

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Safety Leadership Training: A Case for *Evidence-Based Leadership*TM

**Thomas E. Boyce, Ph.D.
President and Senior Consultant
Center for Behavioral Safety, LLC
Reno, Nevada**

Introduction

In response to many clients' frustrations with their return on investment from traditional safety leadership training (e.g., Courageous Leadership), my company has been working hard to develop a leadership model that we now call "Evidence-Based LeadershipTM". Evidence-Based LeadershipTM is not leadership training. Rather, it is a process of customizing leadership for a particular organization and systematically measuring leaders' actions as they impact what others do to achieve key organizational outcomes. Safety improvement is inevitably a key outcome that my clients are seeking and thus this model works well in conjunction with the Behavior-Based Safety work that I have been doing for more than a decade.

The Model

Evidence-Based LeadershipTM (EBL) proposes that most poor business outcomes are produced by too much or too little behavior. Moreover, consistent with the Behavior-Based approach to injury prevention, EBL presumes that if you want to change results, you must:

- know the result you want and measure it,
- know what behaviors are necessary to produce that result and measure them,
- change what people are doing to produce that result.

Therefore, a fundamental assumption of EBL is that some leadership behaviors are not important to producing the results desired by an organization. As a result, those behaviors get in the way of the leadership behaviors that are necessary and sufficient to produce the results one is seeking.

The point above is important to understanding why so much leadership training is not effective. Specifically, if leaders are trained to do things that don't directly impact what people do and they spend time doing that, there is less time left-over to do the things that really make a difference.

Given this, EBL has the effect of making leadership more effective and efficient because it defines what is “necessary and sufficient for leaders to be doing to get the best desired result.”

Defining the Territory of EBL

A majority of my work in leadership has been done at the level of a specific facility within a larger organization. Thus, leadership typically involves the site general manager and his or her direct reports as well as their direct reports all the way down to those front-line supervisors who have responsibility for at least one other person. Thus, we’re defining a leader as anyone who has at least one person directly reporting to them. Specifically, to be considered a leader, you must have a follower. (Informal leaders in an organization can benefit from this process. However, the approach would be very different and could be the topic of another paper altogether.)

Once our leadership group is defined, we define the outcomes or results we’re seeking (or that the leaders are held accountable for). The results for which a specific site are responsible are most often tied to the vision, mission, and goals of the company. Often, the organization has already clearly defined what key performance indicators (KPIs) they will use to measure success. And, these KPIs are duplicated in some way at the level of the individual sites.

It is important to recognize that most KPIs are “lagging indicators” of daily performance. Thus, they are impacted in a positive or negative way depending on what people, including leaders, do on a day-to-day basis. It is unfortunate that most organizations do not clearly define the performance piece or what behaviors are necessary to produce the desired result. Moreover, if the role of leadership is discussed, it is often spoken of in terms of general skills (e.g., effective communication) and often too far removed from the KPI to be useful.

EBL is different in that it places a focus on “leading indicators” of organizational performance. That is, we ask: what do leaders need to do to impact their followers (i.e., direct reports) such that these people (i.e., the followers) are behaving in a manner that will positively impact the KPIs that have been established. Thus, defining the leading indicators of effective leadership and leading indicators of organizational performance is the primary territory of EBL. This territory is seen below in the 3 boxes to the far right of the figure (i.e., leadership result, leadership skills, leaders’ behaviors.)

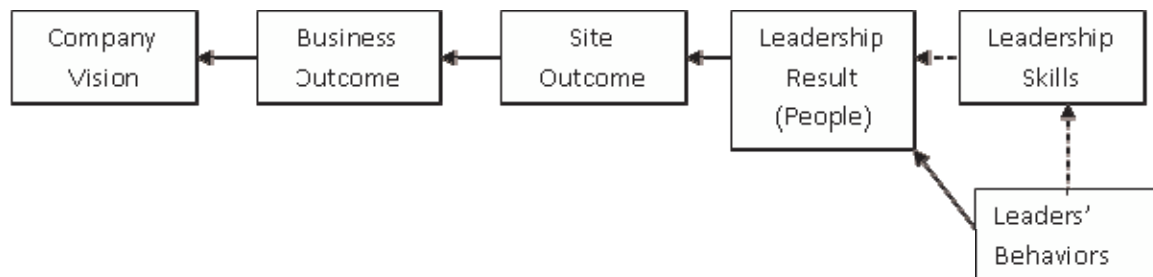


Exhibit 1.

To further distinguish EBL, consider that most traditional leadership training concentrates in the area of the box labeled “Leadership Skills” without regard for what specifically those leaders’ need to get from their people. Furthermore, most often leadership training is conducted with such a broad brush that even if specific results had been pinpointed, the leaders wouldn’t know what to do any way. It is not sufficient to teach leaders in industry that the most effective leaders are “charismatic” or “likable” or “communicate well.” Instead, we must ask “what behaviors will we accept in our organization as evidence that a leader is “charismatic,” is “likeable,” is “communicating well.” This is exactly what “Evidence-Based Leadership” does. Moreover, it is always done in the context of the KPIs that site leaders are being held accountable for by their superiors! Many organizations struggle to do this on their own. My role as a consultant to industry is therefore to assist in implementing the process and getting to the appropriate level of detail, a task that is easier said than done.

A Typical Example

Let’s work through an example to better understand the territory of EBL. In most all industry, safety performance is evaluated as an indicator of success. Typically, businesses have a Vision of zero injuries and fatalities or express the desire to be “the industry leader in safety.” Success in reaching this vision will typically be measured as a KPI expressed as a total recordable injury rate (TRIR). At the level of a specific site, TRIR is also measured and typically a goal for improvement (a decrease in TRIR) is established by the corporate office as a key site outcome. From there, the site is left to figure out how to produce this result.

This is where EBL comes in. That is, with the EBL model, we will define what people at all levels of the organization need to do to produce this result. Defining the safety-related behaviors that need to occur (e.g., working with approved PPE, using proper tools for the job and following recommended procedures, keeping work area clear of debris, etc.) to produce a decrease in recordable injuries is the easy part. What remains difficult is how to get the employees who need to do these behaviors to reliably do them while still achieving a good level of quality products (other KPIs that we can impact) while also attending to the environment.

Specifically, with EBL we work with a sites' leadership team to first define what leadership skills they believe are necessary to be an effective leader in that organization. Subsequently, we pinpoint what behaviors they will accept as evidence that they and their peers are successfully demonstrating those skills. Moreover, we establish a measurement system that allows us to track how often those behaviors are performed and ultimately evaluate these measures against those KPIs that have been established for them. The result is an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of various leaders and eventually a hit list of skills that need to be improved. The icing on the cake is that this process also results in a list of behaviors that are “necessary and sufficient” to produce the results for which the site is responsible. Irrelevant behaviors get downplayed leaving more time for leaders to exhibit the behaviors that really make a difference. The beauty of this process is continuous improvement in leadership that can evolve with the changing needs of the organization, including a workforce that may value something different than their counterparts of a few years ago may have valued.

The situation described above, when placed in the model, might progress like this. Our company VISION is: “to be the industry leader in safety.” We will measure this COMPANY RESULT as a

function of our company TRIR. Each site will be evaluated as successfully contributing to the vision by a SITE RESULT defined as an “improvement in their site TRIR.” As a site we have agreed that we can improve our TRIR by creating a RESULT in OUR PEOPLE that can be seen as an increase in: the use of “specialized PPE” (those that are not routine) and “use of proper tools.” Moreover, we can help to achieve an improvement in TRIR by “improving housekeeping.” As a leadership group we have agreed that AMONG other LEADERSHIP SKILLS that are important, a “visible commitment to safety” will positively impact the safety-related behaviors defined just above. Finally, we will accept as evidence of a “visible commitment to safety” the following LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS: “providing clear direction on safety at the pre-shift safety meeting” and “periodically following-up with employees in the field throughout the shift by providing positive feedback for safe behaviors and correction for at-risk behaviors,” and “assisting employees in identifying and removing any barriers that reduce the probability of the safe behaviors desired.” Placed in our EBL flow chart, these specifics would look like this:

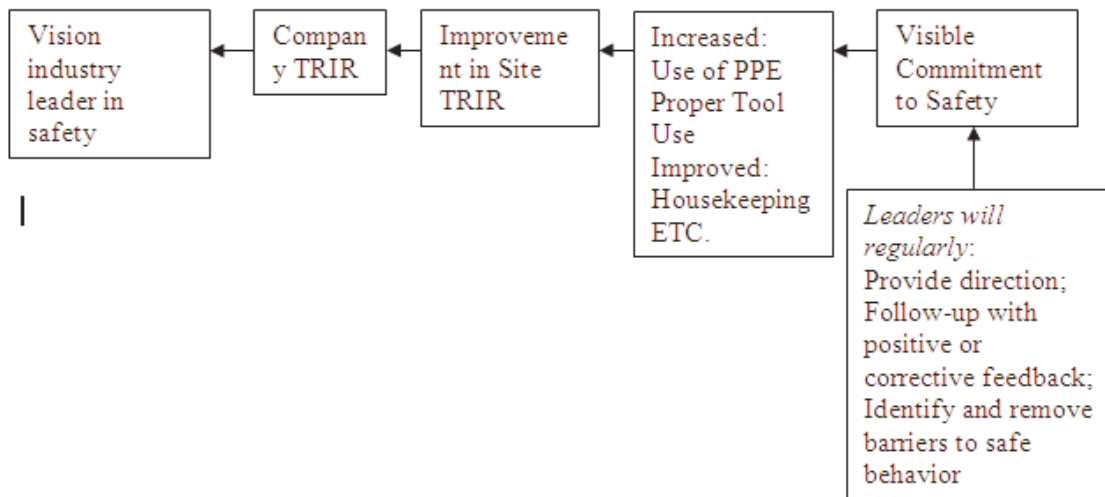


Exhibit 2.

Data Can Be Enlightening: The Case of the Gold Mine

One of my clients that has embarked on an Evidence-Based Leadership Process defined “Effective Communication” as a skill that they believe leaders in their organization should exhibit. They pinpointed several behaviors (see figure below) that they agreed they would accept as evidence that someone was successfully exhibiting this skill. They then collected behavioral observations of one another where opportunities to exhibit effective communication presented itself. The data below are a snapshot of what they saw.

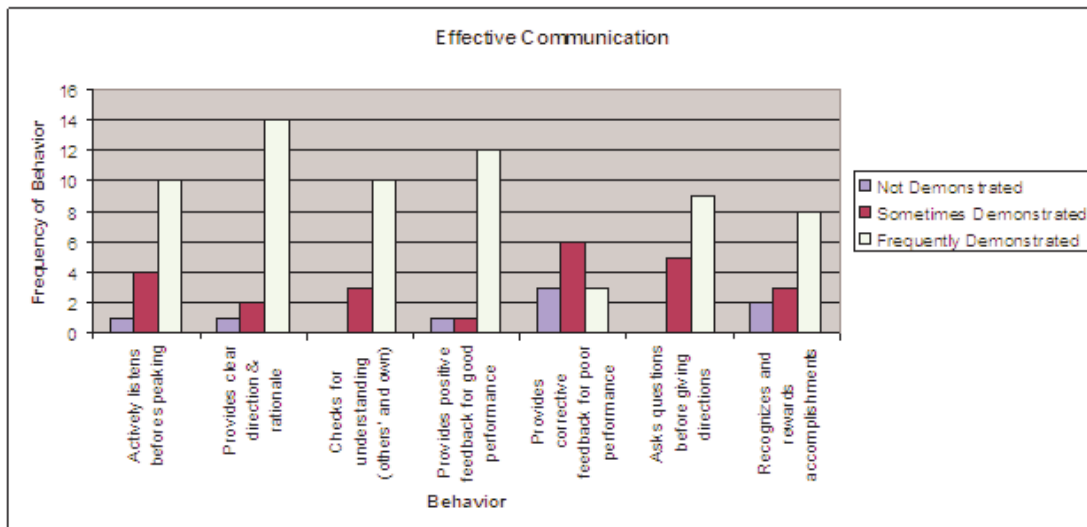


Exhibit 3.

It is noteworthy that the data indicated that leaders appeared to be very good at giving positive feedback to their direct reports, but were less successful and correcting behavior when it needed to be corrected. If this pattern were to repeat itself over time (our sample of data would have to be sufficiently large to draw definitive conclusions), a case could be made that the leaders did not have sufficient counter control over the employees in the organization. A little word about the history of this organization may shed light onto why this result presented itself.

Specifically, the company had been using our Behavior-Based safety process for about 4 years at the time we placed a focus on leadership. During this time, they saw a 50% reduction in injuries during each of those years. As part of that process, we empowered a team of hourly employees to administer the Behavior-Based Safety process (after sufficient training) and emphasized the need for Supervision to recognize safe behaviors and safety improvements rather than to reprimand or enforce poor safety performance. Given the results of the data presented above, it appears as if the organization successfully made the culture change from an enforcement-based to a positive-reinforcement based. However, it appears that this may have been done at the expense of being comfortable using constructive feedback when it was necessary.

The nice thing about seeing this pattern emerge as part of the EBL process, is that steps can be taken to “remediate” those whose leadership style may have swung too far in one direction. Moreover, this can be done without the need to attend to all leadership behaviors. In essence, the training can be streamlined to fit the needs indicated by the data. And, this can continue to occur as long as the leadership data are collected.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, confidentiality clauses prevent me from sharing the specific tools developed for the EBL processes I've been fortunate enough to implement. However, I can issue you a challenge to try at home so that you can, in a first hand way, experience the benefits of the approach.

In particular, I encourage you to implement the equivalent of an EBL process with your family. That is, schedule time with your family to discuss the values you share in your household. Specifically, define what you value in your home environment. Then, brainstorm a list of behaviors that each of you, as members of the family, can perform that will contribute to that home environment. Be sure to get to the level of very specific observable behaviors that you will take as evidence that you or someone else is exhibiting that skill. To get you started, the list and form on the following page is that which I developed and use in my own home. (Again, I urge you to create your own list. The process of customizing will produce a greater benefit. And, although your list may have parallels to that above, what you value may be different from what my family values.

Formally use the form for a month on a schedule that you have negotiated with your loved ones and talk about what you've observed regularly. Moreover, be sure to give each other positive feedback for the good behaviors exhibited and constructive feedback when there is need for improvement. Then, re-evaluate your home environment. My guess is that you'll see a marked improvement.

In my own circumstance, although my family life has been great prior to embarking on the process, I can say that I've seen improvements. This is what my clients are also reporting. That is, many say "we were pretty good leaders to this point. But, EBL has made us the 'leader' of leaders."

Healthy Relationships Checklist™

Date:	Time:	
Observer Name (Optional):	Conditions:	
# Observed:		
Critical Behaviors	Acceptable	Needs Improvement
Show Love and Value of Other		
Verbal affection		
Physical affection		
Put other before oneself		
Communicate Effectively		
Actively listen		
Respect other's opinion		
Maintain emotional control /vocal & body language		
Provide timely feedback / share one's feelings		
Maintain eye contact		
Make Other Person Feel Welcome		
Greet with enthusiasm/make time to talk		
Ask if anything is needed /offer help		
Provide genuine compliments		
Peace and Harmony		
Work to keep house orderly		
Schedule time together		
Work to deescalate conflict		
Keep things in proper perspective		
Show appreciation and be thankful for the good things		
Keep critical comments constructive / behavior focused		
Respect boundaries (e.g.. No pda's. etc) / don't take personally		