

## **Safety Step-Change: Moving Leadership Engagement from Good to Great**

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### **Introduction**

*Good is the enemy of great – Jim Collins, 2001*

Many organizations have good safety cultures; few have great ones! World-class safety cultures commonly have engaged leadership. However, obtaining leadership engagement can be difficult, or seemingly impossible. This paper will provide philosophy, concepts, techniques and a case study to give the safety practitioner the tools to create momentum in their leadership teams to move their safety cultures from good to great.

### **Safety Step-Change: The Six Elements of a World-Class Culture**



**Figure 1. Step-Change Elements**

Many companies feel they have plateaued in their safety performance, either in incident rate, safety initiatives or in their leadership support. So, many safety practitioners are looking to take the next steps to moving their safety cultures to the next level of performance. This “Safety Step-Change” can be brought about in a variety of different methods. For the past 19 years I have been

researching, analyzing and consulting with top-tier organizations looking for the optimal philosophy, strategy and/or technique to bring about this safety step-change. Many organizations I have worked with have good safety cultures. Interestingly, however, the companies with great safety cultures have certain common elements: a resilient safety culture, a background in human performance, engaged employees, engaged leadership, outstanding communication and a focus on leading indicators (see Figure 1). Typically, these elements are found in all organizations, but not all are functioning as well as they could. This is the key to having a great safety culture and severely limits those organizations without those elements and reduces their potential for improvement. I have seen several world-class organizations focus on these elements and achieve a safety step-change in their safety cultures. Moreover, those organizations also experience an improvement in production, quality, customer satisfaction and other key organizational excellence factors.

With so many different methods for gaining cultural improvement, how does the overburdened safety professional choose which strategy to begin to gain momentum and have a lasting impact? It is my opinion that we do not need any new safety “programs” or incentive schemes, we need to look at our current processes and improve the effectiveness of those. Thus, we need to first assess the effectiveness of our safety processes (e.g., near-miss reporting, incident analysis, inspections/observations, training) against the Step-Change elements (see Figure 1). I will give a brief overview of the Step-Change Elements and then talk about a specific case in which I used these elements to improve leadership engagement.

### 1. Culture (What we do as an organization)

Organizational culture (and/or climate) impacts the organization in numerous ways. It is the unwritten rules, or like many employees state: “way we’ve always done things around here”. Some aspect of culture can be thrown into change quickly especially with a new CEO or when an organization is acquired by another. However, even in those cases, merging the cultures is a hefty task. It is more common, however, for cultures to change over time based on well thought out plans and strategic culture change activities (see Kotter, 1996). Many organizations (and their employees) have long memories and a step-change in culture will not come by itself unless specifically planned for and a momentum is created and sustained. So, to change culture, we need to focus on other elements to help create the needed momentum.

### 2. Human Performance (Why we do what we do)

To move our safety culture from good to great, we need to move beyond simply looking at employees who got hurt, identifying what they did, and placing blame (for a safety application of Jim Collins work, see Scott Geller’s ISHN articles March-May 2005). No one tries to get hurt, so we need to understand the principles of Human Performance; why people do the things they do. By becoming experts in understanding individual behavior, we can better understand the elements that either made it acceptable for the employee to do the risky behavior (e.g., acceptable practice - See Geller, 1991; Geller, 1996) or understand the things in our processes that produce error-likely situation and facilitated risky behavior (e.g., production demands; see Rasmussen, 2003; Reason, 1990).

### 3. Engagement (Getting employees to own safety)

Employee engagement is not only meant for the hourly workers, but also for leadership. To truly see a change in the culture, we need employees to take a first-hand role in identifying risky behaviors/situations and help to develop strategies for improving those challenges. However, no matter how well intentioned and motivated the employees are, without leadership support, the

impact on the culture will be minimal. So, leadership engagement is also critical to achieving a step-change.

#### 4. Leadership (Inspiring people to be safety champions)

It has been said that managers have subordinates and true leaders have followers. Kotter (2001), for instance, believes that that supervision is a combination of management and leadership, but many organizations are over-managed and under-lead. As an effective safety champion, one needs to manage behaviors and lead their employees as safety champions themselves. Thus, another critical element in a step-change is getting the leadership team on-board and walk-the-talk. Many leaders say they support safety, but what does that mean? Some leaders are equally stumped at “what more they can do” to support safety? So, to create the momentum needed to move a culture from good to great, we need to provide the leadership team with specific “actionable” activities to demonstrate their level of commitment. The senior level executive then need to hold their direct reports accountable for those behaviors until they become internalized and part of their own “leadership culture.”

#### 5. Communication (Having the courage and consideration to communicate)

One thing in common among the all organizations is the need for better and more effective communication. As organizations go, productivity, sales, quality, and customer satisfaction are highly communicated because they have direct observable consequences. Safety, on the other hand, is more difficult to manage because we typically don’t measure “safety,” we measure “injuries.” Having injury is not an intentional behavior, so it is seen as very difficult to measure and communicate in a positive manner. When someone has an injury, organizations typically communicate that occurrence because the result will impact the company’s bottom-line directly. So to make a step-change, we need to communicate activities and metrics, that when accomplished, will result in a better, safer, and more productive work culture. This impacts not only how we communicate as an organization through official publications, but also how we communicate on a one-on-one basis (see Krisco, 1997).

#### 6. Leading Indicators (Helps you become a more effective and efficient safety leader)

The best organizations, athletes, scholars, and even politicians measure themselves to judge their progress. Without feedback, it is very difficult for any organization or person to improve. To be effective, we need to measure how we are doing. However, a “culture” is not measurable directly. So, we need to find “proxies” for culture change. A “Cultural Proxy” may be something as simple as employees’ perceptions, their willingness to participate in initiatives, or their willingness to share near-misses.

So, to truly achieve a step-change we need to identify leading metrics moving in a positive direction, communicate these metrics by the leadership engaging the employees. In turn, we can then motivate the employees to help identify why their coworkers are taking risks and then become engaged by helping to create solutions to preventing possible injuries and error-likely situations.

There are many different ways to create momentum in a culture change initiative. The first step is to identify your cultural weaknesses. However, cultures are virtually impossible to measure directly. So, we have to find “cultural proxies” to gain insight into our organizations. Once we have those cultural weaknesses identified, we create change initiatives addressing those aspects of our organizations. One well documented starting point of any large-scale change

initiative is to create a “sense of urgency” (see Kotter, 2008; Kotter & Cohen, 2002). The next sections will discuss defining cultural proxies and creating a sense of urgency.

## **Measuring Cultural Proxies**

### Culture Surveys and Interviews

A proxy can be defined as an authorized substitution. When we speak of cultural proxies, these refer to behaviors, compliance to rules, training activities, safety processes, VPs walking the shop floor, executives attending a team meetings and monthly safety communications. Thus, when accurately measured, these proxies can paint a picture of the culture. A commonly used cultural proxy is measuring organizational culture through surveys or group interviews. Organizations use these surveys to assess employee perception. However, perceptions often lag reality. In other words, your leadership team may truly be engaged, but peoples’ perceptions may be living in the past when leadership was not so engaged (or actively disengaged). These assessments can help pinpoint safety processes that are not functioning well and need to be addressed. For example, a lag in employee perception may indicate a lack of communication (another step-change element) that can be addressed and improved. In essence, these cultural proxies are leading indicators of a strong safety culture.

### Inspections and Observations

Another typical method of collecting cultural proxies is through the use of checklists to help track compliance and behaviors. Almost all organizations have an established form of an inspection process to track and trend compliance with rules/regulations and policies/procedures (see Factories Act of 1833; Raouf, & Dhillon, 1994; Weindling, 1985; Wilson, 1985). For the last two decades, companies have begun to add an observation process to focus on safety-related behaviors (Geller, 1996; Komaki, Barwick, & Scott, 1978; Krause, Hidley, & Hodson, 1996). Having an inspection and observation process can, by themselves, increase safety awareness and impact the organization’s safety culture (Guastello, 1993; Tuncel, Lotlikar, Salem, & Daraiseh, 2006), but additionally, they are efficient ways of collecting cultural proxies. By considering inspection and observation information as leading indicators, organizations can move beyond lagging indicators to measure the health of the organization’s safety systems.

## **Increasing Leadership Engagement: A Case Study**

What follows is one example of a large utility using the Safety Step-Change elements to create leadership engagement by focusing on cultural proxies. This example will illustrate how a large utility, that covered several states with over 6,000 at-risk employees, used these principles and tools to begin their cultural evolution starting with small wins and driving the culture change initiative with leadership engagement.

### Start with a Cultural Assessment

As was recommended previously, cultural assessments help uncover holes in your safety culture organization may not have been aware of. This utility uncovered a few areas for improvement including near-miss reporting, accident investigations and leadership engagement. The cultural assessment questions focused on the six step-change elements: Culture, Human Performance, Engagement, Leadership, Communication and Leading Indicators. Over 400 employees gave their perceptions on these elements and made several recommendations for improving their culture. One of the strongest findings was a perceived lack of leadership support. However, these employees’ perceptions lagged reality in that the leadership team engaged in many behaviors that

would contribute to a positive safety culture. The important point, however, is that the employees' perceptions ARE their reality out in the field.

### The Five-Year Journey

Following the assessments, the utility created a "Change Coalition" to help create a sense of urgency and drive the culture change initiatives. The team realized that cultures are not formed in a year nor will they be changed in a year. So, the Change Coalition created a five year road map for their Safety Step-Change outlining critical initiatives (see Figure 2). The critical initiatives focused on highly visible processes that could be addressed and enhanced in a relatively quick manner (creating "small wins"). The near-miss process was redesigned and rolled out in small town-hall meetings airing out the grievances that held back the previous process. This improved the reporting of near-misses from 40 for the whole year to 40 within the first month of the newly designed process. The accident investigation process was renamed the "Incident Analysis" and made use of behavioral (see Geller, 1996) and human error (Reason, 1990) tools to make the process more fact-finding rather than fault-finding. Finally, a two-day leadership workshop was designed around strengthening the six step-change elements. Over 1500 leadership team members attended the workshop from the president down to the supervisors.



**Figure 2. Five-Year Safety Step-Change Roadmap**

### Gaining Leadership Engagement

Following the workshops, the Change Coalition wanted to ensure the success of the new initiatives and make sure the leadership team members used the new "soft-skills" they acquired in the workshop. To do this, the team knew they needed to do two things: (1) get the leaders out in the field, and (2) get them to demonstrate their engagement (i.e., walk-the-talk). It had always been the policy to attend Crew Visits where a leadership team member (safety, manager, director, VP) attend a safety observation out in the field. However, this had not been enforced and thus not done very often. On average, there were 200 Crew Visits done per month. The team suggested to

the president that these be tracked and trended and become part of their bonus structure. The president realized the importance and agreed to make the completing Crew Visits a portion of their bonus. The Executive (including the president himself) had to conduct 3 Crew Visits per quarter, the Directors and Managers had to perform 6 per quarter and the Supervisors needed to complete 9 per quarter. Crew Visits went from 200 per month to 1300 per month. In addition to the Crew Visits, the Change Coalition wanted to give guidelines for engagement activities for the leadership team members to perform on a quarterly basis. From the below list, the Executives and Directors needed to pick four activities per quarter. The Managers and Supervisors needed to select 6 and 12 respectively:

- Attend safety meetings
- Participate in safety recognition events
- Active involvement in union safety team efforts
- Kick off safety leadership training events
- Kick off safety compliance training efforts
- Develop & implement safety action plan
- Lead a team in identifying key issues that need resolution
- Implement system induced solutions
- Create & implement proactive initiatives
- Conduct & complete area safety reviews

As a result of the leadership engagement, no significant loss was experienced in the first 18 months, a 42% reduction in injuries were realized in the first 6 months and a 540% increase in Leadership engagement created a culture change momentum that continues through to today.

#### Start Your Safety Step-Change Today

To begin on your own safety step-change journey, begin by assessing your safety culture and identifying those proxies (or leading indicators) that are of most relevance to your organization. Then, don't do anything until your leadership team is ready to really engage, and not just support, a safety culture change. Tie increased attendance and visibility in safety initiatives directly to performance goals and bonuses. Outline specific "leadership engagement behaviors" that will be measured to demonstrate commitment. Most importantly, shift the focus from compliance to positive fact-finding and recognition. Your initiative may start with just a few small steps, but securing leadership engagement at the beginning will sustain the success of your journey from good to great.

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