



READY TO LEAD SAFETY DIFFERENTLY?

By Pam Walaski

Safety professionals must commit themselves to ongoing professional development over the course of their career. It is one of the keys to ensuring the provision of exceptional service to workers and the organizations that employ them, grounded in the requisite technical knowledge to perform their assigned duties.

In this author's opinion, staying abreast of emerging approaches to safety practice championed by thought leaders and based in research to practice is as important as remaining technically proficient. In recent years, an ongoing concern about the lack of reduction in serious injuries and fatalities has led to shifts from compliance-based approaches to risk-based ones rooted in management systems standards.

Equally important is the emergence of several different methods that encourage safety professionals to consider system-based approaches grounded in how workers behave within the system rather than in isolation. These approaches also stress the importance of creating a work environment that encourages engagement and respects the value of workers. Some of these include human and organizational performance (HOP), relationship-centered leadership, psychological safety and safety differently (thus the title of this article).

These approaches have several common themes that involve professionals moving away from playing the role of "safety cop," meting out discipline when infractions occur and seeing workers as deliberately noncompliant or careless and moving toward empowering and engaging workers by seeing them as partners in developing solutions and creating a work environment that fosters innovation, increased capacity and deep resilience.

This author believes that safety professionals who want to be a part of this shift must be willing to be introspective about their beliefs and philosophies about human behavior, honestly assess how their attitudes may negatively influence how workers view them and be willing to try new methods.

Vantage Point

Vantage Point articles in *Professional Safety* provide a forum for authors with distinct viewpoints to share their ideas and opinions with ASSP members and the OSH community. The goal is to encourage and stimulate critical thinking, discussion and debate on matters of concern to the OSH profession. The views and opinions expressed are strictly those of the author(s) and are not necessarily endorsed by *Professional Safety*, nor should they be considered an expression of official policy by ASSP.

Approximately 4 years ago, this author viewed yet another thread on a social media platform with a video of a person nearly getting seriously injured as a result of some action. The video led to comments about how stupid workers are and how they lack common sense. Commenters noted how workers did not care if they or others got hurt. This particular video was clearly from a third-world country lacking many of the safety regulations and practices enjoyed in the developed world. Something in that thread struck a nerve with this author, who tried to challenge the commenters to be more respectful and consider how a worker might feel reading the thread. The effort was soundly rebuked.

Recently, fellow safety professional Jim Loud initiated an engaging thread on LinkedIn with this statement, essentially capturing the situation:

I see this disdain and lack of empathy from "safety professionals" with disturbing frequency. The core message being that some workers just don't have "common sense." Why do so many in a profession that supposedly cares about people hold this counterproductive view of workers as clueless liabilities? (Loud, 2021)

Following this experience, this author embarked on a journey of immersion into the aforementioned emerging approaches as well as others, endeavoring to learn more about how to incorporate a systems view and focus on the safety professional's relationships as a foundation for change, rather than policies, rules, control and discipline. The journey has been transformative for this author and has led to a renewed passion for this profession. The following discussion summarizes some key learnings of four different emerging approaches.

The first use of the concepts and term "safety differently" is often attributed to Sidney Dekker, a professor at Griffith University in Australia and author of many seminal safety books and articles including *The Field Guide to Understanding "Human Error"* (Dekker, 2014) and *Just Culture: Restoring Trust and Account-*

ability in Your Organization (Dekker, 2016). The safety differently approach challenges organizations to view the role of people differently, relying on their expertise and insights as the foundation for developing programs and processes and understanding the interaction between the organization's systems and worker behavior. Safety is viewed as the presence of positives and an organization improves by building on what is being done right rather than focusing on what is done wrong, especially as it relates to understanding incident causes. Safety differently also adheres to the belief that past successes are not a guarantee of future safety.

The most visible leader of HOP is Todd Conklin, who spent 25 years at Los Alamos National Laboratory as a senior advisor for organizational and safety culture and is now in private practice, as well as a popular podcaster and author of several essential books on HOP and its application including *Pre-Accident Investigations: An Introduction to Organizational Safety* (Conklin, 2012) and *The 5 Principles of Human Performance: A Contemporary Update of the Building Blocks of Human Performance for the New View of Safety* (Conklin, 2019). Conklin describes the five key principles of HOP as 1. Error is normal—people make mistakes; 2. Blame fixes nothing; 3. Systems and content drive worker behavior; 4. Learning is vital; and 5. How an organization reacts matters. Several well-known quotes from Conklin that embed key HOP principles include "Mistakes do not equal violations," "You can blame and punish, or you can learn and improve" and "We must stop seeing workers as problems to be fixed but as solutions to be harnessed" (Conklin, n.d.). Proponents of HOP tend to eschew behavior-based safety applications and focus on understanding the role of the system in influencing worker behavior, concentrating the organization's efforts on learning from itself and building on the strengths of workers.

Both safety differently and HOP emphasize a systemic view of the organization, capable of creating both harmful and beneficial processes. Acknowledging the negative cycles of blaming workers

and expecting error-free actions allows an organization to change and build upon the resources workers provide. Put another way, both approaches refuse to see workers as stupid, lacking common sense and “clueless liabilities.”

Relationship-centered safety leadership is an approach advocated by Rosa Antonia Carrillo. She outlines the key concepts in her book, *The Relationship Factor in Safety Leadership* (Carrillo, 2020). An excellent quote summarizing her approach is “The very essence of a relationship is communication because it is what connects one person to another, or one person to many” (p. 5). Carrillo believes that trusting, inclusive relationships between members of an organization are the source of its success and ability to improve. Her theory outlines eight beliefs and principles of successful leaders, including “true communication takes place in the presence of relationship and trust” and “inclusion precedes accountability.” Organizational leaders are responsible for crafting relationships that create an environment where communication can trigger change and improvement. Carrillo maintains that people will speak up when they feel it is safe to do so and a leader who realizes such engagement is missing must identify areas of broken trust and take the lead in repairing them.

The concepts behind psychological safety are the last approach that has been significant in this author’s journey and is a fundamental part of the research conducted and written about by Amy Edmundson, a professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School. An influential book on the subject, *The Fearless Organization* (Edmundson, 2018), defines “psychological safety” as an organizational climate where people are comfortable expressing and being their authentic selves and are willing to share concerns and mistakes without fear of being embarrassed, facing discipline or other reprisals (Edmundson, 2018). Like the theory of relationship-centered safety leadership, Edmundson attributes to leaders the responsibility for creating an environment where workers are willing to speak up and provides many examples from her research of how it does and does not work. Edmundson suggests that when the focus is on the successful work of the team, not on self-protection, organizations can thrive, but when the focus is on finding fault and suppressing innovation, they do not.

These four emerging approaches have led to changes in how this author leads safety differently, including the following:

- The observation that people do not care how much someone knows until they know how much someone cares has been attributed to Theodore Roosevelt (n.d.) in several variations and is how this author has come to appreciate that demonstrating respect for the dignity and human value of workers comes before being technically proficient. This appreciation must be demonstrated in everyday interactions and attitudes.

- This author considers it the responsibility of safety professionals to ensure that workers feel safe to speak up by voicing opinions and ideas, acknowledging errors and asking for help. If that environment does not exist, the responsibility to identify the problems in the environment and take the lead in repairing them falls on the safety professional and includes apologizing when necessary. This shift in thinking leads to shifts in actions, conversations and relationships.

- The idea that common sense exists that is somehow mutual to everyone is a misnomer. The reality is that a person’s view of a situation is based on their unique combination of experiences and perspectives along with how they assess the situation or facts. Therefore, expecting “common” sense from workers is a worthless endeavor and ought not be used by safety professionals to defend behavioral expectations. Nor should it provide justification for calling workers stupid or sharing videos or photos of errors that may or do result in harm and finding them humorous.

- This author now has a much deeper appreciation for worker behavior as an adaptation to the system under which workers operate. Deviation from procedures almost always stems from lack of understanding, lack of enforcement, poorly written or outdated documents that do not reflect actual conditions under which the task is performed, or documents that were developed without worker input. Despite these common conditions, absolute compliance and accountability are expected. Worker behavior must be viewed considering the system in which workers operate.

- If an organization lacks effective worker engagement, repairing and im-

proving it will be most successful when relationships are repaired and rebuilt on trust. That action must be led by leaders, including safety professionals. The environment must be changed to one where worker contributions are sought after and valued, worker ideas are recognized without judgment of losing face, and credit for them is not withheld.

This author has discovered that by being willing to honestly challenge their own outdated philosophies about how to lead and how to get workers to behave safely, misconceptions and attitudes that were hindering success were uncovered. Change first required adopting the principles of several emerging approaches and continues to be the key to improving this author’s professional practice of safety. Safety professionals and the profession itself would be well served by continually checking ourselves and our beliefs. Workers are not stupid or idiots. They do not lack common sense or fail to care if they or their coworkers get hurt. They deserve to be treated with respect and dignity, in person and behind their backs. This author had the proverbial “aha!” moment several years ago and hopes others have as well or will soon. **PSJ**

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