

Safety Leadership in the US, Internationally and in ASSE

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Thank you to the ASSE Women in Safety Engineering for inviting me to speak about leadership and the safety professional. During this PDC session and in this paper, I want to share with you what I have come to know about leadership, what has worked for me (and what has not), as well as some things I wish I knew about leaders and leadership when I began my career in workplace safety!

What is leadership? What constitutes a good leader? There is a large, collective body of knowledge around this concept. Just Google “leadership” and you get 232,000,000 results ranging from Harvard Business Review references, numerous books, seminars, key note speakers, websites, government offices, consultants, and much more. However, for me leaders possess a commonality of characteristics. They have a vision, are good communicators, understand relationships and are accountable for their actions. As well, they care about those they lead, and the followers know they will be protected by the leader both internally and externally to the environment they are working within, be it a business, government, school district or ASSE.

There are no hard and fast rules for “how to” be a good leader, but there are some truths that have worked for me. Essentially it is about having the confidence to be true to your vision, listening to your inner voice, following that “moral compass” with character, integrity and respect for others, being competent in one’s area of expertise, seeking to understand through listening, taking risks in the face of opposition and leading in a way that works best for you.

Leadership opportunities and skill development come packaged in many different experiences both on and off the job. Leaders are not just CEOs, Presidents or Prime Ministers of nations or the President of ASSE, the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), Canadian Society of Safety Engineering (CSSE) Safety Institute of Australia (SIA) or the Singapore Institute of Safety Officers (SISO). Leaders run safety committees and soup kitchens, chair the membership committee in your local ASSE chapter, serve on their local school or library board, run for National ASSE office, lead a team within their company, “walk the talk” for safety, oversee new company initiatives (sustainability, product integrity, risk assessment, etc.), serve on non-profit Board of Directors, oversee EHS operations for their company locally or globally, or volunteer to be a class parent. One thing I have come to know is that life provides many opportunities to hone one’s leadership skills, and those skills are transferable.

Four things about Leadership that are truisms for me:

- 1) Relationships are the essential ingredient for effective leadership. Always treat others with dignity, integrity and respect; even those who have a very different opinion or perspective than you do.

- 2) Keep your ego in check; be credible, demonstrate humility, ask questions and listen. Always, stay grounded in who you are.
- 3) Be a Risk Taker, Knowing Failure Comes Along with the Territory
- 4) Leaders are a magnet for detractors.

Relational Leadership

“There are no leaders without followers,” a mentor once told me. Think about it, in order for one to choose to follow another, they need to have trust and believe in the other (leader) to provide the best outcome for them. That was my first lesson in leadership: Relationships count. Personal integrity and character count. It is about how one interacts with others. The level of influence one has is directly proportional to the positive experience of those interactions.

Leaders share a common goal with those that choose to follow them. For me, part of that goal should include an element of fun. I know, some leaders will tell you that the “fun” will distract the follower. I believe when people are happy and are enjoying their work, they give their personal best to what it is they are doing and the best solution always surfaces. It is a win-win for all. One of the first things I do when leading a team or work project is to create a positive environment. Typically, that is one where ideas are welcome and group consensus is valued. Create an environment where the leader’s role is to ask the right questions, point the team in the right direction and give credit where credit is due. This only happens when the leader establishes an atmosphere where the team members agree from the start to be respectful of one another, listen, self regulate and look to gain consensus so they can collectively achieve their common goal.

Good leaders highlight the value of each member of their team to bring out their best talent in overcoming business challenges. Harsh “command and control” leaders get compliance from their team. They get the work done through their subordinates in the exact way they plan. This type of leadership works well in a military environment where exact execution of a plan is a matter of life or death. While firmness and a strong guiding hand are part of leading, it is not the only thing. In the business world today, leaders look to their teams for creative solutions to their organization’s changing environment and challenges. This is essential for a company’s sustainability and in maintaining its competitive advantage and market share.

In 1996, I led an exercise, along with Herb Kissling, to found the International Practice Specialty (IPS). Then as the first chair of the practice specialty, I was responsible for building a leadership team and communicating an international vision for the practice specialty. My strategy was simple. I’d ask what interested individuals and then inquired as to whether they wanted to lead that area of interest for the practice specialty. This strategy worked well. The IPS has gone on to produce many exceptional leaders within the Society, including George Pearson, the current VP of the Council on Practices and Standards. The IPS has also participated and influenced the development of ASSE international strategy.

Delegation of responsibilities is important but so is follow-up. Trust but verify. One mentor, early in my career, shared with me that the hardest step in one’s career progression is going from being one of the team to being the supervisor. The greatest challenge is letting go and allowing the work to be done through others knowing that the methodology for accomplishing the work may differ from how you would do it. The key is to focus on the outcome and provide an environment for a person/team to succeed. Sometimes that means getting out of the way!

Fairness and trust are also leadership qualities to value. Making tough but fair decisions are always understood within the context of good communication. Sometimes that means helping an employee or volunteer understand they are not in the right job. Being honest, focusing on non-matching skill sets and not making it personal is healthy for everyone. The employee or volunteer understands and can either focus on upgrading their skills or finding a role better suited to their strengths. It is painful and destructive for all on a team as well as a waste of human energy when a leader, knowingly, allows someone to fail because they do not have the skill sets to do their assigned job.

Keep Your Ego in Check and Stay Grounded in Who You Are

Effective leaders keep their ego in check, are credible and demonstrate humility. They ask questions and listen to the answers; they stay grounded in the essence of who they are. Sounds like a challenge and it is.

Think about how you would characterize the best leaders in your life: Did they inspire confidence in you? Were they tough on you but fair and honest? Did they demonstrate moral character and integrity? Do they continue to inspire you today, even if they are no longer present?

Never underestimate the power of knowledge. Being intellectually curious, asking questions and listening with the goal of understanding gives the leader a greater understanding of the “bigger picture” in any situation. This bigger picture includes the interface between leader’s area of expertise, the competition, the overall environment in which they are working and the challenges therein. Knowledge increases the leader’s credibility as well as her/his ability to make good business decisions, both being essential for success. I have a personal goal to learn something new every day. I also try to remember that learning comes from many different sources and this includes my children who are continually teaching me something new!

Good leaders surround themselves by smart people and they listen to their counsel. This includes mentors, friends, business colleagues, spiritual affiliations, alumni associations, professional associations, fellow officers and members of boards of director’s organizations and associations. It is important for a leader to reach out to identify these people in their life. The ASSE International Practice Specialty leadership team is a good example for me. The leadership in the IPS over the years has included some of the brightest and best in the international workplace safety, health and environmental world. They have included Jim Johnston, Jack Fearing, Ron Kitson, John Kanouse, George Pearson, Stuart Wood and Ron Schaible, all leaders and globally savvy safety professionals from multinational companies such as Corning, Marsh, Wrigley, Figgie International, AMP, Warner Lambert and Wyeth pharmaceuticals. They have taught me a great deal about global workplace health and safety and business leadership through the years.

Be a Risk Taker, Knowing Failure Comes Along with the Territory

Risk and failure go hand in hand; it is part of the leadership package. The greater the risk one takes, the greater the potential for success as well as failure. However, good leaders are confident and optimistic in the face of naysayers and this inspires confidence in their followers. They also do not always “play it safe,” but go out on a limb-- whether they are a baseball player stealing bases or a safety professional starting a new consulting business. If you do not take a risk, you will NEVER reap the rewards of success. Therefore, optimism and confidence are essential to leadership success.

As the UK Manager of Loss Control, working to develop a branching strategy for 5 UK offices across the UK, it never crossed my mind to start my own global safety and health consulting business. When I returned to the US from the UK in 1996, the confluence of my collective knowledge of and credentials in European workplace health and safety, the developing trend of global, shared safety and health services within “International” companies (as they were then called), the ASSE Education department’s request to develop a Global Safety Management seminar, and my desire to do something different resulted in a giant leap of faith and the founding of Global Solutions Inc. The risk was high but the rewards have been....priceless. I work with global clients and continue to conduct the ASSE-sponsored Global EHS seminars as a member of the ASSE National Faculty. Since 1996, the original Global Safety Management seminar has undergone many changes aligned with the globalization of business and the evolution of how companies manage workplace safety and health globally. The best thing about starting my own consultancy is that I love the work I do and have never looked back.

Optimism and learning from one’s mistakes are a leader’s allies. Growing up, when things looked pretty grim, my mother, Elizabeth Seabrook, used to always say to me; “This too shall pass.” There was optimism in her voice and in that statement a knowing that things would not be grim forever. She was always right—no matter how bad it a situation seemed, things always were always better in time. She also taught me a valuable life lesson; simply put, “things happen for a reason.” When I look back at my mistakes and successes, I have come to understand that it has been through my mistakes that I have experienced the greatest learning. In this learning I have come to understand what does and does not work, which has had a positive impact on my success rate in life. Inquiry, not guilt or shame, has been an ally when mistakes happen or an intended outcome does not come to fruition. Being optimistic and learning from my mistakes has helped me develop creative solutions to life’s many challenges, both on and off the job.

Leaders Are a Magnet for Detractors

Detractors are part of the leadership package. Some say that the number of detractors is equally proportional to the extent of change a leader is enacting. For whatever reason, there will be people in a leader’s life who think the leader’s “face doesn’t fit,” that do not agree with the direction or changes being implemented or who are simply jealous because they were not chosen to be the leader. Sometimes the leader gets caught up in the “politics” of the moment. Then there are those detractors, who do not like the color of the leader’s tie, sound of their voice or the color of their hair for seemingly no reason at all. Do not be fooled by these detractors. It is not about the leader, it is about the detractor. What the detractor wants to expose in the leader may be something they do not want exposed in them. Perhaps they need to find a reason why the leader is not perfect? The important thing for the leader is to stay the course, initially working with the detractor to influence them if possible, and if the detractor cannot be influenced, having the confidence to take strong action in this face of opposition.

Good leaders have thick skin. Initially, it is important to ask questions to determine the reasons why there is opposition to a strategy and to work to build consensus with a detractor. However, when it is evident the detractor does not want to work together towards a common goal, further energy on that detractor is a waste of the leader’s time. Detractors will continue to drain energy out of the leader in dysfunctional ways, such as “triangulation” or false accusations, to keep the leader from achieving their goals. It is then essential for the leader to minimize the detractor’s influence, preferable getting them out of the way of progress, and to communicate with

all in those in the leadership chain to assure they continue to be aligned with the leader's strategy and goals.

What I have come to know is that one can never change another person unless that person wants to change. One can influence through actions and dialogue; but at the end of the day, if they do not like or want to follow the leader they need to be moved to a job, activity where they can contribute positively.

Some Final Thoughts and Leadership Tips that Have Worked for Me

Develop your business acumen. This includes understanding business strategy and finance; in addition to developing written and verbal communication, presentation, negotiation skills. Technical competence is usually the foundation upon which leaders are built. In my case it was global safety, health, environmental and cultural acumen as well. For me, achieving the CSP (US) and CMIOSH (UK) designations, developing expertise through on the ground safety and health consulting in the UK and managing multicultural staff in another country all contributed to the development of my global business skills.

Qualifications/credentials count. Early in my career, I achieved my CSP credentials. The Eastern Zone Loss Control manager at the time learned of this from my manager in our Richmond, Virginia office and shortly thereafter opened the door to an introduction to the company's National Loss Control Manager in New Jersey. From that introduction I was promoted to the head office and became a National Consultant for the company.

Be known as someone who can get the job done. A "can do" leader gets on the radar screen of their immediate boss and their leaders. By persevering in finding solutions that enhance the business, organization or team, good leaders will always be offered a "seat at the table." This is especially true of safety professionals who need to work hard at times to be relevant to their business, and not be perceived as the "safety police." Leaders volunteer to do the things they are good at doing because success breeds success and confidence. The flipside it true: leaders volunteer to do things that will stretch them. This will prepare them for new jobs and challenges ahead, and the learning and confidence gained by achieving stretch goals is immeasurable.

Remember the transferable skills you have developed in all facets of your life can increase your business acumen, technical competency and ability to lead:

- Communication/technology skills—developing school newsletters, assisting in creating a website for the local library or your church, networking on Facebook, LinkedIn or *Secondlife* and building and using Avatars for networking.
- Multi-tasking –raising children (and all that encompasses!) and balancing work
- Leadership—serving on the local school or library board of directors, running for a local chapter or national level ASSE office, leading a new work initiative, creating and deploying a new risk control model for your organization, serving as a Team Captain for the local Soup Kitchen, being a Girl or Boy Scout leader, coaching a girls basketball team.
- Training and education—running safety meetings, teaching Sunday school, or facilitating Anti-racism dialogues in your community.

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- First Job out of University: Aetna Life and Casualty: Ken Skogan, Rick Morgan and Bill Davis
- Chubb & Son: Jack Sullivan, Sam Lee, Doug Baillie, Bernadine Burnell, Sue Penny and Tom Newark
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Career Progression and Highlights

- BS Chemistry, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA
- Trainee to Senior Engineering representative, Aetna Life and Casualty, Richmond, Virginia,
- Chubb & Son Inc.:
 - Casualty consultant, Richmond, Virginia
 - Achieved CSP Designation
 - National consultant, Warren. NJ (honed my speaking, adult learning development, negotiating, and marketing and volunteer management and leadership skills)
 - UK Consultant, London, UK (developed international business, cultural, professional and technical expertise, achieved CMIOSH designation and became an active member of IOSH International Specialist Group Advisory Committee)
 - UK Manager, London, UK (developed and implemented UK Loss Control strategy for staffing 5 new and expanding UK branches, Member, Thames Valley Branch, IOSH
- Global Solutions, Inc., President, founder and principal consultant (1996- present)

ASSE Career Progression

- 1981 - joined ASSE, Colonial Virginia Chapter
- 1981 - member, Colonial Virginia chapter membership committee
- 1982 - chair, Colonial Virginia chapter membership committee
- 1982-87 - moved up the executive chairs in the Colonial Virginia Chapter
- 1987 - promoted to New Jersey and joined the New Jersey Chapter
- 1988 - 1990 - member of the New Jersey chapter executive committee
- 1990 – 1995 - moved to the UK & founded (along with 4 British ASSE members) the ASSE UK Section. Became Section's first Chair.
- 1995-1996 - formally founded (with Herb Kissling) the ASSE International Practice Specialty under the umbrella and guidance of the ASSE Management Practice Specialty
- 1996-1998 - Administrator of the International Practice Specialty
- 1996-present - member, ASSE National Faculty
- 1998-2002 - member, ASSE Board of Directors, Vice President, Council on Practices and Standards
- 1998-2002 - speaker at ASSE Leadership Conference
- 2002 -present - member, ASSE International Practice Specialty advisory committee.
- 2001-2005 - member, ANSI Z10 Committee
- 2002- 2007 - expatriated to the UK for 2nd time.
- 2002- present - member International Specialist Group, IOSH (British Institution of Occupational Safety and Health)
- 2005 – chair, International Membership Taskforce
- 2005-7 - Strategic Planning committee
- 2008- present-member, Business of Safety Committee
- 2007-8 - member, National ASSE Bylaws Committee
- 2008-9 - chair, National ASSE Bylaws Committee