Safety Leadership

Managing the paradox

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo

"TWO YEARS AGO, one of our employees was seriously injured. Management commitment to safety soared and we got many hazards mitigated that we've been trying to get to for years. Around that time, we did a perception survey of our safety culture and our management scores were up in the 80 to 90 positive percentiles. Our survey consultant told us our biggest challenge was going to be keeping those high perceptions. Sadly, she was right. Today, we're down in the 50- to 60-percent range and people are saying that we only care about safety when an accident happens."

This scenario is too often true. Unfortunately, management and employee willingness to participate in the extra safety awareness efforts immediately following a serious incident gradually fades. The pressing concerns of production or financial viability take precedence, and it is a challenge to maintain preventive efforts in an atmosphere where concern gradually wanes until the next injury. Most managers agree that this form of reactive management in response to unpredictable events is not desirable and produces a work environment where firefighting gets the attention at the expense of long-range objectives. They spend a lot of money trying to fix this problem, but it cannot be fixed because it is not a problem. It is a paradox or polarity—neither of which can be resolved—only managed.

Paradox, Sometimes Called Polarity

Paradoxes or polarities are sets of opposites that appear to be in conflict, but are both needed for success. Examples abound in safety—"cost effectiveness" versus "preventive maintenance," "planning" versus "getting the work done." One cannot focus exclusively on one and neglect the other without negative consequences.

Polarities in an organization can be identified by the strong opposing points of view they trigger where both sides are sure they are right. An either/or solution will not work because there are disadvantages to focusing on a solution that only reflects one side of the polarity. An example of this dilemma occurred in a chemical plant where a unit was down because of fire damage. Since it was essential to return the unit to operation as quickly as possible, plant management decided to cancel a meeting to address pressing safety concerns so that all involved could focus on repairs. The safety manager argued that the meeting should be held because many of the risks to be addressed would be even more prevalent during the intense months of overtime that were to follow. Despite this, the plant manager canceled the meeting because he felt everyone was already working many hours of overtime and he could not ask more of his people.

Who was right? Who was wrong? Is there one judgment when no accidents happen, and another if accidents do happen? This polarity of task versus safety creates the perception of a moral and ethical conflict that leaders often face. How they address this dilemma influences the opinions people hold of them [Barling, et al(b) 304]. A leader who communicates ethical responsibility is viewed as inspiring, motivating and caring; a leader who does not is viewed less favorably [Barling, et al(b) 306]. The ability to understand and explain polarities increases a leader's effectiveness in addressing the underlying ethical and moral dilemmas that so often cause conflict between business and safety priorities. This has significant implications for the perception of management commitment to safety.

Peter Koestenbaum, who first published his principles of polarity as applied to psychotherapy in 1978(b), and applied them to business in 1991(a), notes that it would be easy if management were faced solely with choices between wrong and right. However, when faced with right and right, the choice becomes more difficult. Failure to be aware of and manage the unintended negative consequences of decisions leads to setbacks such as lack of support for future safety efforts, loss of

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momentum, poor implementation, broken commitments and cynicism.

Koestenbaum asserts that preventing or reversing these setbacks requires that leaders develop the ability to live with and manage the ambiguity and conflicts of polarity. Then, they must develop this competency in their direct reports [Koestenbaum(a); (b)]. Barry Johnson describes it as moving from "either/or thinking" to "both/and thinking" (Johnson). Embracing this philosophy requires a willingness to adapt to change and accept personal responsibility. This is not an easy message for leaders to deliver when people demand consistency or clear-cut answers.

The insight provided by Koestenbaum and Johnson are useful in overcoming one of the strongest barriers to buy-in for safety efforts—perceived lack of management commitment. Several studies have asserted that employee perception of management commitment correlates strongly to safety performance [Zohar; Barling, et al(a); Parker, et al]. Companies make great efforts to communicate their dedication; yet, in the author's experience working with safety culture, in many instances, managers feel they are committed to safety, while employees believe that management is more committed to production.

It is proposed that the true source of failed implementation and results is not lack of management commitment, but mismanaged polarities, misunderstanding the phenomenon of polarity itself, and the inability to speak intelligently about the ethical dilemmas underlying these polarities. Polarities such as safety versus production or quality versus cost arise each day, from all directions. Addressing them starts with being aware of polarity, and acquiring the skills to discuss and balance these situations so that an organization can enjoy safety and productivity, quality and cost-effectiveness.

Examples of Well-Managed & Mismanaged Polarities

When not handled in a constructive manner, paradoxes can defeat safety efforts at the first misstep. Conversely, when managers are prepared to manage polarities, a misstep can become an opportunity to build credibility and trust. Case history 1 presents a worst-case scenario where a safety initiative was abandoned because people perceived a polarity as a threat and reacted with mistrust and self-protective actions. Holders of opposing viewpoints took unbending stances and both sides with-

drew to defend their positions. Case history 2 is an example of how recognizing and managing a polarity can strengthen commitment to a safety program and the company.

Case History 1

The president of a manufacturing division launched a safety initiative to develop a joint union-management safety team. The union had agreed on the condition that the company be forthcoming about any plans to downsize or outsource work. Soon after, the union learned about plans to delay the purchase of new equipment for one site. Union leaders assumed this meant the company planned to send the work outside the country. Management denied this was the case, but admitted that it had erred in not informing the union about the purchase delay. Union leaders withdrew from the joint safety team saying they could not trust management.

When the union president was reminded that the joint safety leadership team was concerned with saving lives and preventing injury, he replied, "We've been betrayed too many times to trust again."

The senior executive in charge of the effort was so angry that he canceled the entire initiative. Emotionally unprepared, this executive was too frustrated to participate in a discussion with the union and confront the perceived "profit versus safety" polarity. Consequently, mistrust increased, labor relations suffered and serious injuries continued to occur.

A common polarity was at work in this situation—stability versus change. People want job security (stability) but the external environment demands that organizations constantly change and adapt to remain competitive. Corporations typically downsize to reduce costs and save jobs. The workforce perceives this as putting profit before people. So, when management says, "We care about you, work safely," the reaction is cynicism.

In such an environment, one must be aware of the perceived polarities and develop strategies to deal with the emotionality of events such as reversing a decision to buy new equipment. Overt communication when plans have changed and involving people in identifying potential solutions are effective strategies in such situations.

Case History 2

As part of a major safety effort, a chemical division held large group meetings at each plant for employees to design safety improvement action plans. It was agreed to implement a program that would encourage near-hit reporting without fear of punishment.

Contrary to this agreement, when an employee reported not using lockout/tagout (LOTO) as a near-hit, the plant manager decided to place a reprimand in the employee's personnel file because he felt the violation was too serious to go unpunished. The employee's union representative filed a grievance and the dispute grew until the union threatened to withdraw from negotiations.

The plant manager was conflicted. If he withdrew the discipline note, was he sacrificing accountability for the sake of promoting open communication? After some reflection, he realized he was facing the polarity of trust versus control. He feared that if he did not discipline this person, people would not believe he was serious about following safety procedure. Yet, punishing this person would destroy his credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of employees. He decided to trust that the employee had reported the near-hit to help improve safety and that building on this trust would benefit the safety program more than the discipline ever could.

The plant manager met with his staff and union leaders and explained how his mistrust had caused him to overreact (over control) and he apologized for having broken his original commitment. The union returned to negotiations, which went more smoothly than they had in years. Everyone agreed the issue of enforcing LOTO procedures still needed to be resolved, so a joint task force developed a plan to raise awareness through peer group observation.

The managers in these two examples were correct in their points of view. Cost-effectiveness is essential to success in today's market and accountability is key to a successful safety effort. Convinced of their rightness, each acted with conviction.

However, in the first case, the manager did not have the understanding or the tools to manage a volatile situation. The second manager understood the polarity, which allowed him to see how his desire for control and discipline could lead to unintended negative consequences.

As these examples illustrate, a manager cannot gain support from a group or bring a vision to fruition through force. The way people communicate about inherent dilemmas is a key factor in the ability to engender trust and commitment to a goal. The following case study provides a process specific to handling polarities.

Application of the Polarity Principle

The day before a long-awaited safety process improvement meeting was to be held, two units at a chemical plant caught on fire. The plant manager canceled the meeting and called on everyone to work overtime to get the unit back on line.

Three months later, after no time off, repairs were completed and firstline supervisors met to plan how to proceed with the safety program. No serious injuries had occurred during the intensive repairs, so the team was asked to reflect on how safety had been managed during this period. Before this three-month period, the entire plant had been involved in a two-hour monthly safety conversation with all managers. During these meetings, the polarity principle was used to promote personal accountability for safety. Real-time safety/production issues were discussed and resolved with an emphasis on "your role in making this happen."

Since the management team was familiar with the concept of polarity, a mapping process based on Johnson's Polarity Management technology was

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Figure 1

Getting the Work Done vs. Process Polarity/Paradox Map

Positive • Get work done • We're ready for production • Success • All units up and running • Financial goals met	**Positive** • Safety tailboards complete • Regular updates • Financial training • Budget planning • Corporate control processes (budget, discipline, reports)
TASK	**PROCESS**
Negative • Burn out • Sacrifice family life • Overwhelmed • Feel loss of control • Incomplete commitments (canceled safety improvements)	**Negative** • Too many meetings • Takes time away from completing work • People afraid to make decisions • People ask for more direction

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used (Johnson 83). The polarity was named task versus process. Task referred to getting the work done (meeting client and management demands). Process included planning, training, meetings and other activities not directly related to urgent tasks.

As Figure 1 depicts, the team started by placing task in the middle of the left-hand column and process in the right-hand column. This created four quadrants. The upper quadrants symbolize the positive aspects of each side of the polarity; the lower quadrants symbolize the negative, unintended consequences of each pole.

The group then addressed the upside of process. Team members listed all activities that had taken place not immediately related to getting the work done. They had made sure to have safety tailboards and to keep people informed of progress and decisions made. Opposite of this positive list was the downside of process, which included too many meetings that took time away from work and people afraid to make decisions. The latter was deemed a result of the discipline and control processes the corporation was implementing.

Next, the group examined the upside of task, which included completing the work on schedule and getting the units operational. Those involved shared great feelings of success when talking about this quadrant.

Finally, the downside of task was addressed—the toll of long hours, the sacrifices families had made, and feeling overwhelmed and out of control. Employees had also pointed out the incomplete commitments to safety improvements that had been made. They had been loyal during the company crisis and wanted to see what was coming next.

During the ensuing discussion, the group realized that a second polarity was being managed—production versus safety. The managers felt the previous training in polarity management had helped them prepare for this emergency. When they looked at the situation from a polarity and ethical perspective, they understood the need to have a one-on-one conversation with each employee to communicate management's ongoing commitment to safety. To that end, they prepared for a leadership conversation that covered four points:

1) I care about you. What are your concerns or suggestions for safety or work improvements? How can you help to implement them?

2) We have to face reality. What are your concerns about the new discipline and budget controls? Do you understand what they are and how they will affect us?

3) What do you see for yourself? What are your aspirations? How can I help?

4) Address performance: How am I doing in keeping my commitments? How are you doing? [Koestenbaum(a)].

The conversations went well and recent employee perception surveys indicate that management is perceived as highly committed to safety. Although no final solutions were found to the task versus process polarity, this tool can help managers analyze a situation so that they can talk about it in a way which shows they care and still communicate the importance of getting the work done.

Leadership Is the Resolution of the Paradox

Leaders who are able to talk intelligently about the ethical issues that underlie polarities are better able to inspire and motivate employee commitment to safety. Organizations recognize that culture is the most promising area to focus on in order to improve performance. In the author's opinion, teaching the polarity principle as part of safety leadership development is a promising strategy for addressing these cultural issues.

Polarities are not problems that can be solved and stay solved. Gray areas such as balancing production and safety must be addressed as often as clarity is needed. Leaders are the catalyst to helping people accept and manage the many conflicting priorities while maintaining an excellent safety record. Leadership is the resolution of the safety paradox. ■

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