

Six Safety Leadership: Energizing & Sustaining Safety

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

Many companies introduce new tools, procedures, training that may elicit good results. But this doesn't always work out to the satisfaction of organizations. Many times safety leaders reflect frustration that their companies have either squandered resources in ill-advised interventions or that they have not realized the full potential benefits of actions taken and programs implemented. Or, as one corporate safety director said, "I can't help but feel we're leaving money on the table."

Currently, many organizations operate in a resource-tight environment. There is often an underlying sense of uncertainty for numerous companies and professionals, where the biggest thing they can count on is that resources are contracting—budgets slashed, time allowed cut, staff rified, and travel and other expenses reduced. Many report they are working harder just to keep performance above water, to barely hang on.

In this kind of milieu, strategic leadership is critical for maximizing gains from new interventions and being able to maintain positive forward safety momentum.

Of course, even after separating the wheat from the chaff, there are numerous leadership ideas and philosophies that might be of help in current conditions. But attempting to implement many approaches can be jarring, overwhelming or counterproductive. Some may even neutralize others out, further contributing to wasting time and resources, missing potentially here-today-gone-tomorrow opportunities, losing credibility—and possibly endangering career development.

However there are Six Safety Leadership strategies and methods for nurturing and maintaining positive energy towards safety objectives that are self-synchronized and may readily be implemented towards such gains as: turning around safety disinterest into safety advocacy; redirecting certain worker's "I'm an accident waiting to happen" mentality to one of surefootedness and self-control, and changing the norm from lackadaisical, leery or left out to confident, concentrated and committed.

These Six Safety Leadership strategies include: internal energizing, selecting path, projecting forward, maintaining liquidity, harnessing inertia, and conditioning for momentum.

This article will focus on methods for moving towards global-class leadership in safety performance and culture.

Identifying Six Intervention Shortcomings

In order to not continue perpetuating previous missteps, it's critical to identify shortcomings of interventions that have previously fizzled. Here is a non-exhaustive list that we've seen from our experience in working with numerous (predominantly Fortune 1000) companies worldwide, including but not limited to: 3M, Alaska Tanker Company, Alcoa, Alliant TechSystems, American Airlines, American Electric Power, American Water, Amtrak, Avon, BHP Billiton, Boeing, BMW, BP, Constellation Wine Company, DuPont, Dynegy, FMI, General Cable, Halliburton Energy Services, Harley-Davidson, Honda, Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, L'Oreal, Mead Westvaco, Michelin/BF Goodrich, Noble Drilling, Northwest Natural Gas, ONEOK, Panama Canal, Petro-Canada, Pfizer, Rock-Tenn, Sikorsky Aircraft, Southern Nuclear, Textron, United Airlines, U.S. Steel, URS Energy & Construction, Xerox and many others).

1. Doesn't garner right support in advance. Too often, for want of buy-in, an intervention is lost – or sabotaged. For implementations to make significant and sustaining improvements, it's critical to get buy-in in advance from critical organizational players. These usually include: Level A, B and C managers, staff managers and professionals (such as Contracting, Legal, Human Resources, Medical, etc.), bargaining unit leadership, the Safety Committee, and key contractors in some cases.

2. Logistics aren't sequenced. Too often, steps critical for implementation are missing – or aren't thought of until down the road, where project adoption has to back up to get needed support (e.g. getting a necessary signature to proceed – and the signer is out on vacation). It's critical to list critical buyoffs or other approvals that have to get made and work on these in advance. Again, this often occurs because the change agent/implementer doesn't do an adequate job of looking ahead to what has to occur to get an implementation off the ground, or to realize significant returns. Failing to do so is akin to a baker beginning the process of making dessert by following step-by-step cookbook instructions, only to realize, while in the midst of stirring the mixture over heat, that he had to fold in several eggs – none of which were prepared and ready to go. This can be a recipe for failure.

3. Unrealistic expectations. It's the role of the implementer to communicate and work through realistic expectations of improvement on the parts of all key players. Usually, most people involved in an improvement process have expectations of what will occur during the implementation, what changes will be visible, when they might realize improvements, and to what degree. It's critical for the professional to surface and manage these expectations. We've seen executives with what we considered unrealistic and unswayed expectations prematurely pull the plug on implementations that were going well because these senior managers expected faster or other kinds of returns than what was normally transpiring.

4. Doesn't make adjustments. Too many don't understand the Will Rogers assertion that "Planning gets you into things; hard work gets you out of them." These less-effective leaders may do an adequate job of planning but are "overly good" at "staying the course." That is, they don't read early results of an intervention, ignore initial indicators of receptivity among managers and workers, or don't adjust or adapt to changing situations. In other words, they don't look for or see what is really happening, instead staying with their pre-set plans.

5. Doesn't disturb inertia. Too often would-be leaders don't realize, when things are not going as well as possible, that the purpose of power is to change the future, not stay stuck in same-old ways. Rocking the boat is often necessary to alert others that continuing in an unsuccessful strategy – or one that previously may have worked but no longer does – is clearly continuing to head, rut-like, in the wrong direction.

6. Doesn't account for/reduce blockages to sustaining change. Kurt Lewin, in his work on Field Theory and Force Field Analysis, contended that lasting change is much more likely to occur when initiators identify and reduce blockages (he called these “restraining forces”) rather than trying harder by adding additional forces (which he named “driving forces”).

Six Safety Leadership Strategies to Energize and Sustain Safety Performance and Culture

1. Selecting a path. This refers to choosing objectives that are: executable, will make a significant difference in reducing blockages to higher performance (per Force Field Analysis, as above), align as many key organizational members as possible, may be relatively easily measured, and are associated with specific skills and actions that improve performance. It may come to a decision whether to introduce an intervention as “new and different from what we've done previously” or incorporating it into existing “program.” This choice would depend upon strategic assessment and a decision to “break the mold” or to “move at a slightly different angle.”

2. Projecting forward. This means setting expectations of timing, return on investment, simultaneous and multiple objectives and returns for “hitting three bullseyes with one arrow,” not merely focusing on “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” It requires planning and setting vision, getting buy-in, and creating shared milestones towards successful implementation.

3. Energizing internally. Organizational safety culture and performance has a history and future. According to the First Law of Motion, “A body at rest tends to remain at rest. A body in motion tends to remain in motion.” Such is also the case with safety.

Physically, momentum is defined as the product of mass and velocity. In other words, it's size and speed, as moving towards a given direction. I define momentum as “continuing movement along a path.”

How can a leader engender positive momentum? Through disturbing the inertia of either doing nothing or of continuing along a pathway that has been shown to, at least lately, elicit minimum positive results.

This necessitates working with a site, business unit or the company overall to spark the energy of motivation (which means “creating movement”) towards developing and progressing towards tangible cultural objectives. At the same time it entails making it more likely each organizational member is internally/personally motivated to work towards objectives that are consistent with the company's desired direction. This is often an issue of getting movement from stillness or, more often, deflecting/angling current momentum in a slightly different direction.

Energy input is required to break inertia. Remember that it's easier to redirect forces that are already in motion (e.g. workers who are suspicious, upset and angry about safety requirements – or distrustful of management) than it is to rev up workers or a business unit with a “cold start” (e.g., those who seem to have already given up, are hopeless, and just counting the moments until retirement).

It will be no surprise that each person – worker, supervisor, manager, executive - has individual wishes, plans, motivations. The keys to internal energizing are: a) getting the attention and interest of each organizational member through hoped-for results/benefits they value and b) aligning the attention, interest and actions of each towards common goals. The key to part (a) above is to make safety personal to them, offering personal benefits that go well beyond appealing to having something bad not happen (“do this so you don’t get hurt”) and towards seeing tangible, positive, new and better results from actions taken.

Energy is a critical component to change on any level – chemical, atomic, action change and organizational improvement. It’s key to understanding, generating and redirecting momentum toward a positive direction.

4. Harnessing inertia. In an atmosphere of significant resistance, this entails utilizing the strength of inertia—stability. Rather than fight resistance to change, channel it to working for safety. Many people resist change that is thrust upon them, over which they perceive having little or no control. They may dig in their heels to change. Here is where inertia may be harnessed. Plan and communicate changes in actions as temporary (“Would you be willing to try this new PPE for just 2 weeks to see if it makes a positive difference?”). Monitor use of and reactions to the equipment. After the specified trial period, get back to people promptly to see if they note a positive difference. Often, wearing the new PPE will become a short-term habit after this period. At this time, resistance to change works *towards* change.

Harnessing inertia may include setting habits, utilizing the “Melt-Move-Refreeze” approach to redirecting resistance. But it always refers to making resistance to change work for, not against, higher safety and organizational objectives.

5. Maintaining liquidity. During times of great flux, some financial experts counsel their clients to remain liquid. In other words, to maintain a significant portion of their assets in funds they can quickly and easily access without penalty. Similarly, to overcome a dysfunctional “stay the course” approach during times of uncertainty or great change, strategic leaders don’t overcommit resources. They investigate potentially new interventions, apply those selected in strategic pilots, perhaps try several different approaches in different arenas to see which one(s) might best work. In other words, they don’t go off on a limb, where, if a chosen intervention doesn’t achieve expected results, they can still easily recover and move in another direction.

Maintaining liquidity can also mean understanding and utilizing the principle, “Be water not rock; Be rock not water” – knowing when to stand firm vs. when to flow around objections and obstacles to change (that are only thrown up to subvert changing the status quo).

6. Conditioning for momentum. In other words, build up individual and organizational “muscles” for sustaining improvements, not holding at the same level. This mindset is based on creating and reinforcing an ethic of, as Bob Dylan wrote, “He’s Not Busy Being Born Is Busy Dying.” Don’t rest on your laurels – no matter how previously good safety performance may have seemed. It requires helping individuals and the organization elevate their auto pilot/default ways of acting. For individuals this might entail at-work and at-home skills for lifting, using PPE, etc. they don’t think about consciously (e.g. like locking in a seat/shoulder belt right after sitting in a vehicle). For companies, this means re-setting default messages when an injury occurs (e.g. showing concern, rather than criticizing/blaming the injured person).

High-level leadership strategies and skills can energize positive change and keep momentum for improvements alive and growing.

Bibliography

Books:

- Pater, R. *Leading From Within: Martial Arts Skills for Dynamic Business and Management*, 1999
- Pater, R. *How To Make High-Impact Safety Presentations*. 1988, American Society of Safety Engineers

Articles:

- Pater, R. "Leadership Made Easy." *Occupational Health & Safety*, May 2011
- Pater, R. "9 Cs for Communicating More Persuasively." *Occupational Health & Safety*. April 2011
- Pater, R. "Leadership: Dust and Rust and Trust." *Occupational Health & Safety*. March 2011
- Pater, R. "9 Critical Mindsets, Skillsets and Toolsets for Advanced Safety Leadership." *Professional Safety*. February 2011
- Pater, R. "Engaging Employee Energy." *Occupational Health & Safety*. February 2011
- Pater, R. "Advanced Safety Leadership Skills." *Professional Safety*. January 2011,
- Pater, R. "Enlist The Power of Setting Expectations." *Occupational Health & Safety*. January 2011
- Pater, R. "Anchoring Skills into Daily Actions." *Occupational Health & Safety*. December 2010
- Pater, R. "The Leader's Code." *Occupational Health & Safety*. October 2010
- Pater, R. "Keeping Safety Leadership Moving Forward." *Occupational Health & Safety*. September 2010
- Pater, R. "Scissoring Through Barriers." *Occupational Health & Safety*. August 2010
- Pater, R. "Leadership Through the Clouds." *Occupational Health & Safety*. July 2010
- Pater, R. "No Fear Safety Leadership." *Occupational Health & Safety*. June 2010
- Pater, R. "The Martial Art of Safety Leadership." *Occupational Health & Safety*. May 2010
- Pater, R. "Calming an Inflamed Organization." *Occupational Health & Safety*. April 2010
- Pater, R. "Preventing Leadership Cumulative Trauma Disorders." *Occupational Health & Safety*. March 2010
- Pater, R. "Leaders, Empty Your Cache." *Occupational Health & Safety*. February 2010
- Pater, R. "Fueling Cultural Change." *Occupational Health & Safety*. December 2009

- Pater, R. "Incenting, Not Incensing Workers." *Occupational Health & Safety*. November 2009
- Pater, R. "Leading with Receding Resources." *Occupational Health & Safety*. October 2009
- Pater, R. "Quantum Cultural Change" *Occupational Health & Safety*. September 2009
- Pater, R. "From the Top Down: Enhancing Safety Through Culture Change." *Maritime Executive*. July/August 2009
- Pater, R. "Strategically Piloting Safety Success." *Occupational Health & Safety*. August 2009
- Pater, R. "The Two Ultimate Culture Questions." *Occupational Health & Safety*. May 2009
- Pater, R. "Developing a Culture of Alertness." *Occupational Health & Safety*., February 2009
- Pater, R. "Stepping Up Your Safety Culture." *Occupational Health & Safety*. January 2009
- Pater, R. "Autopiloting Leadership and Safety." *Occupational Health & Safety*. December 2008
- Pater, R. "Advancing Ergonomic Culture." *Occupational Health & Safety*. October 2008
- Pater, R. "Developing Next-Level Leadership Power." *Occupational Health & Safety*. September 2008
- Pater, R. "Step Change from the Bottom Up." *Occupational Health & Safety*. August 2008
- Pater, R. "Starting Up Safety." *Occupational Health & Safety*. July 2008,
- Pater, R. "Next Level Safety Cultures." *Occupational Health & Safety*. May 2008
- Pater, R. "Inspiring Safety Culture." *The Compass, newsletter of the Management Practice Specialty of ASSE*. Winter, 2008
- Pater, R. "The Essence of Leadership: Seven Keys." *Occupational Health & Safety*. December 2007
- Pater, R. "Ergonomic Leadership for Higher Level Performance." *The Monitor, newsletter of the Industrial Hygiene Practice Specialty of ASSE*. Winter 2007
- Pater, R. "Elevating Ergonomic Leadership." *Occupational Health & Safety*. September 2007
- Pater, R. "Leadership in Ergonomics." *Workplace Ergonomic News*. August 2007
- Pater, R. "Beyond Workplace Safety." *Occupational Health & Safety*. August 2007
- Pater, R. "Key Ingredients for Changing Behavior." *Occupational Health & Safety*. June 2007
- Pater, R. "7 Critical Leadership Questions." *Occupational Health & Safety*. May 2007

- Pater, R. "Mobilizing Safety Leadership and Performance." *Occupational Health & Safety*. March 2000
- Pater, R. "Energizing Safety: Launching Performance and Culture." *Occupational Health & Safety*. January 2007
- Pater, R. "Next-Level Leadership." *EHS Today*. December 2006
- Pater, R. "Ergonomic Leadership: 13 Strategies for Energizing Higher Level Performance." *The Compass: newsletter of Management Practice Specialty of American Society of Safety Engineers*. Fall-Winter 2006
- Pater, R. "Inspiring Behavioral Change." *EHS Today*. June 2006
- Pater, R. "Becoming a Courageous Leader." *EHS Today*. May 2006
- Pater, R. "Leveraging Executive Safety Leadership." *The Compass: newsletter of ASSE's Management Practice Specialty*. Spring 2006
- Pater, R. "Becoming a Master Safety Strategist." *Occupational Hazards*. November 2005
- Pater, R. "Changing Perceptions Toward Safety Change." *Occupational Hazards*. October 2005
- Pater, R. "Overcoming Executive Resistance to Active Safety Leadership." *Occupational Hazards*. August 2005
- Pater, R. "Activating Executive Safety Leadership." *Occupational Hazards*. March 2005
- Pater, R. "The Safety Catalyst: Making Safety Change Happen." *Occupational Hazards*. January 2005
- Pater, R. "High Level Safety Persuasion: Influencing Up, Down and Sideways." *Occupational Health & Safety*. January 2005
- Pater, R. "Moving From 'Stressed Out' to In Control." *Plaintalk: DuPont Employee Newsletter*. October 2001
- Pater, R. "Attention Control for Safety and Productivity." *Professional Safety*. January 2001
- Pater, R. "Secrets of Involvement II." *Occupational Health & Safety*. January 2001
- Pater, R. "Secrets of Involvement I." *Occupational Health & Safety*. December 2000
- Pater, R. "The Power of Paying Attention." *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*. October 2000