing their mental wounds from previous, perhaps long-ago negative encounters with others who they see as management. Ironically, entering a new work site touting shiny academic or other credentials can often backfire, resulting in pushback from existing managers or workers, especially those who have worked in their company for many years.

We have also found that credibility can most quickly be strengthened by listening, making real contact, learning about experienced workers' concerns as well as by eliciting and respecting any (approved) work-arounds or modifications they've developed to get jobs done safely. And by underplaying "how much I know," "how smart I am" or "how much education/degrees I have and you don't." While this may sound obvious, it's surprising how many professionals slip, trip and fall into some variation of this disconnecting pit.

Instead acknowledge, "I've never done this particular job. Can you walk me through how you approach it?" and avoid initially dictating better methods that might seem inappropriate or "we tried that long ago and it didn't work" to employees.

Changemaster Ron Bowles, when asked his advice to new professionals on building acceptance and credibility, says that it is critical to "ask more questions, have fewer [quick] answers."

As credibility and trust are intrinsically linked, we've found that other methods for building trust also simultaneously elevate credibility.

Trust

We believe that trust is the bedrock on which influencing positive change is built. This includes dispassionately eliciting often contrary views or reactions, listening to new information, considering different ways that require their shaking loose customary and comfortable methods to try on something new and iffy, initially awkwardly doing tasks differently (anytime someone tries on a new method from a long-comfortable one they can initially feel somewhat awkward) and more. If others don't trust us, they're unlikely to listen, or they might hear what we say through cynical filters.

It is easy for some to discount the critical importance of something as intangible or as soft as trust. Yet a *Harvard Business Review* article quotes studies that revealed that, "compared with people at low-trust companies, people at high-trust companies report: 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction with their lives, 40% less burnout" (Zak, 2017).

Trust also affects safety, whether people believe what leaders convey to maintain their well-being, whether they consider adopting new methods for self-protection from incidents at work and at home tasks, whether they take extra steps or go out of their way to be "safe and not sorry," and more.

It is also too easy, and often a by-default misconception, for established safety leaders to assume the presence of trust or to even disregard trust as an essential foundation of high-level safety (e.g., "We're paying them." "It's their job." "They don't have to like it, just to do it."). Just because someone doesn't see or acknowledge trust's importance doesn't mean it's not an invisible-but-crucial element that a safety culture requires to thrive, like having sufficient oxygen in a room. Conversely, the permissible exposure limit of distrust is exceedingly low in any company that aspires to global-class safety.

When distilled, trust has two dimensions: intent and competence. Ultimately, trust boils down to answering silent questions: Intent = "Do I believe you have my best interests at heart? Are you concerned about me and my well-being or are you focused on looking good to your boss? Or just want to improve the company's numbers? Does this really affect me or is it just more safety spam? Do you really see me as a person, no matter how different from you, or just as another potential statistic?"

Competence is the fraternal twin of credibility. Questions about competence come down to: "Do I think you know what you're talking about?" "More importantly, can you actually help make those changes that will benefit me?" (This last question addresses how critical it is for safety leaders to lead up, to become as influential as possible within their company's power structure.)

•Rely on mission. Eminent leadership expert Warren Bennis discovered one common characteristic in both younger and older transformative leaders, no matter their profession or industry: They had each been through a crucible experience that transformed their belief structure, set them with a "North Star" (according to Anil Mathur, former Alaska Tanker Co. CEO and president, and world-class safety leader) that internally focused and rocket-fueled their passion and commitment to affecting others (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). Most people can detect real passion and differentiate it from either a sales-y adjuration or just-going-through-the-motions messaging.

We suggest that to become or remain a high-level safety leader, each of us should periodically reflect on

our own North Star: "What are my crucible experiences?" "How can I communicate this in a way that others will resonate with my experience?" "What made me into who I am today? The aspects I'm most proud of, most satisfied about?" "What have I (recently) learned or realized that I really want to share with others?"

Mission is like a rechargeable battery that, unless periodically plugged in, will become drained and only provide dribbling power to our own planning, movement and for energizing others. This can be a potential danger with some experienced and otherwise excellent safety leaders whose passion may have become eroded over time through cumulative mental and political wear and disappointments.

•Share information: It's not just the leader's opinion or whim. Like Rome, trust is erected over time, not built in a day. Karly, to her initial chagrin, saw that many workers didn't trust the intent of the safety profession (e.g., "We're just a number to them." "They tell a lot but don't listen." "They just come up with dumb or unworkable methods.").

She says, "Proving myself was a challenge. But gaining trust, demonstrating competency, and showing up helped me overcome the obstacle." One way that Karly has gained trust: "I worked on this by showing workers where I was getting my information, making it clear this wasn't just my opinion or academics, but concrete and proven ways to help them."

"Back to the firefighter analogy," she says. "Most of us know these courageous professionals have the technical knowledge to direct us to a safer location in an emergency. But what if we do not trust them? As the firefighter in this analogy, the safety professional needs to gain that trust. If the firefighter shows you the life net below, you might trust them more. I showed them the OSHA regulation, ANSI standard, etc., and explained to them that this was the foundation of my decision. Of course, I had to watch out for it backfiring. It is essential to go beyond compliance, not rely on this as your only basis during the conversation. While compliance is sometimes our only basis for a decision, we should present it in layers. 1. Yes, I am competent and I have this standard to back up what I'm saying; and 2. I also care about you, and it's not about the compliance, but about you going home safely. It's like cooking. You need all the ingredients because if you forget the sugar in the cookies, they may be healthier, but they'll likely be awful, and few will actually eat them."

•Prioritize responsiveness. Karly has also found that quick follow-up is essential. Being responsive, even by providing interim information (or letting someone know that you have not forgotten their request and your promise, are still working on finding out what they asked about) sends the message that she values them and takes their concerns and them seriously. And that she realizes and readily admits she does not know everything. She says, "I do my utmost to follow up quickly in situations that I'm not completely certain about. Moreover, part of trust for me is showing visible leadership. Like the firefighter on the top of the building, I show up for my workers every day. They can trust that I'll be there for them no matter what."

•Help others trust themselves more. Robert has found that one of the basic drives threading through people in a myriad of industries worldwide is the desire to have more personal control in their own lives. So, rather than rely on the opposite and old-but-often-suspected pleas to "trust me," Robert goes the other way. "It matters less what I say than what you find works for you." This helps to disarm some default resistance and sets the stage for his next step up: helping them discover and then decide for themselves what they can apply to live and work safer with greater control.

Ron Bowles explains, "I've found that inclusion in the process is critical. Most of us are more committed to decisions that we had a part in making. I would say to a worker, 'Here's your challenge as I understand it. Is that correct? Here's the technical information (e.g., OSHA, ANSI, MSHA). How can we integrate this information to reach a solution?'"

Karly's and Robert's challenges echo what we have heard many other safety leaders express (often in frustration), both those new to the field and professionals seasoned over decades. But it is never too late to learn. This assumes a willingness to try some new things or incorporate different ways. As one wise leader suggested self-reflecting, "Do I have 30 years of experience or just 1 year 30 times?" In part 2, we'll follow on high-level persuasion.

Our bottom-line realization? What might superficially appear to be impenetrable gaps between generational leaders can actually be a mild fog temporarily obscuring significant overlaps in mission and practice. That just as a complementary approach that combines administrative and environmental controls with human factors improvements is critical for highest-level safety performance and culture, so is melding the strengths between different-seeming leaders. In the process of our communications, we have significantly learned from each other, and hope this stimulates some thoughts and strategies for leaders throughout the safety leadership spectrum. **PSJ**

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