

## **Relational Leadership in an Electronic Age**

**Julius E. Rhodes, M.S.I.R., SPHR  
Founder and Principal  
mpr group  
Chicago, Illinois**

As individuals involved in the safety profession it is imperative that we possess the requisite skills needed to execute in the functional areas of your responsibility. Given the lack of direct responsibility over many of the other individuals that you interact with, you also need to exercise leadership that allows you to transcend line and staff relationships while also addressing the geographical distance that sometimes separates you from your client base. As a result your ability to use technology to address myriad concerns also becomes an important part of your job. This new dynamic is substantially different than what many of us are used to encountering. However, as with any change we always have a choice. We can either manage change or we can allow change to manage us.

Given all the foregoing issues, with which we are faced, I would like to suggest that our first concern should be to understand the essential leadership characteristics that we need to display so that our roles are viewed less ambiguously by others with whom we need to interact. One of the crucial areas that I believe many people often neglect in the execution of their leadership role is the realization that they need to equally balance process and people. Second and this may seem like a cliché but leaders need to consistently display high integrity behaviors. If you look around almost any area today, whether it is in the newspapers, on television or just about anywhere else it is not hard to find what amounts to a near epidemic of ethical lapses. Therefore, if we are to be successful in our role knowing the absolute critical nature of what we do, then there is no room for ethical lapses. A third area of leadership that I would like to offer is that we must have a desire to be in charge of our areas and speak for ourselves versus allowing others to speak for us.

Now the areas I have just enumerated are certainly not exhaustive and they are also not presented as a final list of relational leadership attributes that are needed by those of us in the safety profession. However, they are offered as a start on a long journey that each of us must be willing to take so that our profession receives the recognition it deserves for the contribution we make to our environments. There is however an umbrella under which all of these characteristics fall that is absent will not allow us to become effective leaders. That umbrella area that we must all become more proficient in is communications.

## Communication

There is an old adage in sales that states, 'you don't want to oversell your point'. Put another way, sales people are often taught to make your pitch in the most persuasive way you can and then allow the recipient of your intended message the time to make up their mind. In the situation I have just described, the contact is usually face to face and it probably represent one of the few times in communication where, 'less is more'. This however, is not the norm when it comes to communications especially when you are dealing with the benefits (accessibility) and detriments (misunderstandings) that take place when communicating electronically. Even the most well crafted communication can come across lifeless and flat if the person(s) you are communicating with do not have knowledge of you as an individual.

While communication can take place in a number of ways in this electronic era, the reality is that we cannot build our initial credibility electronically. If we are to establish relational leadership then the relationship must first be initiated based upon communicating with each other on a face to face basis because that is where the best communication takes place. We have to find ways to get in front of the people we may have to interact with at some point in the future because that is where they and we as well will make our initial assessments of them. In that regard our choice of words, tone and body language will all play a significant role in how we are viewed.

If we are unable to get in front of the people with whom we have to interact then we must utilize technology as an extension of ourselves and what we want to show others. I have found many situations where people use technology as an excuse to avoid the very people they need to work with in order to get the task accomplished. This is accomplished by sending emails or leaving phone mail messages when you know or are relatively certain that the person you are reaching out to will not be around during the time of transmittal. People who resort to these types of tactics are quickly discovered and their ability to develop fruitful relationships is undermined. When communicating in the electronic age and attempting to build relationships the caveat should be, 'share early and often' and 'don't wait for someone to ask for your input'.

Whether in person or through technology, it is essential that our word selection, tone and body language provide us with the opportunity to remain cognizant that every potential expression in these areas carries a meaning to the person with whom we are communicating. This implied meaning is magnified in a negative sense if you are using technology to communicate and there is or has not been a real basis for forming the relationship. Our language should always be assertive, that is clear and concise and utilizing actionable terms and it should never be aggressive (negatively charged and accusatory). Also, we need to make sure that we provide opportunities for our audience to get to know us as a person as we try to get to know them as well. When interacting face to face you should ask yourself, 'if I were on the other side of this communications exchange would I want to behave in a manner consistent with the communication I am receiving or would I want to simply walk away?' There must be harmony between the words you use, the tone and your body language so that the 'music' of your communication will make the other person want to dance. In the electronic age where technology creates almost instant access, these familiar traits are not available to us so we must substitute communicating on a timely basis, with full disclosure and in a manner consistent with the needs of others.

This begs the question, how do you know what other people need? The short answer is you ask questions but a more expansive response is you have to understand your style of communicating and how you like to receive information and the same information for the intended recipient of your message. Once you know this information you can then adapt your style to show the flexibility needed to make people fully aware that you are extending yourself to meet their needs and more times than not when this happens they will do the same for you.

As a way of supporting your efforts in this area here are a few reminders that if utilized appropriately will allow you to improve your oral communication skills.

- Have a communication plan and be concise in your statements

To the extent that you understand how you want to craft your message because you have thought about it before hand you give yourself the best opportunity develop communications that are clear, concise and not susceptible to any other interpretation.

- Be cognizant of the other person's time

Time is a very precious commodity and it is a finite quality. If people begin to see your communications as verbose they will avoid them and then your job of reaching them becomes twice as hard.

- Refer to people and relationships

The more you know about and include specific references to people and your association with them (not the same as name dropping) the more others can see that you are reaching out and sharing your knowledge with others. Equally important is the fact that people will see that you actively seek out others as a way of building your knowledge base and they will appreciate your efforts and reciprocate in kind.

- Use repetition to 'cement' your message

Great speech writers use three themes, which are: tell people what you are going to say, say it, then say it again. This repetition allows people to clearly identify your message while developing a healthy respect for your ability to provide communications that are well sequenced and easy to follow.

- Use conversational language and refrain from using industry jargon

As it relates to electronic communications, if a person does not know what you are talking about then you cannot come across as smart. As a result it behooves all of us to use language that makes others feel comfortable with us and this is especially true when communicating electronically and/or where distance is included.

- 'How' you say what you say is just as important as 'what' you say

The greatest need any individual has is to be respected and keeping this in mind will go a long way in establishing relational leadership.

- Believe in what you are saying and do so with sincere passion

Never let your tongue speak a word that your heart does not believe.

- Develop an understanding of the total business

Ask for and make yourself available to meet with people who can help share their knowledge of the business with you.

- Actively listen to what others are saying

As it relates to active listening, I have found that few people practice or even understand what is meant by this term. While many of us have taken classes in public speaking and writing the sad reality is that many people have never had a class in listening skills. Active listening involves the following four steps.

- Discipline – provide the person with your full attention, free of mental ‘clutter’
- Realize that your attitude impacts your ability to listen – make sure your attitude allows for the best chance to receive the message that is being transmitted
- Make the necessary adjustments so that you can fully take in what is being communicated to you – life is all about adjustments
- Acknowledge the other person and provide opportunities to share with them what you have heard

## **Process and People**

When it comes to interacting with others the greatest need any individual has is to be recognized. By recognizing people appropriately we take a good deal of emotion out of the equation. It does not matter what a person does or what your level of involvement is with them. To the extent that you can recognize the role they play in helping to make the enterprise successful, you go a long way in developing an authentic relationship that will allow them to provide you with their commitment versus mere compliance. While compliance will keep you at the water level, you always want to be above the water level and the best leaders are always significantly above the water level.

Once people understand that you will recognize them for their good works they will also become your advocate in sharing your message(s) and who you are with others. This will allow you to have a leg up as you cultivate relationships because the ground will already have been turned and the seeds planted prior to your arrival. All that will be needed is for you to provide your unique touches that will come across as the water and the sun in order for the relationship to take bloom. No matter how good you are as an individual, all of us need people who understand us and our causes to advocate for us.

This is especially true when what we are suggesting is a change in the way or manner in which people have become accustomed to doing things. As safety professionals or those involved with the safety field, we should always endeavor to find ways to enhance our contribution to the organization and not be satisfied with retaining the status quo. Imagine the impact you could have on your operation(s) if people believed they would be honestly recognized for what they contribute to the environment?

If we are to be effective in our roles then there are three areas that have to underscore our relationships with others. First, we have to build our relationships based upon trust. If there is no trust, there is no basis for the relationship and sooner or later that will result in catastrophic failure. Second, all of us need to understand the impact we have on others as well as how our actions impact how people perceive us. Finally, we must be willing to take ownership of the things we have control over such that people see consistency between what we say and what we do, as well as, what we ask of them.

This last point in many ways serves as a bridge to help us connect with people through our ability to give and receive feedback. Feedback is essential in any relationship and it represents the life blood of the exchange. Often when people either give or receive feedback they get away from the purpose and concentrate on the person or the personalities involved. As a way of combating this deleterious effect we need to remain calm in the process by disengaging. This does not mean you are dispassionate but it simply realizes that there is no contradiction in being empathetic but also delivering a straight-forward, honest and sometimes tough message.

## **Speaking for Ourselves**

Another area that is sure to help in displaying leadership and building relationships is the ability to ask questions and to disclose information about ourselves so that people do not view the exchange as one-sided. Asking a question(s) requires that you are organized in your own thinking but also that we are investing in listening to what the other person has to say.

By disclosing information we allow ourselves to be vulnerable or more appropriately human and it encourages others to do the same. Finally, as it relates to giving and receiving feedback the issues cannot become personal. While there is no denying that people are emotional, we cannot let those emotions dictate how we will perform our job or with whom we will perform our job.

Ultimately what we are attempting to do is influence people in a manner that will allow us to come together for the good of our stakeholders. When engaging in influencing behaviors it is essential to understand the influence outcome that we desire. There are three influence outcomes, which are: resistance, compliance and commitment. Resistance occurs when the influence attempt is vague or broadly defined and the person finds it difficult to identify the requested action item. Compliance is okay but it also carries with it the threat of punishment and it does not present us with the best opportunity to maximize our potential. Commitment is where all parties should strive to be so that they are actively working towards the highest level of achievement.

When you have commitment as a result of your influence outcome it is more likely that you can then expand your sphere of influence such that others are willing to engage in collaborative efforts to make for a more dynamic and unified environment. In this regard, when influence and

collaboration combine, the result is a win-win-win situation in that your needs, the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization are met.

While collaboration is desirable, it is not a panacea. However, since safety is the most important job that any of us have, collaboration should be used under the following situations:

- To find solutions where concerns are too important for compromise
- When long-term relationships are important
- To gain commitment by consensus building
- When others are willing to take a collaborative approach

This last point is absolutely critical because no matter how well crafted your attempts are at displaying leadership attributes, if a person is not willing to work with you due to indifference then the relationship is again one-sided.

In the final analysis if we are to promote authentic relationships that will provide us with the best opportunity of reaching and exceeding our goals we must be willing to accept the fact that in order to provide the conditions for others to change then we must be willing to change ourselves. This means, among other things, learning about others through direct contact and allowing ourselves to get to know people on a deeper level.

When we are talking about relational leadership in our electronic age there has to be a greater emphasis on the fundamental communication skills we all have and they must be applied consistently, often and they must show care and concern for others so that we mitigate the geographical distance, lack of formal reporting relationships and technological interference that can occur.