# Motivating Leadership of Safety Excellence:
# What Really Works

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The role and influence of leadership have come into sharp focus for safety professionals. How leaders think about safety, the behaviors they engage in, the safety messages they send, and the decisions they make enable and invigorate the achievement of safety excellence. So, *what motivates a leader to achieve safety excellence in the first place*? Leaders are charged with an array of complex tasks, demands, and responsibilities; how well we understand and engage a leader's intrinsic motivations largely drives how likely we are to achieve our safety goals.

In the author's experience, most leaders are already inherently motivated to improve safety: chiefly, leaders are driven by a sense that safety is the right thing to do. Secondarily, leaders also see safety as a way to build a performance platform, solidify the culture, and support profitability. This intrinsic motivation, however, fulfills only a precondition for safety leadership; it does not assure that the right things will happen. The reality of organizational life is that many leaders are poorly engaged in driving safety functioning, despite their good intentions. For these organizations, the question is not, *how do we motivate leaders to improve safety*, but, *how can we tap into our leaders' inherent motivation to achieve excellence in safety*?

This article examines the problem of leadership motivation, identifies the reasons that intrinsic motivations remain untapped, and develops an approach for engaging leaders in a way that demonstrably influences safety outcomes.

## The Motivation Question

The safety community has long debated the right way to motivate employees at any level to improve safety. The discussion has centered largely on two questions: What constitutes meaningful, as against superficial, involvement in safety activities? And what methods best generate genuine participation in safety? We acknowledge that participation in activities in themselves does not confirm motivation: I can "go through the motions" of attending a safety meeting, for instance, without actually contributing to the advancement of safety objectives. What

workers, supervisors, and leaders usually mean when they talk about creating motivation around safety is that they want to promote interest and participation in safety on a *personal* level. That is, whether I'm a leader or a front-line employee, safety is personally important to me, and I act within the organization because of, and on behalf of, that interest.

How then, do we generate or reinforce such motivation? The many approaches sort generally into two categories: transactional and transformational. Transactional approaches seek to generate motivation by offering something in exchange for a person's work and interest in safety improvement. Activities in this category include bonuses or awards for group performance, incentives for the performance of safety activities, and including safety as a metric in a leader's performance management and compensation. The second approach, transformational, seeks to engender motivation by engaging the person in the work itself.

At the front-line level, transactional motivation has mixed results at best. When the contingency is incident frequency, transactional motivation can reward (or punish) employees for things over which they have little control, such as the practices of a workgroup on another shift. At the senior level, safety incentives appear somewhat more effective; leaders are more often in control of the means to achieve outcomes and bear ultimately responsibility for them. Even here, transactional motivation can become a distraction from the larger issues of what it takes to be an effective safety leader. A leader measured and compensated on a specific metric, for instance recordable rates or workers' compensation cases, more likely focuses on that area to the exclusion of the bigger picture. While it is desirable to hold leaders accountable to specific outcomes (and therefore send the message that their leadership in safety is needed), relying on these measures alone misses an important opportunity to motivate leaders at an intrinsic level.

Our experience suggests that transactional motivation proves ultimately unsatisfactory because it fails to address the fundamental motives that drive engagement in any work activity. As pointed out by Herzberg and others, the most important work-related motivating factors do not have to do with pay, benefits, or other external elements. These things are important, but providing them at best brings the organization to a neutral position. What's more important to driving interest in work performance is achievement, recognition, and the satisfaction of the work itself. Financial and other tangible incentives, while potentially compelling in the short term, do not appeal to the underlying drive for the long term – they do not generate motivation on a personal level.

## Intrinsic Motivations

Intrinsic motivation connects people on multiple levels — the intellectual, the emotional, the creative, and the psychological — with the work they do. This connection is predicated on what each person brings to safety: what safety means to him, what prompts him to become involved in it, and what he would like to get out of it. We begin below with a look at what safety means to the person we are trying to engage; the meanings vary from level to level, just as the experience of safety – and its outcomes – differ at each organizational level. With this understanding, we can define activities and interactions that capitalize on these intrinsic motivations and make them active.

## Concerns of Senior-Most Leaders

In the safety arena, senior-most leaders (often called "C-level") worry about fatalities first and foremost. While some worry more than others, and some care from experience, which is a hard teacher, senior leaders as a group are moved by fatalities in their organizations. Most find unacceptable that fatal accidents are preventable and continue to occur in their organizations. For those who aren't yet motivated to prevent fatalities the key question is, Is it necessary that a life be lost? In other words, *Are fatal accidents a part of doing business, or can they be prevented?*

In addition to precluding fatalities, senior leaders are also concerned with getting things done competently. When safety managers say they have trouble getting "management support," they often have failed to demonstrate their competency in making a difference. The senior leader holds back support more from fear that resources will be used ineffectively than from a lack of interest in prevention.

On a personal level, senior leaders are motivated to improve safety because somewhere deep down they realize it's the right thing to do. Safety also complements the charge a leader has to promote sustainability: creating an organization that is responsible and that cultivates its resources. Engaging senior leaders, and therefore motivating them, means showing them how they can influence safety outcomes, and enhance the wellbeing of the organization, directly through their actions, decisions, and beliefs, and indirectly through their support.

## Concerns of Hourly Employees

Front-line employees are concerned with their own wellbeing in the present day-to-day activity of their jobs. They have seen other people hurt, sometimes seriously, and they see the potential for injury, as well as the exposure to risk, on a daily basis. For them, safety is personal. Safety means not getting injured personally and not seeing friends and coworkers get injured. Hourly workers understand from their day-to-day experiences how the company views safety. Does the organization respond promptly to known hazards? Are safety suggestions appreciated and valued? Are safety meetings conducted well or perfunctorily? Do new employees receive adequate safety training? Do first-line supervisors model safe behavior? The list goes on, but the point is that safety isn't about what people say, it's about what they do.

What does this insight tell us about how to engage the hourly employees in safety, and thereby how to motivate them? It says that we should look for opportunities to have hourly employees participate in safety improvement activities, that participation in itself will be motivating. Lead a safety meeting, do a safety observation, fix a safety problem, make a suggestion, give feedback to another employee. *Involvement generates motivation.*

## Concerns of the First-Line Supervisor

To a first-line supervisor or team leader, safety means keeping people from getting hurt. To this level of leader, an injured employee is an individual, not a statistic. Given this proximity to exposure and injury, supervisors should be among the strongest natural allies of safety efforts. But supervisors often do not have the skills they need to be effective in this role. Employees are often promoted to supervisory positions because of technical proficiency rather than management skill, and, even within the same organization, we see great variation among supervisors in their safety skills and motivation.

To engage supervisors and team leaders, it is essential to develop their leadership skills, to foster awareness of this group's importance to safety performance, and to reveal points of influence that supervisors and team leaders can leverage for safety. Engagement for this level takes the form of talking to employees, observing how work is done, observing exposures, and responding to identified hazards.

<u>Concerns of the Plant Manager</u>
Much like the senior leader, plant managers are concerned with fatalities and with ensuring that resources are well used. But, unless the plant is large and the work hazardous, the number of fatalities will remain low even if the workplace is unsafe. Plant managers must understand the relationship of exposure events to injury events. And to do that, they need to understand leading indicators: measures of variables that can be shown to have a statistically valid, predictive relationship to the frequency of injury.

Engaging plant managers means giving them the leading indicators that tell them where exposures are occurring, charging them with the active oversight of the site's safety systems and mechanisms, and immersing them in finding solutions to safety issues.

<u>Concerns of Labor Representatives</u>
Labor leaders want to keep their members safe. The imperative of assuring worker safety commands the labor leader's interest and guides union leaders' actions. Labor representatives are also interested in finding common ground with management on the quality of working conditions. Engaging these leaders means giving them a role to play in safety activities, soliciting their input on safety decisions, and finding joint safety issues on which to collaborate.

# Connecting Senior Leaders to Safety Performance

Most senior leaders come to the challenge of safety with a history of competence and a track record of success. They bring to this challenge either inbred or well developed motivation to promote safety throughout the organization. That is the good news. The bad news is that leaders have little slack in time and resources with which to add additional activities. Effective engagement at this level requires that we seize existing opportunities to influence safety, which for senior leaders means their day-to-day interactions, tasks, and decisions.

How then do we connect C-level leaders to safety performance, to leadership behaviors at the operating levels, and more broadly to company culture? Research has identified a set of leadership characteristics that predict organizational culture and safety performance – a framework within which the leader influences safety outcomes. This framework comprises three categories of leadership characteristics.

<u>1. Personal Safety Ethic</u>
Effective safety leadership starts with who the leader is: his or her value for people, her personality and her emotional commitment to safety. Culture receives and hosts the effects of a leader's values and behavioral standards—what he believes is important, what is acceptable, and what is not. Of course, what's important here is not what a leader says he values, but what he *actually* values—the ethics manifested in his personal behavior. These elements influence safety

decision-making, interactions with subordinates, the priority the leader places on safety, and how the leader drives success.

## 2. How the Leader Influences

Good research reveals the relationship between leadership style and safety results (e.g. Hoffman & Morgeson, 1999; Zohar, 2002). Leadership style consists of four dimensions that describe how a leader motivates and inspires people to go above and beyond the letter of their jobs. The **Influencing** dimension establishes the basic credibility and principled action so critical to forming relationships. The **Engaging** dimension creates relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding. The **Inspiring** dimension propels these relationships toward an improved future, while the **Challenging** dimension helps break paradigms that get in the way.

## 3. What Leaders Do

Creating a culture in which safety is a driving value (or isn't) arises from leaders' day-to-day actions. In the most effective safety leaders, certain behaviors are seen to recur (Krause 2005). We find it helpful to view these practices sequentially, one building upon the other.

**Vision**–The leader envisions what safety performance excellence would look like and conveys that vision in a compelling way throughout the organization. He or she acts in a way that communicates high personal standards in safety, helps others question and rethink their own assumptions about safety, and describes a compelling picture of what the future can be in terms of recurring behaviors at every level of the organization.

**Credibility**–The leader commands trustworthiness among other people in the organization, and fosters a high level of trust in his or her peers and reports. The leader is willing to admit mistakes with others, "goes to bat" for direct reports, supports the interests of the group, and gives honest information about safety even it if is unwelcome.

**Collaboration**–The leader works well with other people, promotes cooperation and collaboration in fostering safety, actively seeks input from people on issues that affect them, and encourages others to implement their decisions and solutions for reducing exposures to hazard.

**Communication**–The leader is a great communicator. He or she encourages people to give honest and complete information about safety, even (or especially) when the information is unfavorable. The leader keeps people informed about the big picture in safety, and communicates frequently and effectively up, down, and across the organization.

**Action-Orientation**–The leader is proactive rather than reactive in addressing safety issues. The leader gives timely, considered responses to safety concerns, demonstrates a sense of personal urgency to achieve safety results, and demonstrates a performance-driven energy by delivering results with speed and excellence.

**Feedback & Recognition**–The leader is good at providing feedback and recognizing people for their accomplishments, publicly recognizes the contributions of others, uses praise more often than criticism, gives positive feedback and recognition for good performance, and finds ways to celebrate accomplishments in safety.

**Accountability**–Finally, the leader clearly communicates people's roles in the safety effort, gives people a fair appraisal of their efforts and results in safety, and fosters the sense that every person is responsible for safety outcomes in their work unit. This practice comes last: accountability, absent the other practices, can be counterproductive. When integrated into the other six practices, accountability complements the work undertaken.
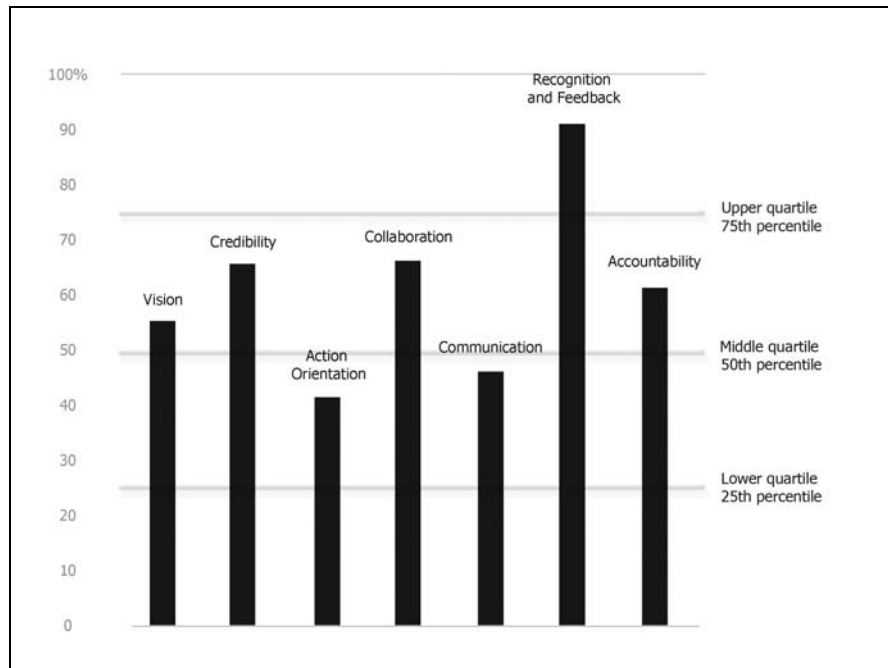


**Exhibit 1. A sample leadership diagnostic report
showing best practices expressed as percentiles.**

The safety leadership best practices defined here, along with the four leadership styles, can be measured through 360 degree feedback and interviews with the leader's peers, reports, and superiors. Results can be shown as percentiles comparing the individual leader to the scores of leaders in a large comparative database. Exhibit 1 illustrates a case (true but disguised) of a leader frequently seen as giving effective recognition and feedback, but not perceived as prone to act to address and resolve issues in the safety arena. In this instance, the leader might work with a coach to develop an action plan that would enhance his ability to support the activities of others in order to execute critical safety tasks.

Rarely do two or more leaders display identical profiles of relative frequency in the employment of best practices. Differences in skill, experience, and even motivation tend to produce wide variations, even within the same company. Exhibit 2 illustrates this point, showing both the mean percentile score (the bar heights) for the senior leadership team of a medium-sized global company, but also displaying the individual percentiles of each member of senior leadership (the triangles within and above each bar).

**Exhibit 2. There can be wide variations in best practices scores within a leadership team.**

This diagnostic work provides leaders with tangible information about how they shape organizational culture. A study of relationships between the top site-level leader's best practices and site-level culture (Exhibit 3), shows strong positive correlations between ratings of each best practice and overall ratings of each dimension of organizational culture. The leadership's overall score (the aggregate of the seven best practices) predicts culture overall. By "culture," we mean the relative frequency of the perception of both good organizational functioning (e.g., perceived organizational support) and strong safety climate, among other factors.
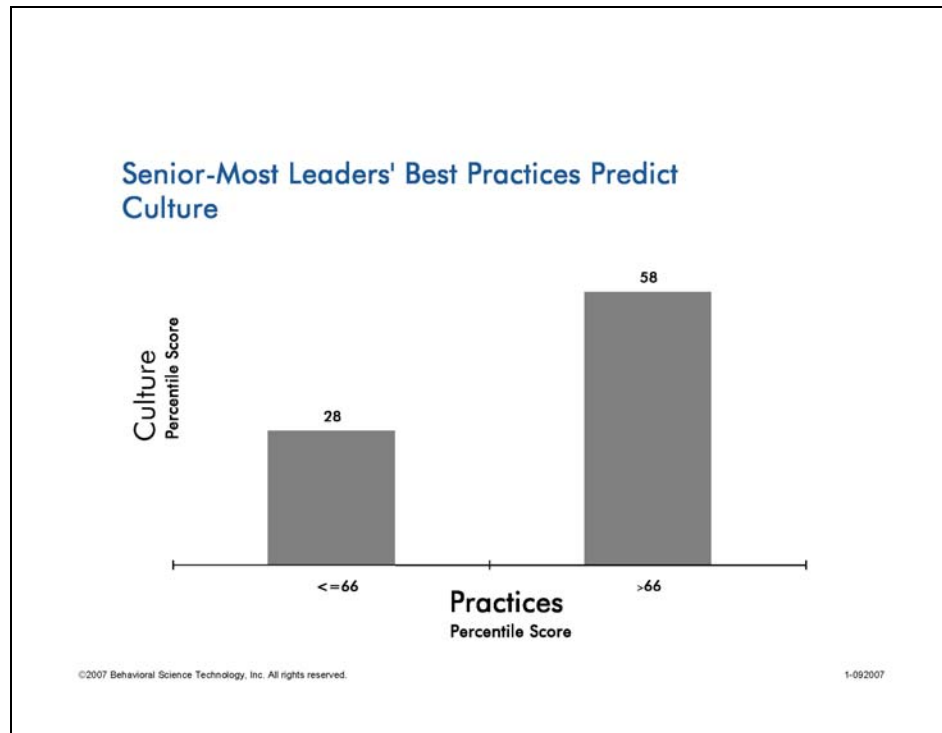
**Exhibit 3. Leaders' best practices predict culture.**

## Engaging the Senior Leader: Coaching and Development

Diagnostic tools provide an ideal medium through which to create active motivation among leaders. These tools allow leaders to see in tangible terms how they are affecting safety outcomes, and the wellbeing of the organization, directly through their actions, decisions, and beliefs, and indirectly through their support. These tools also provide a starting point for individual leaders to develop their own safety best practices and strengthen their leadership style. While leaders vary in their abilities and skills, safety leadership behaviors can be learned and developed.

Specifically, a coach can be invaluable in guiding the individual leader's development and fostering active motivation. Moreover, coaching no longer represents just a remedial task for the inconsistent or weak performer: it now regularly provides needed development for leaders who want to move from good leadership performance to sustained excellence in safety leadership, from "B+" or "A-" performance to the rarefied company of the solid and consistent "A" performer.

The goal is to help leaders understand how their behaviors affect reports, peers, and managers, and to influence their ability to meet personal and organizational goals. A coach reviews with the leader the consequences that result from a specific behavior (or pattern of behaviors) and provides a clear perspective on how these behaviors either support or impede the achievement of goals. The leader and coach then develop a plan to close any gaps and leverage existing strengths. The plan doesn't have to be complicated — in fact, the simpler is the plan, the better. Focusing on

three or four main issues, the plan should include a concise description of the action steps (the specific behaviors) the leader will employ, the gap the actions are intended to address, who will do what and when, and how the coach and leader will measure the impact.

The coach's role is to support, suggest, measure, cajole, nag, and provide input. It is the leader's job to "do" — to make the changes that will ensure the objectives established in the plan are met. An additional role for the coach might include observing leaders in situations in which they apply the new behaviors and providing both corrective suggestions and positive feedback. The coach can also help leaders to think through methodologies, techniques, meeting agendas, and communication tools that will help them achieve the desired outcomes, plus, of course, providing a "sympathetic ear and a little advice" when needed.

The use of such an approach has been shown to be effective at improving downstream results (Exhibit 4). Individual leaders who go through the development process often gain new insights into performance issues that they have struggled with for years. Many are also pleasantly surprised to find that drastic adjustments to their behaviors are not needed to assure a measurable impact. The pattern of improvement in Exhibit 4, moreover, is common: Leadership coaching helps organizations boost employee engagement and lower injury rates.
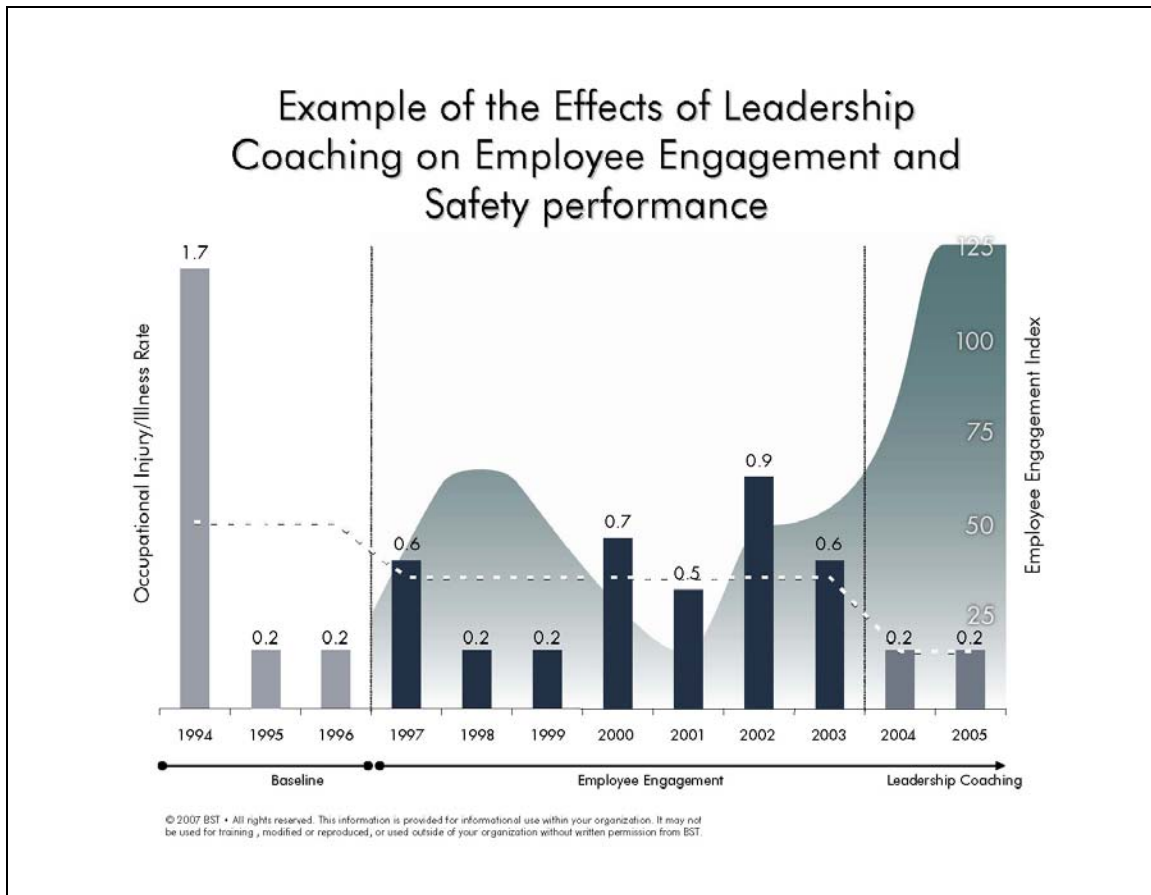
**Exhibit 4. Occupational injury rates for one site shown
before and after leadership coaching.**

## Conclusion

The motivation that drives leaders to engage in safety differs fundamentally from other business motives. The leader's motivation to get safety right requires compassion more than profit improvement or personal success. Connecting this inherent drive with concrete, actionable behaviors appeals to the individual leader's need to produce results and achieve what is personally important. It also allows organizations to develop effective safety leaders throughout the organization, setting the stage for sustainable safety excellence.

Overall, the leader's primary safety role is to build a culture in which safety is a driving value. In this environment enabling safety systems thrive, sustaining systems are held in place, and the working interface is continually made safer through the reduction of exposure to hazards. Both our client research and the research literature confirm that leaders' behaviors shape culture, that culture predisposes organizations to safe (or unsafe) behaviors, and that best safety practices at every level determine the frequency of unacceptable exposures and predict whether safety

outcomes continue to improve. What's new in our client research is the practicality and pervasive effect of coaching on the behaviors of leaders who stand at the first link in this chain of influence for safety excellence.

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