

Advanced Leadership Skills for Standout Safety Culture and Performance

**Anil Mathur, M.S., M.B.A.
CEO
Alaska Tanker Company
Beaverton, Oregon**

**Robert Pater, M.A.
Managing Director
SSA/MoveSMART®
Portland, Oregon**

Effective leadership skills are essential for strong safety performance and culture; they are even more crucial in the current environment of uncertainty, uneven morale and reduced resources—and organizations recognize this need. You don't have to look far to see numerous tomes, articles and seminars aiming at transferring the attributes of basic leadership, usually citing the import of continuous improvement; ironically, while many have good intent, information and case examples, focus is often on, "Here are the skills, now you've got it," which can run contrary to a process of continual development.

In our view, "leadership" means getting desired results by working with and through others. It means generating exponential results over time from considered, much smaller, daily actions.

In our experiences—Anil's in several executive positions (currently as CEO of the what is recognized as the safest and most environmentally sensitive oil tanker company in the world) and Robert's as head of a consulting company with worldwide clients such as BP, United Airlines, Honda, Avon, Boeing, DuPont, Harley-Davidson, Johnson & Johnson, Michelin, Textron, Xerox, U.S. Steel, and many more—we have seen examples of levels of leadership, from less effective to extremely so. Not surprisingly, higher levels of leadership are directly correlated with higher levels of safety performance and culture, in a wide array of leading and trailing measures.

We recognize that leadership mindsets, toolsets and skillsets can vary from person and culture. Ultimately, leadership is less taught than learned, and that there is a wealth of leadership skills and attributes that we know about that could fill numerous books, much less this short paper (and that we know we certainly don't have all the answers).

But, in this short space, we wish to offer core skills and attributes to further levels of safety leadership in companies worldwide, to suggest possibilities of significant improvements on multiple levels and to breakthrough the ceiling of what many think of as "just" safety leadership.

Anil has applied these (and other) skills to help his company work over 14 million hours without a lost-time injury, as of this writing. And this aboard ships that have more risks than many other companies, such as exposure to the environment (arctic winters, high winds rain), turning valves, traversing vertical ladders, vibration, listing and rolling, crossing slippery decks, using heavy tools, long hours, interrupted sleep patterns, and more.

We see safety leadership as a subset of overall leadership. So the skills and attributes described below apply to leading organizations for significant improvements in culture, performance, morale and motivation, safety and health. (*Caveat*: Although our predominant experience is with private sector companies, we also believe that the information in this paper (and expanded in our seminar) also applies to governmental and not-for-profit organizations.) Our knowledge predominantly stems from real-world practice.

While much of this can't be transferred in a large seminar much less a short paper, here are nine skill sets, mindsets and toolsets for graduating towards advanced leadership for safety culture and performance. Further, bear in mind that "advanced" may not necessarily mean doing anything vastly different than what is done by lesser leaders; it may mean doing some of the same things but on a higher, more efficient, and impactful level.

Nine Advanced Mindsets, Skill sets, and Toolsets

1. Developing Yourself First. Beginning and mid-level leaders are those who may have a high-ranking title and significant perks, but whose actions don't lead their charge to highest possible level with minimal energy expenditure. Characteristically, they initially focus externally, on how to best affect others. They frequently attempt to hide their own reactions, where their underlying message is, "Do as I say, not as I do." They frequently believe they can effectively shield their inner concerns, doubts, and other reactions from others. Unfortunately, this approach creates dysfunctional time, inefficient mixed messages, lower morale, and a "cover yourself first, do the job second" culture. For better or worse, studies show that especially when they are under stress, workers tend to give less credence to what others (leaders) tell them and more to what they see. Actions speak louder...

In contrast, advanced leaders emphasize understanding oneself and practicing self-control (with the highest level of self-control the ability to be calm and make best decisions under significant pressure). They realize that, whether intellectually this would be the case, their credibility, internal belief system, consistency, level of self-motivation, and confidence can't be prevented from affecting others, sending out ripples of messages throughout their company.

Consistent with this, Dee Hock, CEO Emeritus of VISA International, who wrote in *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (1999), that leaders should spend 50 percent of their time managing themselves (character, principles, purpose, motivation, and conduct), 25 percent of their time managing those with authority over you (bosses and supervisors), 20 percent managing their peers, and the remainder to help subordinates ("those that work for you"). This is quite different than the more prevalent leadership approach of spending most of the time trying to get others to become strong followers.

As Robert wrote about in his book, *Leading from Within* (1999), we believe that leaders develop in three stages, which are not totally linear. First, they develop their leadership foundation by developing themselves: seeking their own motivation, making peace with mixed feelings, honing their own mental and physical resources, and building courage to do what is

needed but may be difficult or unpopular. Secondly, leaders work towards becoming more influential: inviting improvements in thought, approach and actions, directing the energy behind conflicts into sparking interest and creativity, and developing commitment by drawing people rather than attempting to overpower them. At the third level, leaders emphasize mastering change: befriending and reacting effectively to unforeseen changes, planning successful change, and then becoming expert at efficiently catalyzing positive improvements.

Advanced leaders lead from the front, do unto themselves first, and hold themselves accountable before looking to blame others. Being arrogant or overly proud of one's accomplishments blocks working towards getting even better, and is the sign of a mediocre leader (not to mention, this kind of posture puts off those with whom the leader would hope to influence).

If you've seen a Spiderman movie, you may have heard the expression, "With great power comes great responsibility." Master leaders apply the reverse. They know that when they first take responsibility for themselves, the impact that their actions, inactions, decisions, and messages have on their organization, means that they can attain great power to foster positive change.

Anil talks consistently about the importance of leaders developing emotional intelligence (where emotions, once befriended, are allies toward perception and decision-making, rather than a source of perpetually distracting internal tension), first in themselves, and then in others. Master leaders learn to make stress work for them, rather than letting the tail wag the dog.

2. *Cultivating Leaders.* Lower-level leaders want avid followers. They operate as if their underlying assumption is that they know what is best for everyone else. Their theme might be, "Do as I say, without question," or "Check your thoughts at the time clock." In line with Newton's Third Law of Motion, their actions can create equal and opposite reactions; the harder the push, the stronger the pushback (which may not come immediately or directly). They engender resistance, quality deficiencies, presenteeism, absenteeism, ignoring safety policies and procedures, different kinds of sabotage, or quitting. They also miss the opportunity income of potential creative ideas from others, heightened acceptance from everyone, and the smooth flow of scheduling and work associated with this, as well as offloading work that is refined and taken to a higher level of performance by others.

In contrast, advanced leaders follow Tom Peters' prescription, "The best leaders don't create followers; they create other leaders." They spread the leadership load. They do not abdicate their role by creating a "leaders-less" organization, but rather expand into a leader-full company. Our view is that ultimately everyone is the safety director of his or her own life, at work and at home. As in a bell-curve distribution, some are ineffective, most are fair to good, and some are highly effective safety directors. We see the role of an advanced leader as helping move every person up, so that everyone within the company is at the very least a good safety director or better.

A significant part of cultivating leaders is engaging everyone in the safety process. The best leaders know that, at its apex, safety is not done unto others or even done with workers. It's done by workers for themselves, using the best safety judgment, processes and procedures at work and at home, even when they know others are not watching. The highest level of safety culture is one where leadership is spread from top to bottom and from bottom to top.

There are many ways that adept leaders develop leadership skills in others. These may run from training line workers as safety catalysts, giving them the power, budget and charge to actually make positive improvements; training supervisors in skills needed to lead safety within

the context of their other duties; setting expectations for the leader's direct reports to, in turn, cultivate others as leaders, and more. They activate everyone's involvement in decisions that affect safety long-term, including the purchasing, contracting and legal departments, as well as all vendors/contractors.

Developing a leader-full safety culture leverages everyone's strength and skills toward engaged and high-level safety performance.

3. Directing Attention. When asked the key to high performance leadership, Tom Peters responded that everything he'd learned in over twenty-five years of working with companies could be distilled into five words, "Attention is all there is."

What you put your attention to is what you get, what you don't.... Further, what you don't see can't be utilized and can indeed blindside you. Advanced leaders hone their attention skills. They invite challenging feedback and viewpoints, where lower-level leaders are most comfortable with those who only fawn and agree. Master leaders look for disconnects; ineffective leaders ignore them. Excellent leaders look around, inside and outside their companies to spot better ideas or potential pitfalls before they commit themselves to far-reaching interventions; weak leaders shoot from the hip, only value what they quickly see, believe in "it's worthless if it ain't been invented here."

The ability to direct attention is a part of a skill set of nine skills that can be honed over time. The best leaders acknowledge (even if only to themselves) their current attention limitations and work at strengthening their ability to focus attention internally as well as externally, narrow as well as wide, as Miyamoto Musashi wrote, "to perceive even trifles," that might be incipient leading indicators. They know where they want to steer their safety culture (towards leader-full) and watch for the warning signs of organizational problems (disconnection, loss of focus, and morale issues).

Because they focus on developing others' skills, the strongest leaders help others bring attention to day-to-day differences in doing tasks.

4. Tasting Before Salting. Someone once said that if you are considering hiring an applicant for any responsible position, first meet with him or her over a meal. Watch to see if they salt their food before tasting it. If they do so, don't hire them. Why? Because this is likely a default mindset that is ineffective; that it's only weak leaders who make blind assumptions about how much seasoning is in a dish before even trying it.

Once-a-year safety perception surveys are not enough. Neither are once-a-half-year behavior audits. In contrast, the best leaders set up direct and indirect mechanisms to consistently sample the reactions and resistance of their direct reports and those of others above and below them throughout the organization.

5. Communicating for Action. Black-belt leaders communicate personally, rather than defaulting towards safety statistics or cost-savings; rather, they focus on personal benefits of safety. For example, in the MoveSMART® system, created by Robert, leaders communicate how best safety methods help everyone practice "Safety, Stronger, More in Control," becoming better at their favorite hobbies and sports, helping protect their loved ones, whether children or older relatives, and more (Pater, 1990).

Best leaders realize they are continually practicing to become more effective. So their safety communications shift from lost-time incidents (LTI) to leadership-in-training (LIT).

Anil has found that one of the most important markers of strong safety leadership and culture is “the quality of safety communications” within the company. High-quality communications are those that are two way (and this can be measured in several manners), with significant meaningful worker input. Advanced leaders develop the skill sets needed to generate important, real two-way communications. For example (and this is but one skill), they tend to ask a greater proportion of open-ended questions that draw out considered responses, rather than read-my-mind yes-or-no, agree-or-disagree queries. Responders know their perceptions and viewpoints are sought by and sincerely considered by advanced leaders, who make sufficient time for these kinds of communications.

Also, best leaders are careful not to speak as if they are the “answers guy.” They nurture and extract expert information from others doing the job, accepting technical expertise from those who actually have real-world experience.

Shooting the messenger, or blaming others, is a flashing red signal of lower-level leadership. Advanced leaders set up systems to elicit needed, sometimes sensitive, information where people feel safe to offer these communications. For example, Alaska Tanker Company has a no-blame, near-miss reporting system that has been proven to surface potential safety risks and problems at an early level.

6. Deepening Trust. Norman Schwartzkopf said, “Leadership is a potent combination of character and strategy, and if you have to be without one, be without the strategy.”

Trust grows from others’ perception of the leader’s intent, consistency and follow-through. Best leaders acknowledge to themselves they may not be as fully consistent as they would like and continually work towards becoming more so. In this regard, they actively surface and root out mixed messages—every company has them to some degree in our experience. They do this by asking the right questions and ardently listening in many ways. For example, a strong leader might ask herself (as well as others with whom she works), “What do we do here that encourages hiding needed safety information?” then take needed actions to reduce obstacles to information transfer.

One person defined power as “the ability to change the future.” Best leaders engage the clutch of maximum power because they know they cannot change the past, only the future. High-level leaders have a different focus than their lower-performing peers. The latter often default toward punitive action, whereas the former emphasize corrective measures.

They hone their follow-through, responding quickly to questions and requests, even where this entails sending the message they cannot agree to every request nor provide all information demanded at the time.

Strong leaders move from quarter to quarter towards longer term thinking and goal-setting. They know that quick fixes rarely work but that substantial improvement can occur in a relatively short time (months at times) with dedicated effort.

Most important, advanced leaders understand the importance of trust as a foundation for all company communications and improvements and keep trust building in the forefront of all actions.

7. Having Visibility and Invisibility Strategies. On one side, advanced leaders practice being visible, showing up for safety events, being a strong safety spokesperson. They inject energy into safety interventions by showing personal enthusiasm and commitment.

On the other side, they are invisible. They seek out others as safety heroes and transfer credit for safety ideas and applications to everyone else.

8. *Making (the Right) Things Happen*. Ultimately, it's results that count. Strongest leaders advance their company's performance. They lead do-ably by making it easy for others to change, setting realistic expectations, eliciting agreement at the earliest possible level, and by sending the consistent message that everyone's job is not to, "Get it Done" but to, "Get it Done Safely."

9. *Deep Problem-solving*. Management expert Peter Drucker wrote that weak leaders spend most of their time trying to come up with the right answers, whereas strong leaders work at coming up with the right questions. Anil has applied this in many ways with great effectiveness. Questioning and clearly waiting for a thoughtful answer can be a significant skill for moving beyond old and ineffective safety habits.

Again, none of the above is theoretical or academic. It's happening right now in leaders within companies throughout the world in many sectors of business. By advancing their mindset, skill sets and toolsets to a higher level, leaders can actuate significant and sustaining improvements in safety culture and performance.

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