

Elements of Leadership and the Safety Professional

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Introduction

Nothing is more common in organizational language today than the word leadership. The word is posted on banners, used in vision and mission statements, found in senior leader communications and woven into just about every employee performance review. It is a fair bet to say that the word may be one of the most used words in our organizational language without a clear path established toward attaining it. It would seem that for many organizations, there is the belief that if we talk about it with regularity, organic change will occur and a dynamic leader will emerge.

In an article published in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled “Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?” the author explores the difference between “leadership” and “management.” “It takes neither genius nor heroism to be a manager,” he wrote, “but rather persistence, tough-mindedness, hard work, intelligence, analytical ability and perhaps most important, tolerance and goodwill.” Granted, one would be hard pressed to deny that these are not admirable qualities, but it is doubtful that these qualities would ever deliver sustainable safety performance in a complex and dynamic organization.

Over the past 20 years of my career, I have spent countless hours dedicated to leading local and corporate level organizations improve their safety process and performance. In the course of that work, I have discovered that organizations best optimize their efforts when they provide strong well balanced leadership. Strong and well balanced meaning that it does not lie strictly on a regulatory focus, but considers employee capability and capacity, their behaviors, the environment in which they work and supportive system tools. More importantly, the role of the safety and health professional as well as his or her ability to extend leadership out into the organization is pivotal in driving positive and sustainable compliance, handling crisis, developing strategy, influencing management and changing culture. The dividing line between managing these things and leading them is literally measured in our ability to infect others with a sense of urgency. Frankly, the difference in leading as a safety professional is less about our own needs to reach a level of position power, and more about the needs of people and the organizations we are leading.

Delving into the elements of leadership, there are numerous books filled with attributes a leader should possess. A quick Google search revealed a myriad of titles on the subject ranging from the “Seven Attributes of Leadership,” to the “Twenty One Indispensable Qualities of a

Leader” and ending somewhere greater than where I completed my search with, “Forty Three Critical Leadership Tips.” There is a preponderance of evidence supported by an abundance of bestselling self help books to imply that the ability to lead is a missing quality in much of society as we know it. I would venture a guess that it is missing in many of our work organizations and threatens safety success.

So how many attributes do a leader need to have to be successful? A fair assumption is that a successful leader will have many attributes in varying degrees of understanding and execution. More often than not, leadership is developed over time and in many cases, it is due to the complexity of the circumstance at hand. We have all heard that “leaders are not born, they are made.” That is not to say we are to wait until a crisis to learn a particular leadership skill, but to be prudent in mapping out expected encounters and developing from there. What was mentioned earlier, and as we view the work of a safety professional, there is a high calling to lead the safety management process forward. Since safety touches almost every functional business area in an organization, it provides a great template for how other functional areas will launch their own plans for success. This should give us pause to at least ponder the attributes we need as safety professionals to improve ourselves and our organizations.

Looking at the role of a safety professional, I believe there are five key attributes that every safety professional needs to possess to have sustainable success in their organization and career.

Five Attributes of Safety Leadership

Visionary Leadership

What is a visionary leader? First, it’s important to understand that there is a difference between a visionary, a vision and a visionary leader. A visionary is someone that sees the future and can articulate it with great inspiration. A vision is taking what one sees and using those ideas, crafts a message into simple language that gives direction. A visionary leader on the other hand is a combination of all three. It is easy to understand the role of a visionary and a vision, but to be successful the visionary leader brings vision to fruition with specific strategies, achievable goals, and actions that extend far into the organization through wide participation. Several years ago, I wrote and published an article on setting organizational safety vision. The article was a result of what I had personally experienced throughout my career in working with other safety professionals in writing and adopting credible safety visions. The results from most of these sessions were marred with lackluster energy and void of true visionary leadership. Frankly, regardless of the title or position of the people I was working with, I found myself on many occasions, working in the midst of people with positional leadership, but acting more like managers.

Maybe the best way to describe it is that for the safety professional, success is best experienced as a visionary leader when we can move organizational energy to a higher level by setting a clear vision of what is actually possible, and then transmitting that energy to the people that work in our organizations to deliver it.

Supportive Leadership

On many occasions, we discuss supportive safety leadership within a situational model. The model focuses on the idea that when there are differing levels of organizational competency and

capacity, some people will have a level of unwillingness to connect with the process thus requiring our reaction. The ability of a leader to pull them back is absolutely critical to success. Earlier in my career when I was a facility level safety leader, I noticed that my facility could usually meet safety performance expectations year-on-year, but always seemed to fall short of having step change improvement that would take us from good to great. My conclusion was that while I had a majority of the employee population involved and participating, there was a small minority of those that remained outside of active safety engagement. These I called outliers. Author Malcolm Gladwell defined an outlier as “one that appears to deviate markedly from other members of the sample in which it occurs.” Applying this thinking, there’s a great probability that many of us have outliers residing in our organizations in two distinct groups, both positive and negative. A positive outlier is an employee that produces and goes above the expectations of what is required. The best way to sustain a positive outlier is to simply recognize and appreciate them. A negative outlier on the other hand, is an organizational challenge. They are usually the small group of employees that work to disrupt collaboration and pay little attention to the organizations values, its vision, or its goals for success. The danger of allowing such negative outliers to reside in the work system is that it fosters acceptance within the organization and over time, it will grow as much as the organization enables it. In my case as the facility safety leader, I took initiative quickly to leverage involvement from everyone. I established a safety management process that required every employee to own part of the safety process. Every employee had a safety project that they were responsible for managing, every employee had a safety skill champion area they were required to develop, and every employee was required to have a good level of safety management understanding before they could ever be considered for promotion. Performance bonuses were even tied to high value leading initiatives. Simply, the negative outliers were going to be involved in an organizational safety culture that lived its values.

Affiliative Leadership

A close association with supportive leadership is affiliative leadership. It is the ability of the safety professional to bring together groups of people when team building is important. While I do not think this style can be used alone, there is plenty of evidence to support that our ability to leverage collaboration and teamwork is a pivotal leadership attribute to a well balanced and sustainable safety process.

Reviewing Figure 1, the DuPont Bradley curve may be a good way to show the affect of this type of leadership. The stages of the journey include a reactive stage that is self explanatory, a dependent stage where employees are told how to act and how to work. This is commonly thought of as a culture of employee dependence on the employer for safe work. Next, the dependent culture can become an independent one with some work. In this part of the curve, employees take a lot of the initiative and focus on their own safety, sometimes to the exclusion of leadership and fellow workers. There is a tendency for many in management to allow the organization to reside in this part of the curve simply from an idea that it feels okay and with time, becomes less work. The ideal workplace safety culture is one of interdependence; where employees and leaders work together to both implement and promote a values based belief system that is built on the premise that ‘no-one gets hurt’ and that ‘injuries and incidents can be prevented’. When an interdependent culture is created, employees view safety as a critical part of their role, not an adjunct to it, and they see themselves as the driving force behind the safety process. They adopt safe work systems because they want to, not because they have to, or because they are told to. Simply put, a critical skill for the safety professional is his or her ability to bring people together. We win or we lose, but we will do it together.

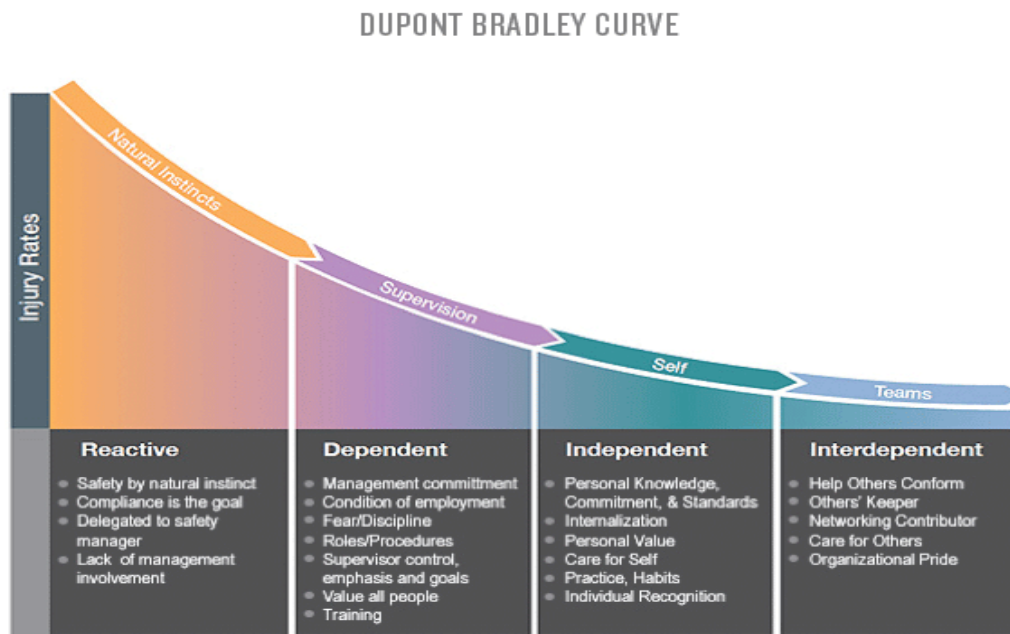


Figure 1. DuPont Bradley Curve

Command Leadership

Without a doubt, our need as leaders to set an actionable vision, pull people into the safety process and leverage collaboration is critical to safety success. But there is also a need to command on occasion. Command style leadership comes from an old military leadership model and assumes that people need to be told what to do, and if you don't tell them exactly how to do it, you'll be disappointed in the results. Over the years, this style of leading has fallen further and further out of favor until, as most of us know, crisis hits the organization. A large chemical spill, a fire, a serious injury or some other impending crisis and the safety professional is suddenly thrust to command regardless of the incident management structure. With that said, I believe there is also reason to practice this leadership attribute outside of crisis. In my own career, and I would venture a guess in many of yours, we've spent many hours owning our safety process and its strategies in front of senior leaders responsible for making correct decisions. If you are like me, simply giving away the organizations safety process was never an option because of my knowledge, skill and experience. Though more subtle than the military view of command and control, owning and effectively communicating with confidence an effective safety management plan is paramount to long term success. For example, many of us as parents start out being in command and then as our children grow, we use different leadership attributes to strengthen them. As our children grow to teenagers, we provide more freedom but at times jump in to command a situation. As your children mature toward adulthood, most likely a command style of leadership is not required.

There has been much written that suggests that command leadership is outdated and should be permanently shelved as an attribute of leadership. I am not sure that the safety professional can easily do that and be successful. As mentioned above, there are occasions that require command and then after, our ability to step back, appraise the facts and give direction toward the solution. It is critically paramount for mitigating risk or stopping impending loss. The safety professional must be self aware enough to provide the organization what it needs at any given point time. Once the crisis has been resolved, we can then use another approach to bring people together to analyze the root cause of the crisis and develop actions.

Competent Leadership

Competence alone cannot make a leader, but it can undo one. Over the past several years we have experienced one of the greatest periods of economic downturns in our history. The mortgage crisis, poor banking and inappropriate investment practices have elevated a picture showing a sure lack of competent leadership at the top of many organizations. How could such events happen to so many admired companies? The difference may lie in what society perceives as the characteristics of leadership. Looking back in our history, we find most of our recognized leaders within the framework of a military model; a person who took command and control because of their recognized competence and what they did to get the job accomplished. An example of this is that of 44 United States Presidents, 31 were active in the military, 29 had leadership responsibility over other soldiers and 12 of those reached the rank of General. While this alone cannot define a great President, it does raise the awareness that during the past 60 years, we have moved away from that model and have been prone to vote for leadership that exhibits strong likeability versus pure competency. In the business world, Bernie Madoff provides a great example of how charisma and social skills have little to do with competency. The New York Times reported that his social and professional lives were “practically inseparable.” For years, the SEC and other accounting professionals raised red flags indicating huge problems with his investments, but the cries went unabated simply because he had a great ability to build trust in his intricate social network. He was very likable.

On the other side of this coin, being competent doesn't mean that a leader knows how to do everything, but rather knows what to do and how to get it done. A competent leader will know where their strengths and weaknesses lie and will then drive forward to fill the gaps. Socrates said that the “one who clearly knows best what ought to be done will most easily gain the obedience of others.” In view of how I think of a safety professional, I can't agree more. Throughout my career, I've had the opportunity to work for many people I could fit into both categories. I've had bosses that were thrust into safety leadership because the role was a growth opportunity toward their next step to reach a higher organizational role. Usually, these leaders produced lackluster results. While most possessed many good leadership attributes, they lacked safety process expertise and it showed. Likewise, I've had the chance to work for a few people that were highly competent, but exercised few leadership attributes required for such a position. In this scenario, we had developed great safety strategies and plans, but suffered getting them executed across the organization.

Summary

Throughout my career and on numerous occasions, I've been asked, “How many staff people does it take to lead safety?” My answer is always the same; “it is exactly the number of people

that show up for work every day.” It’s the management team, the production colleagues, the maintenance department, and every other person that impacts the organizations safety process.

Business organizations are starving for effective and genuine leadership. Regardless to the organizational position of the safety professional, we are all leaders or at least should be. For some, the safety professional has position power with great authority because of his or her knowledge and experience on the job. However, regardless to *where* we are in position or responsibility, we have a tremendous opportunity to influence the organization through effective safety leadership.

As I have mentioned, there are so many attributes of safety leadership that should be considered purely from the understanding that every organization is different and has specific needs. But after many years of working as a safety and health practitioner, I cannot imagine not having these five attributes in my wheelhouse. For the safety professional, it is not merely the *doing* that defines our worth, but it is that combined with thinking, aligning, developing, and inspiring. It is leadership in action. Call it self-esteem or boastful thinking, but I’ve never considered myself less than a leader hired to move the safety and health process forward.

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