Influencing the Behavior of Senior Leadership

What makes a great safety leader?

By Thomas R. Krause

IS BEING A GREAT SAFETY LEADER different than being a great leader generally, or is it the same? If an SH&E professional really knew what it would take, and was positioned correctly in the organization, what would be the best way to influence the behavior of senior leaders in order to help them be great safety leaders?

Over the last 20 years, the author and his colleagues have worked with several leading companies to develop methods for safety improvement. Most of this work has been conducted at the site level, working with employee-driven improvement processes. In the course of this work, and in studying those factors that distinguish organizations which are successful with these initiatives from those that are less successful (Krause, et al 6), the author has concluded that the quality of leadership is the single most important factor (Hidley 32).

This brings into focus a critical performance question: What is the most effective mechanism for influencing the leadership behavior of senior managers? This question encompasses five areas:

1) How does safety leadership ensure performance improvement? It is widely recognized that organizational excellence requires leadership, but what does it mean to be a safety leader in terms of day-to-day activities? What kinds of behaviors must leaders engage in to create the safety performance improvement their organizations need?

2) Why should a senior leader be interested in safety? Some senior leaders are already motivated to improve safety (for various reasons) while others are not. What is the basis of the senior leader's motivation to improve safety, and how do organizations appeal to that motive most effectively?

3) What does a zero-incident safety culture look like? Today, many companies and their leaders state that achieving a "zero-incident" or "injury-free" safety culture is a serious objective. But is it possible to define that culture in practical terms? What day-to-day activities would employees at various levels engage in, and how would they differ from the activities of the cultures that employees actually work in?

4) Can one identify best practices in senior safety leadership? Is it possible to define in behavioral terms a set of practices that senior safety leadership should perform in order to shape safety culture? What kinds of behaviors and practices would be appropriate for such a culture?
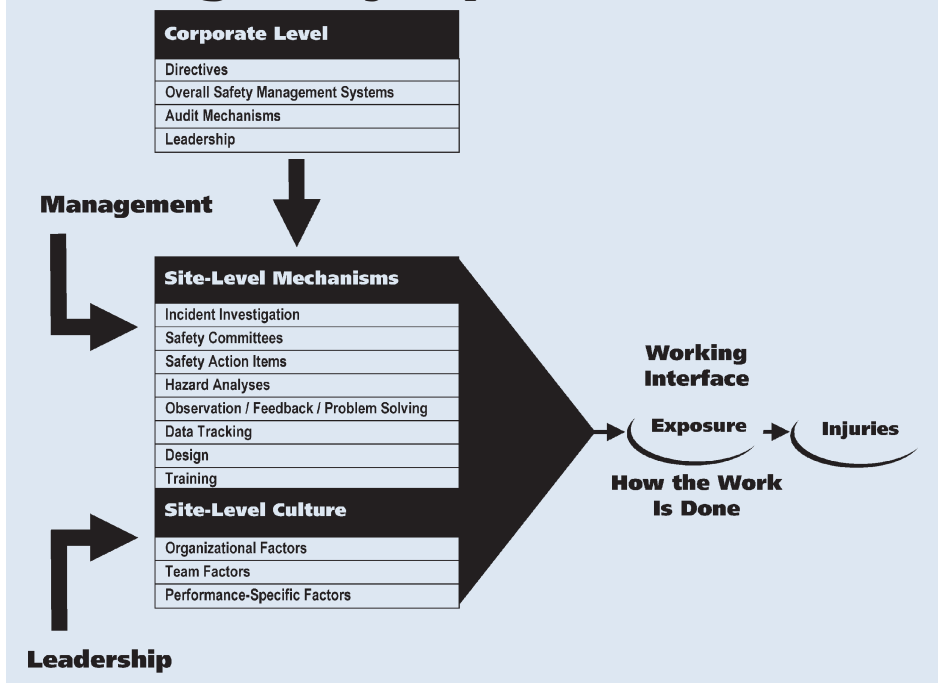
5) Is leadership behavior subject to the same principles of behavior as that of frontline employees and supervisors? To influence the behavior of the senior leader concerning safety and health, one must understand what factors drive that behavior. Are these the same factors that drive behavior generally (as with frontline employees and supervisors) or are different factors involved for senior leadership?

This article examines these five areas to answer these questions.

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Figure 1

Ensuring Safety Improvement

Corporate Level
- Directives
- Overall Safety Management Systems
- Audit Mechanisms
- Leadership

Management

Site-Level Mechanisms
- Incident Investigation
- Safety Committees
- Safety Action Items
- Hazard Analyses
- Observation / Feedback / Problem Solving
- Data Tracking
- Design
- Training

Site-Level Culture
- Organizational Factors
- Team Factors
- Performance-Specific Factors

Leadership

Working Interface

Exposure → Injuries

How the Work Is Done

The Role of Leadership in Safety
How Does Safety Leadership Ensure Performance Improvement?

The primary goal of safety initiatives, whether at the site or corporate level, is to reduce the amount of exposure that occurs in the workplace—referred to as the "working interface" (Krause 31). While not all exposure is equal in terms of its severity potential, all incidents result from exposure to hazards. Reducing that exposure is the primary mechanism of safety improvement (Figure 1).

Leadership must understand that the same number of exposure events in a given time period can lead to a different number of incident events. Otherwise, leadership will inevitably overreact to the incident data. A few months will pass in which injury frequency is unusually low, prompting leaders to conclude that safety is improving when it is not. Or, a "rash of injuries" will occur over several months, causing leaders to believe that safety has deteriorated when in fact exposure may have been reduced. None of this suggests that safety has to do with luck ultimately, only that incident frequency is subject to random variability. Safety leaders need leading indicators—indicators that predict injuries with statistical validity. Such indicators allow organizations to take proactive measures that prevent injuries.

Most SH&E professionals already understand this, yet safety leaders—the executives who make the important decisions—do not. Safety leadership begins at the corporate level where directives and objectives are established. The corporate level recommends safety management systems and site-level mechanisms such as incident investigation, safety committees, safety action item tracking systems, hazard analysis, behavior observation and feedback. In addition, the corporate level usually provides an audit mechanism that sites use to measure how well they are implementing these site-level mechanisms. However, as many companies have discovered, two sites can have

identical audit scores of site-level safety improvement mechanisms, including similar technology and workforces, yet very different incident frequency rates (Petersen 32). What accounts for this?

The Role of Leadership in Culture

Performance cannot be predicted based solely on knowing the strength of site-level mechanisms. To understand why incidence frequency rates vary, one must also understand site-level organizational safety culture. Essentially, this culture is "how things are done here"—the shared common values and behaviors of the organization with respect to safety. This will be examined more closely later. First, however, let's consider what motivates senior leadership to care about safety in the first place.

Why Should a Senior Leader Be Interested in Safety?

Based on the author's experience, senior leaders are primarily motivated by human compassion. While other reasons exist, such as recognition that safety improvement is good business, the real motive of the senior leader who works to improve safety is a sense of integrity, a grounding in ethical principles, a sense of duty.

What Does a Zero-Injury Culture Look Like?

More organizations are striving for a zero-incident or injury-free safety culture. Many senior leaders have heard this phrase and have embraced it as an objective. Some have a clear vision of what such a culture entails. For many others, the vision is somewhat blurred, but the general idea is appealing. Ask senior leaders what they mean by zero-incident safety culture and most will reply, "an organization that has a high value for safety and that has very low incident frequency rates." Other leaders acknowledge that while a zero-incident safety culture is the ideal, some incidents are inevitable and it is overly optimistic to think that injuries can be completely eliminated.

If an injury-free culture were possible, how would one recognize it? What would the culture look like in an organization that had zero injuries? What would be its primary characteristics?

To answer this question, literature concerning organizational safety culture (e.g., Edmondson; Erickson; Hayes, et al; Hofmann and Morgeson) was reviewed. Hundreds of studies that examined this question were reviewed, then the field was narrowed to approximately 20 articles (e.g., Moorman, et al; Hofmann and Stetzer; Huselid; Kotter) that presented empirically supported data on aspects of the safety culture that could be shown statistically to predict incident frequency rate. Through this work, nine factors that characterize a high-performing safety culture were identified (Figure 2). In the view of the author and his

colleagues, a zero-incident safety culture would be one that scored very high on each of these factors (Hofmann).

Nine Factors that Predict Positive Safety Outcomes

1) **Procedural Justice.** Does the individual worker perceive the supervisor's decision-making process to be fair? An employee wants to be confident that decisions which affect him/her are based on merit and good data rather than on prejudice or personal preference.

2) **Leader Member Exchange.** This scale refers to the relationship that the employee has with his/her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the level of confidence an employee has that the supervisor will provide support and look out for the worker's interest. If employees believe their supervisors ignore their interests or do not represent them in the organization, they will contribute to low scores on this variable. If employees think supervisors will take active steps to protect their interests, they would contribute to a higher score.

3) **Management Credibility.** Do employees perceive that what management says is consistent with what it does?

4) **Perceived Organizational Support.** Do employees perceive that they receive the support needed to accomplish the organization's objectives? Employees may understand that the organization wants to improve safety, but may not perceive that they are given the support needed to improve safety.

5) **Workgroup Relations.** How well do employees get along with coworkers? To what degree do coworkers perceive that they treat each other with respect, listen to each other's ideas, help one another out and fulfill commitments?

6) **Teamwork.** To what extent do employees perceive that working with team members is an effective way to complete tasks? Although related, workgroup relations and teamwork are slightly different. Workgroup relations has more to do with whether the employee enjoys working and interacting with members of the workgroup; teamwork has more to do with the extent to which the employee thinks they work effectively as a unit. For example, an employee could enjoy working with people, yet not believe they can accomplish much together. Conversely, an employee could think that the team can accomplish much together, yet not enjoy the process.

7) **Organizational Value for Safety Performance Improvement.** Scales 7, 8 and 9 are specific to safety performance. This scale measures the extent to which the employee perceives that the organization values safety performance improvement. Is it some-

thing people just talk about or is it something people value? The more employees perceive that the organization values safety goals, the more willing they will be to invest in those goals themselves.

8) **Upward Communication.** This factor refers to the extent to which communication flows freely upward through the organization. Can the worker speak to his/her supervisor freely about safety issues and concerns? Are supervisors able and willing to speak frankly to their own managers about safety concerns?

9) **Approaching Others.** Do employees feel free to speak to one another about safety concerns? If an employee sees coworkers engaging in at-risk behaviors, is s/he willing to speak with them about it?
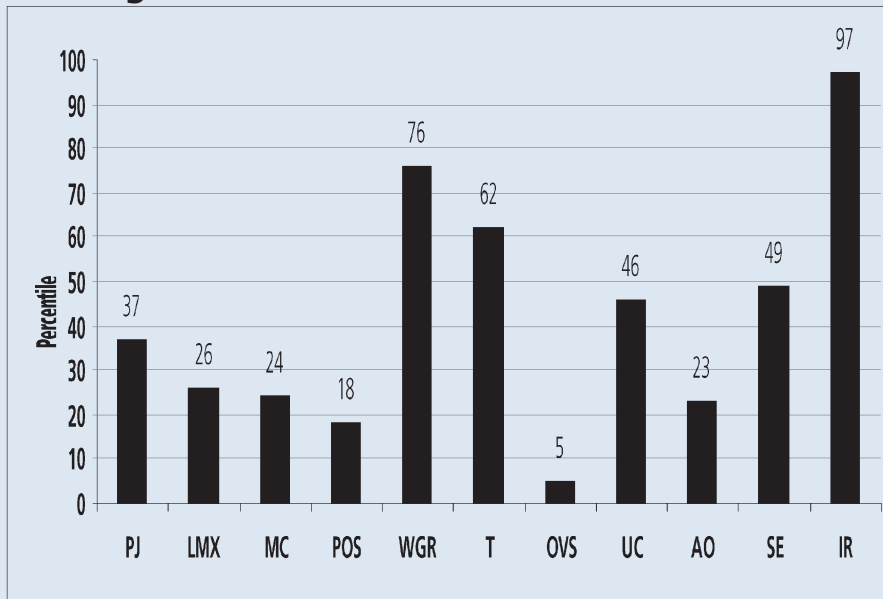
Note that six of these nine scales concern organizational functioning generally and are not limited to safety (e.g., Moorman, et al; Huselid).

These findings were used to develop a survey that measures the nine factors of organizational functioning. Questions are designed to elicit perceptions about these factors from a cross-section of employees, with answers scored using a Likert scale of 1 to 5. Scores are then compared to a norms database and are expressed as a percentile contrasting the surveyed organization against many others. This yields a profile that can help a company better understand its safety culture.

For example, Figure 3 shows relatively low scores on all organizational factors and a very low score on organizational value for safety as well as approaching others. Teamwork scales are relatively high. These results suggest that people in this organization enjoy working together and work effectively in teams, but they do not perceive a strong value for safety within the organization and do not perceive sufficient support, encouragement and credibility, or fairness. They are also not likely to talk to each other about safety concerns. Interestingly, this organization's senior-most leader is dedicated to safety improvement and has challenged the organization to

Figure 2
High-Performing Safety Culture

Root Causes → **Organizational Qualities**

Organizational Factors
1) Procedural justice
2) Leader-member exchange
3) Management credibility
4) Perceived organizational support

Team Factors
5) Work group relations
6) Teamwork

Safety-Specific Factors
7) Organizational value for safety performance improvement
8) Upward communication
9) Approaching others

Organizational Qualities
Organizational commitment
Openness to change
Job satisfaction
Mutual trust and respect between supervisor and worker
Organizational citizenship behavior
Excellent communication and cooperation

Outcomes
Incidence rates
Level of safe behavior
Safety-related costs

Figure 3

Safety Culture Profile

PJ......Procedural Justice	OVS....Org Values Safety
LMX...Ldr-Mmbr Exch	UC......Upward Commun
MC.....Mgt Credibility	AO......Approach Others
POS....Perceivd Org Supt	SE.......Self Efficacy
WGR...Wrkgrp Relations	IR........Incident Reprtng
T.........Teamwork	

move toward an injury-free culture. The company's incident frequency rate is quite low numerically, yet is still above its industry's average. These data reveal that leadership is not delivering a consistent message through the organization down to the worker level.

What Does Excellent Safety Leadership Look Like?

Knowing what a high-performing culture looks like, the next question is whether one can identify specific actions that leadership can take to foster those characteristics. In the experience of the author and his colleagues, certain management and leadership practices do recur in those organizations with high-performing cultures. Comparing that experience with literature on leadership influences on safety and organizational culture (e.g., Kotter; Erickson; Fairhurst, et al), it was concluded that at least eight definable leadership practices are connected to the development and support of a high-performing culture (as defined in the scales). These are vision, credibility, collaboration, feedback and recognition, accountability, communication, values safety and action-oriented.

Best Practices in Safety Leadership

What are these best practices and how can leaders use them to influence a high-performing culture? While leaders are often too busy to take on new initiatives, by taking an individual approach, leaders can vastly improve their functioning in these eight areas. Leaders can evaluate their current performance with respect to these practices, and identify several behaviors they can perform regularly to close any gaps and develop a high-performing organization.

1) Vision

Safety leadership starts with vision. The senior-most executive must "see" what safety performance excellence would look like in that organization. ("Organization" could refer to the entire company, a division or a site, and the leader and his/her reports would make up the leadership team for that organization.) The leader must also convey this vision in a compelling manner—not only through words, but also through action. This includes demonstrating a willingness to consider and accept new ideas, and helping people to realize that their actions affect the safety of others. It also means being able to challenge and inspire people around the vision and values, and describing a compelling picture of what the future will look like when safety is fully realized. Leaders who want to develop a better safety vision might discuss safety in formal meetings or discuss implications of recent safety results with shopfloor workers.

2) Credibility

An excellent safety leader is credible. When s/he says something, others believe it and do not question motives or hear a mixed message. To be credible, one must be willing to admit personal mistakes openly, support direct reports, and represent and support the group's interests with higher management. A credible leader gives honest information about safety performance even if it is not well-received; asks for ideas on how improve personal performance; acts consistently; and applies safety standards uniformly. Leaders who choose to focus on credibility might try to view visits to the floor as opportunities to identify and ensure follow-up on safety issues, or might model and discuss safe behaviors in front of other employees.

3) Collaboration

Collaboration encompasses working well with others; promoting cooperation in safety; asking for and encouraging input from people on issues that will affect them; helping others resolve safety-related problems for themselves; and encouraging others to implement their decisions and solutions for improving safety. To improve this practice, a leader might express confidence in the ability of others; take opportunities to support the decisions that others make on their own; or gain commitment of others before implementing changes in safety.

4) Feedback & Recognition

An excellent safety leader provides effective feedback and recognizes people for their accomplishments. S/he publicly recognizes the contributions of others, uses praise more often than criticism, offers positive feedback and recognition for good performance and finds ways to celebrate safety achievements. To develop feedback and recognition skills, a

leader might take opportunities to recognize people for safety work well done or to recognize the contributions of others in meetings and communications.

5) Accountability

An excellent safety leader gives workers a fair appraisal of safety efforts and results, clearly communicates people's roles in safety and fosters the sense that people are responsible for the level of safety in their organizational unit. To develop accountability, a leader can set clear SH&E responsibilities for direct reports. For some leaders this is difficult because they take on too much themselves. These leaders might identify behaviors such as asking direct reports how they would handle a problem instead of simply prescribing a solution.

6) Communication

As a great communicator, the leader encourages people to deliver honest, complete information about safety (even if unfavorable), keeps people informed, and communicates frequently and effectively up, down and across the organization. Leaders who want to enhance their communication skills might try to share with people the background and reasons for SH&E policies and procedures, or ask what others are thinking when they are discussing safety.

7) Values Safety

An excellent safety leader acts to support safety values and principles. S/he leads by example regardless of position, title or role, and s/he clearly communicates to employees that safe behavior is expected. To develop a value for safety, a leader might discuss the impact of economic decisions on safety efforts or encourage others to connect safety to other performance areas.

8) Action-Oriented

An excellent safety leader is proactive rather than reactive in addressing safety issues. S/he gives timely, considered responses to safety concerns; demonstrates a sense of personal urgency and energy to achieve safety results; and demonstrates a performance-driven focus by delivering results with speed and excellence. To become more action-oriented, a leader might try to verify that SH&E efforts are focused on the top priorities.

Are Safety Leadership Behaviors Subject to the Same Principles as Frontline Employee or Supervisory Behavior?

In the author's experience, the principles that govern the behavior of senior leadership are identical to those which govern the behavior of frontline workers and supervisors. However, doing the right things to influence that behavior may vary significantly from the senior leader to the manager, supervisor or frontline employee. Senior leaders are often highly motivated and do not resist change, and the tasks before them are highly enabled.

However, efforts to get safety leaders to perform the right behaviors face the same types of difficulties encountered when trying to achieve any type of

behavior change. Short-term consequences for not performing a given safety behavior are often soon, certain and positive while the long-term effects of failing to engage in these behaviors may be difficult to detect. As a result, workers may be motivated by short-term positive consequences such as convenience, saving time, not having to confront difficult issues, avoiding boredom and irritation, finishing other work and maintaining the illusion of good safety performance.

But, like any other type of behavior, the safety-related behavior of senior leadership is susceptible to soon, certain and positive feedback as well. When senior leaders have a clear understanding of what critical behaviors are important for them to perform, and how they are related to a given objective, the stage is set for the right behaviors to occur. Some method of providing feedback is necessary. In the course of gathering data about senior leadership safety behavior, previously undetected barriers will often emerge.

Conclusion

As the SH&E professional's role continues to change, and companies require doing more with less, cultivating great safety leaders will be an important, if not critical, aspect of what SH&E professionals do. ∎

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