

Leader Roles in Creating Trust and Open Communication

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Audits, procedures, rules, and programs are extremely important to failure prevention. When all is said and done, however, it doesn't matter that you passed all your audits with flying colors if you end up with millions of gallons of oil in the ocean. It doesn't matter that safety compliance is drilled into employees if you end up suppressing important information that could have prevented a shuttle explosion.

It is important to have systems and processes in place to prevent these disasters but they do not work if people don't trust each other enough to communicate about the latent hazards, production pressures, and trade-offs that affect safety decisions everyday. Change happens constantly and quickly in a high-risk environment. Our clients know that people are a vital part of tracking those changes in time to prevent accidents, but human dynamics, feelings, and sometimes, past history can get in the way. This presentation introduces the tools to engage people in the communication process.

In 1992, Rosa Carrillo co-developed the first validated safety culture survey that showed correlation between the levels of trust and open communication in the workplace and reduced accidents. She will be presenting her own research as well as research conducted by Jody Hoffer Gittell from Brandeis University who has validated seven dimensions of effective communication and collaboration. Carrillo's study was validated in a two-year study (Carrillo 1993, 1994). Gittell's study was validated by over nine years of research in the healthcare and airline industries (Gittell 2005, 2009).

Background

Rosa Carrillo has been involved in safety culture performance management since 1993. She has interviewed hundreds of employees from all levels of the organization after major incidents trying to get at the root causes. Employees frequently came up with the diagnosis that the root causes were a lack of trust and open communication. "Management just didn't listen." "Management doesn't care." "We tried to tell them about the problems before the accident. Now it is too late." In the early 90's we were just getting into "systems thinking" and we thought of communication breakdowns as symptoms, that we had to align the systems (rewards, measurements, strategy, etc) and fix them. But more experience brought the realization that it was very difficult to fix the systems without the elements of trust and open communication.

Trust and open communication are the foundations of a safety culture. Without trust communication cannot flow. Blocked communication leads to organizational failure.

Even though we know it is important to have trust and open communication we really don't have much time to focus on developing it. It requires taking the time for in depth

conversations to find out what's on people's minds and engaging others on how to solve problems. Instead, We have deadlines, budgets, and just plain stress that keep us focused on getting the job done. So, facing this reality, here are some ideas for us to think about. If trust and open communication are the foundation of a strong safety culture how can we strengthen it? What are the tools than can help us?

How Organizations Really Work

You've all heard the saying "what gets measured, gets done." We are told that measurements are important, and the easiest things to measure are the visible and concrete aspects of the organization. The iceberg is a popular metaphor to describe organizations because it illustrates that what you can see is really only a small part of what's going on. In Exhibit 1, you see examples of what we tend to measure because that is what is visible.



Exhibit 1. A Cultural Perspective

Our focus on the tip of the iceberg leads to the types of solutions listed at the right of the iceberg. These solutions often cause a lot more work, money, or frustration. And they don't address the root causes of the dynamics that break down trust and open communication. Perceptions, emotions, beliefs and expectations are invisible and we don't have any way to measure them except through perception surveys or conversations.

As you can see the invisible elements have a lot more potential to sink the ship than the visible problems. But we avoid the bottom of the iceberg because it can feel scary and dangerous down there. It isn't really, but you can't know that until you've dived down and experienced the magic of how one small act of respect, care and concern can outperform hundreds and thousands of dollars of technical solutions.

Scientific Validation to Address Emotions First

There is substantial brain research that validates the importance of addressing people's emotions, feelings and their need for relationship. So often on safety culture assessments you hear that people wish management was more visible, that they had more opportunities for dialogue and interaction. In fact, leaders who spend more time in the field interacting with people receive higher effectiveness ratings (Rock 2009, Cooper 2010, Goldsmith 2013). David Rock, a well

known author, has a model he calls SCARF made up of the areas he has identified in the brain that are most important to helping people feel secure. SCARF stands for status, certainty, autonomy, relationship and fairness. If a person perceives that any of these aspects were violated, they shut down. SCARF serves as a guide for supervisors and managers in their relationships with people. **Why is this important?** Because when people feel threatened their attention span shuts down and they stop listening or trusting.

Implications of the Importance of Relationship and Emotions

As a leader, if you are not paying enough attention to how people feel or to building relationships you are creating barriers to communication. Exhibit 2 is a partial list of these barriers.

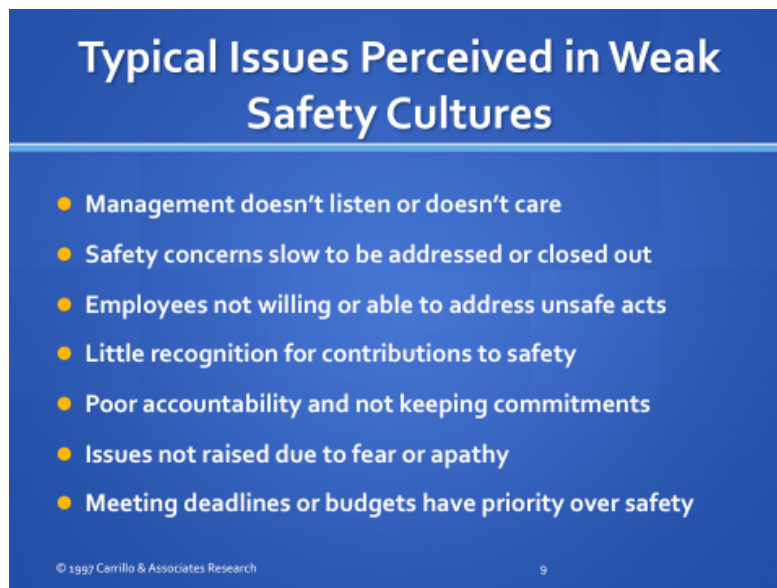


Exhibit 2. Typical Issues Perceived in Weak Cultures

If you are a leader, every action you take and every decision you make either supports or undermines the perceived levels of status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness in your enterprise. This is why leading is so difficult. Every word, glance and gestures are noticed and interpreted, usually resulting in meanings you may never have intended.

The SCARF model provides a means of bringing conscious awareness to all these potentially pitfalls. It helps alert you to people's core concerns (which they may not even understand themselves) and shows you how to gauge your words and actions to be more effective.

We often talk about unsafe behaviors. The behaviors that threaten people's sense of well being may be the most unsafe. Any improvement effort has to start by reducing the threats inherent in our leaders' behavior.

How Can We Measure and Improve Trust and Open Communication?

Relational Coordination (RC) is a term coined by Jody Hoffer Gittel. RC is a mutually reinforcing process of communicating and relating for the purpose of task integration. Relational coordination is particularly useful for improving quality and efficiency performance under conditions of reciprocal task interdependence, uncertainty and time constraints. It is also a validated survey instrument tested in a four-airline study over 12 months of operation as well as many hospital studies since 2001 to the present.

The study discovered seven communication dimensions that identified high performers. The survey analyzes a work process and asks each member of the team or person in a particular role to answer the following questions:

<i>Survey Dimension</i>	<i>Question</i>
Frequent Communication	How frequently do people in each of these groups communicate with you about [focal work process]?
Timely Communication	Do people in these groups communicate with you in a timely way about [focal work process]?
Accurate Communication	Do people in these groups communicate with you accurately about [focal work process]?
Problem Solving Communication	When there is a problem with [focal work process], do people in these groups blame others or work with you to solve the problem ?
Shared Goals	Do people in these groups share your goals for [focal work process]?
Shared Knowledge	Do people in these groups know about the work you do with [focal work process]?
Mutual Respect	Do people in these groups respect the work you do with [focal work process]?

What emerges is a picture of a social network and the strength of the ties between the people. This where the communication either flows effectively or breaks down. This allows you to pinpoint exactly who needs to be brought together to clarify how information is being transferred and understood. Instead of blame fixing and personality issues, you have specific, measurable actions you can take to improve the collaboration and coordination of efforts to get the work done. This increases the levels of trust and open communication while improving work performance.

How does this relate to safety? In the wake of major disasters or accidents what often emerges is a trail of miscommunications, misunderstandings and broken relationships. After the accident it becomes even harder to fix these elements because people feel guilt and or blame. It would be far better to find out where the relationships are broken before the accident. However, even after the accident success is much more probable if we are able to approach it from a non-blaming perspective that doesn't focus on human error.

How Does a Leader Build Relationships?

The most effective communication is face-to-face. Do not use emails for anything important. Figure 3. Build Leadership Capability in Relationship Building, is a model showing that we have to communicate the value of relationship building as equal to technical competence. The vector rising diagonally lists the behaviors that build relationships.

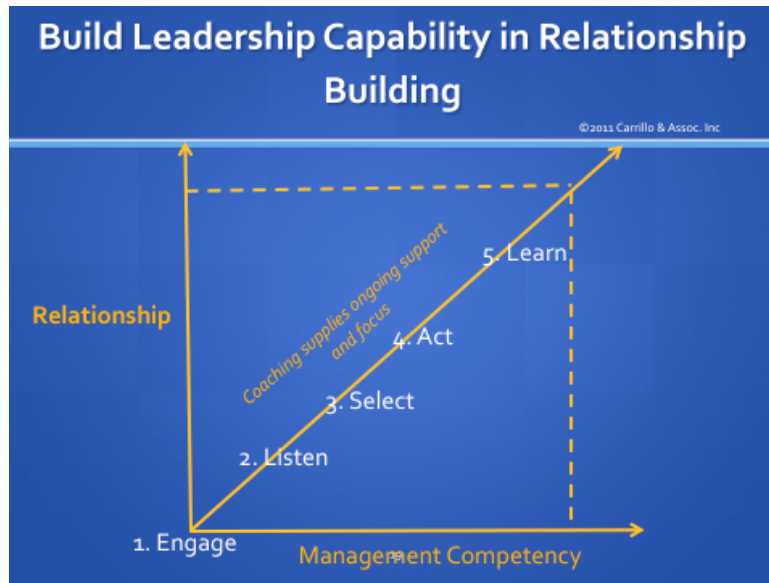


Exhibit 3. Build Leadership Capability in Relationship Building

When a leader consciously builds relationships, it gives others a feeling of safety even in uncertain environments. It makes it easier for employees to focus on their work, which leads to improved performance.

Engagement can be induced when people working toward objectives feel rewarded by their efforts. This approach is likely to minimize status threats, increase certainty, and create a sense of relatedness and fairness.

Conclusion and Special Note for Entrenched Cycles of Mistrust

Locations where there is a long history of mistrust between labor and management pose a difficult challenge. The trust divide between union and non-union is cultural. When multiple attempts at redesign and adding communication structures have failed a new approach is called for. Many sites report improved performance as a result of using survey assessments to redesign structures, but it may be that redesigning the structures isn't what improved performance. May be it's simply the dialogue and conversation that took place during the redesign and that changed things. Do we sometimes engage in changing the organization's design when the real issue is lack of shared purpose or mutual respect? (Carrillo 2011)

In either case, the approach needed begins with changing leadership's working assumptions and communication skills. You cannot be safe without good communication.

Everything depends upon each telling the other what is relevant. If I don't trust you I'm not going to tell you the truth. Some employees say that they don't speak up because management won't listen, because they haven't in the past. Employees and leaders need the skills and self-awareness to break through this impasse. It won't happen on its own. This presentation will make the case for increased management interaction with employees. Leaders create space for communication by attending to:

- The value and creation of trust
- Effects of shame and punishment
- Effective change leadership
- Quality conversations and dialogue
- Personal presence: listening, understanding, and creating relationship

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