

A Safety Mindset for Effective Leaders

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Introduction

The outcome of this paper and my presentation at the 2009 ASSE PDC is to give you the resources to help your corporate leadership take personal responsibility for themselves and others. They, as well as the rest of your employees, must first understand how working safely benefits them personally. You must discover the tools to help others embrace the mindset that safety must be a personal value and that values do not change when conditions change. Techniques will be shown to rekindle your team and regain their vision, passion, and energy for helping others work safely while acknowledging their own accountability for achieving results.

The Challenge

Have you encountered the following challenge? You work for a company that is committed to the safety of their employees. The top-level management is personally committed to safety. They believe it is possible to be profitable, productive *and* safe. You know from your own interaction with these leaders that they are sincerely committed to safety but the employees at your company believe just the opposite. When you talk to employees they are under the impression that the corporate leadership doesn't care about them and is only interested in dollars. How did the message not get through? What barriers got in the way?

Let's Look at Management's Viewpoint

Corporate leaders are charged with successfully achieving their company's mission and making a profit for their stockholders. Governmental agency leaders have a similar position, to provide the most services for the dollars they are budgeted. What is encouraging is that I've interviewed many corporate leaders who have discovered how to convey their commitment to safety to everyone on their team. Safety is one of those values that come from the top down. The challenge is that in the rush of getting the job done some employees misunderstand that the leadership still wants the job done safely. Leaders must always make sure each and every employee understands their level of commitment to safety. People have short memories or concentrate on the message of the moment. The company president or plant manager may have told them that safety is a must and every job must be done with safety as the key focus. The challenge is that in the midst of a crisis or during future meetings they hear other messages. Leaders share the importance of production or solving a key challenge. They might say, "Do whatever it takes to get this job done!" They really mean do whatever it takes as long as you can do it safely, but employees don't

hear that unless the leadership reinforces it every time. I suggest leaders always direct those they lead by saying, "Do whatever it takes to get the job done, safely." How about, "Get it done no matter what, **Safely**." This reminds them of the importance of getting results, but lets them know that previous commitments and focus on safety are still in place.

Leaders must capture a vision and share that vision with their fellow leaders so that they can achieve the safety results they expect. **Reinforce, reinforce, reinforce**, is one of the secrets I have learned by interviewing CEO's and leaders who have successfully conveyed their vision to all members of their team.

Look For Other Company Values That Are Never Compromised

Think for a moment about the values your company holds as significant. Quality, Integrity, Honesty are a few that may come to mind. Pick one that everyone in your company knows is never compromised. Ask yourself, "What has the leadership done to ensure that everyone knows the importance of this core value?" This could very well be the key to your successfully making sure the employees understand management's commitment to safety.

Leadership Integrity and Safety

Integrity is one of the best safety tools your leadership can use to carry their message of safety. Your integrity is vital to conveying a safety vision. Your people know what values you are not willing to compromise. Is safety one of those or do they think that when the going gets tough safety slips down in priority?

What You Can Do To Help Your Corporate Leadership

The following are some ways successful leaders demonstrate their commitment to safety:

- They personally attend major safety events and kickoffs;
- They honor their commitment to prevent negative consequences for reporting close calls;
- They follow up on safety challenges and make sure those responsible have solved the issue;
- They constantly monitor middle management to make sure they are as committed as the upper level leaders;
- Safety is a measured performance item on the annual reviews of all corporate leadership;
- Commitment to safety is a key to promotions within the company;
- Financial advancement in the form of raises or bonuses are affected by safety performance;
- Communication directly to employees through email, memos, and articles in corporate newsletters;
- Integrate safety into existing corporate structure by using existing meetings to communicate safety information; and
- Establish a corporate leader safety hotline to give employees a direct method to communicate with leadership.

Help Them Realize That Improving Safety Performance Meets Their Goals

When I want to motivate someone I must think like they do. When you want to convince your corporate leadership that safety needs more attention let them know how it affects those things they are charged to take care of. I have always believed that you must know what they want. A great example of someone who understands this is John Miles of OSHA. He told me when I was presenting to their regional managers meeting that one company he knew of went from a workers compensation cost of 4.5 million to 1.5 million in a five-year period. Sheer profit from focusing on safety. How would your corporate leadership like to find almost 3 million in extra profits every year over the next five years? Take some time and research with the help of your workers compensation provider what potential savings could be realized. Safety is one of the greatest opportunities to achieve greater profits and also protect your people. The greater profits help you achieve a competitive edge year after year. Companies with a poor safety record bidding on a job have it much tougher being the low bidder because they must factor in injury costs that their competitors don't have. When you think like the corporate leadership thinks you can develop safety strategies in which they will be willing to invest time and dollars.

I have found this to be such a powerful motivating force that I actually developed a special seminar that I call, "Safety For Leaders". It is a special motivational presentation for leaders. In order for you to understand how you can do this yourself, let me share with you the concepts of the seminar. It begins with making sure corporate leadership is taking personal responsibility for their own safety. They, as well as the rest of the employees, must understand how working safely benefits them personally. It then reminds them they must understand that they are also responsible for the safety of those they supervise. Safety leadership is more than just cooperating with the safety department. It is making sure middle level management and employees understand that safety is a personal value of each leader and that values don't change when conditions change. I, then, teach leadership how to communicate the need to work safely 100% of the time.

Over the past year, I have had the pleasure of speaking at the Johnson Space Center as a part of their, "Safety Through Everyone's Participation," (STEP) program. Their former Center Director, George Abbey, has given me several insights into how to make sure everyone at your facility understands that your leadership is committed to safety. First, he was personally involved with the team that developed the STEP program. Once developed, the entire management team was required to attend the course prior to sending their employees to the meetings. Mr. Abbey, then, made sure his management team understood that their people must attend the safety meeting. At their Senior Management Meeting, the first item on the agenda was safety.

The employees at Johnson Space Center understood Mr. Abbey's commitment to safety as he personally opened each day's class with an introduction of the program. The message this sent was very powerful. Everyone at Johnson Space Center understood the value of the Director's time. The fact that they saw him take time out of his busy schedule to welcome them to the class, which is held three days each month with an audience of seventy five to one hundred fifty people each day, spoke of his true commitment.

Another benefit of his being there was that he saw evidence of the attendance. Early on in the program, several months ago, about one third of the class failed to show up. Because Mr. Abbey was there, he knew that would be a major discussion item at the next week's manager's meeting. I gauge effective communication and motivation by the results someone gets and I am pleased to report that since that meeting the attendance has been outstanding. The management team at NASA certainly got the message that safety was not something that could be put on hold at the Johnson Space Center. Further evidence of effectively communicating safety as a value in

an organization such as NASA has occurred when changes in the launch schedule of the space shuttle have happened. People with launch or mission responsibilities have been in the class instead of using the mission as an excuse to put it off. They know that safety is the most important focus of JSC, not just flight safety, but employee safety on and off the job.

Rob Kelso, Deputy Director of Safety and Mission Assurance, said one month prior to my presentation, "It is important that everyone on the JSC team focus on safety otherwise we are allowing people to be hurt." What a great concept for managers to embrace. How much are you doing to convey that it is unacceptable for anyone to be injured while working for your organization? Do your leaders know that when they do not successfully convey their personal commitment to safety then they are allowing people to be injured?

As a leader in your company, you must make sure you demonstrate to your employees over and over again your commitment to safety. When you are on a safety team or committee you must make sure your leadership gets this message to the employees and let the leadership know when the message isn't getting through. Oftentimes, a leader who cares isn't getting the feedback from the workers that let them know they need to improve communication. Safety is truly everyone's responsibility and communicating the importance of safety is also everyone's responsibility.

Some Additional Thoughts On Leadership and Safety

Seven Deadly Management Sins

The following are Seven Deadly Sins management makes in safety leadership and communication.

1. Only mentions safety at safety meetings.
2. Regularly allows people to miss safety meetings etc. to allow them to get work done.
3. Observe and ignore unsafe behaviors.
4. Review performance of middle management without safety behaviors being a measure, i.e., meeting attendance and number of observations.
5. Keeping their own personal safety values a secret.
6. Thinking safety interferes with production.
7. Talking numbers instead of about people.

Errors Leaders Make

What errors do you believe leaders make when communicating about safety?

- Not demonstrating the actions they want others to do.
- Poor knowledge of the challenge or situation.
- Only communicating in a meeting setting. Never communicating where the action takes place.
- Lecture
- Not involving the audience.
- Ineffective communication.
- Never visit employees they stay in the office all day.
- Dictate safety without involvement.

- Reinforce undesirable behavior by not stopping it.
- Never put themselves close enough to a safety issue to understand the issues.
- Gave an example of something the audience knew was not correct and then tried to tell them something he thought would work. (No credibility)
- Dictate as opposed to convince
- Do not live what they say.
- Fail to convince people of the value in what they are being asked to do.
- Not walking their own talk.
- Leaders follow up only on safety statistics.
- Leader not wearing personal protective equipment at the work site.
- Leader says one thing and does another.
- Awarding poor performance.
- Refer to dollars when telling employees how much safety means to you.
- Thinking of safety as an expense rather than a profit center.
- Dictate as opposed to convince
- Keeping their own personal safety values a secret.
- Thinking safety interferes with production.
- Talking numbers instead of about people.
- What do you believe leaders do right when communicating about safety?

Some Positive Traits of Leaders

- Uses humor.
- Knows how to listen.
- Tells personal stories.
- Expects continual improvement.
- Supports employees in difficult safety decisions that were made.
- Joins in on scheduled safety gatherings.
- Describes the value/objective of safety processes as well as how to do process.
- Leads by example.
- Stops an unsafe activity and tells employee the correct technique.
- Gets out into the field to visit employees – Hands on Knowledge.
- Uses ‘real life’ personal experiences to engage staff.
- Wants you to go home safely to your family everyday.
- Makes sure audience understands.
- Gives immediate feedback to questions.

Thoughts on Safety For Leaders

- Safety and performance reviews - What do you hold your managers responsible for?
- If you do not have safety on their annual review then why should they make it something on which to concentrate? Reviews should measure behaviors, not safety statistics.
- When you are in a crisis, then is the best time you want to deliver the key message about safety. Learning is state dependent. If you tell them at a meeting that you are committed to safety and it is a value for you, that is step one. In order for them to really understand it is a value, you need to remind them in the midst of a crisis or an intense situation.
- When you are delivering a message that in fact is saying, “ Get this done, no matter

what.” What are they hearing? If they misunderstand your commitment to safety, they might think such a directive is telling them to suspend the importance of safety in the interest of getting the job done. One little word placed in your directive sentence can make all the difference. Say, “Get this done no matter what, Safely.”

- This reminds them that you still hold safety as a value.

Guidelines For Effective Listening

- Listening the way they listen.
- Look to listen and look to talk rules.
- It is as important that they believe you are listening as the fact that you are in fact listening. When an audience perceives you are not listening then they will not respond to your advice, decision, or teaching as well.
- Remember to watch out for their, “look to talk” and “look to listen” rules.

Never Give Up

One last thought. Persistence is the key to success. First, you must believe you can get through to your leadership. Second, begin to use different techniques to get the results you want. Third, if one technique doesn't get the result then use a different technique. Most people fail because they give up short of the goal. Winners keep changing their strategy and ultimately find the tool that gets them the results they knew were possible.