

10 Leadership Qualities for a Total Safety Culture

Safety Management is Not Enough

By E. SCOTT GELLER

Many safety professionals use the term “management” more than “leadership.” For example, an ASSE symposium held in Las Vegas in February 1999 was entitled “Best Practices in Safety Management.” Yet, in a keynote address to attendees, John Nance referred to “leadership” rather than “management.” He discussed the need for safety leaders to overcome organizational and cultural barriers that prevent open discussion about hazards and at-risk behavior. “Good leaders invigorate the flow of interpersonal communication,” he said, and “orchestrate others to achieve synergy.”

At the same symposium, Thomas Krause defined leaders as people who “inspire people to want to do something,” as opposed to managers who “hold people accountable for doing something” (59+). This distinction was consistent with the author’s presentation, which showed that, in order to achieve a total safety culture, people must take personal accountability or responsibility for safety (Geller 213+).

As a follow-up to those thought-provoking presentations, let’s examine key differences between safety management and safety leadership. The purpose is not to belittle management nor to suggest that less management is needed. The objective is to illustrate the need for more leadership in safety—which is *not* the same as management. The 10 qualities described are relevant for everyone in a work culture, including managers.

LEADERS FOCUS ON PROCESS

Starting in kindergarten, the focus of education is often on the final result rather than on the process by which an outcome is achieved. As a result, over time, students can become obsessed with grades and lose sight of the important purpose of their education. Rather than focus on critical thinking and problem-solving processes related to a particular theory or research finding, they memorize facts and formulae needed to pass an exam. Furthermore, rather than help students think creatively about situations, some teachers merely lecture the facts. Final grades are given, and the critical outcome is attained.

In most settings, managers are held accountable for outcome numbers; in

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turn, they use these numbers to motivate others. In safety, such numbers are based on the relatively rare occurrence of an injury; they are reactive, reflect failure and are not diagnostic for prevention.

Conversely, safety leaders hold people accountable for accomplishing proactive process activities that can prevent injuries. When process numbers improve, people are reinforced for their efforts and develop a sense of personal responsibility for continued contributions and never-ending improvement.

A process orientation asks, "How did they achieve it?" instead of, "What did they achieve?" The question is not, "What is the total recordable injury rate?" but, "What steps are needed to keep people safe every day?" It is not about failing to achieve an injury-free workplace, it is about deriving corrective action plans for ongoing reports of environmental/behavioral audits, near misses, first-aid cases, property-damage incidents, and occurrences of recordable and lost-time injuries.

When an outcome—such as a reduced injury rate—is viewed as an achievement of successive steps or "small wins," people's sense of personal control is enhanced. They see the outcome as hard-won through their involvement in a process. By continuing to increase attention to the process, injuries can be further reduced. Managers track outcomes. Leaders enable and reinforce discussions of the ongoing processes needed to prevent injuries. Such conversations keep people aware of what they must do to ensure safety.

LEADERS EDUCATE

In industry, training is a more common term than education—a reflection of the concern that employees must know exactly what actions to perform to complete a particular task effectively and safely. However, managers with a training mindset can appear to demand a certain activity—actions become a matter of "I said so" rather than "it's the best way to do it."

Education involves an explanation of key principles behind procedures; it enables the listener to understand *why* protocol must be followed. With the proper education, people develop responsibility for an action plan—they don't do something a certain way simply because a manager is holding them accountable.

Education also inspires creative customization and ownership. In other

words, when leaders offer rationale and examples rather than policy and directives, employees can select procedures that best fit their situation. As a result, they assume ownership and follow through from a self-directed perspective.

LEADERS USE CONDITIONAL STATEMENTS

An instructor's style can encourage or inhibit creativity and ownership. For example, when facts are presented unconditionally (as an absolute truth), alternative ideas are stifled. Such single-minded teaching and learning may be efficient and may prevent interpersonal conflict, but the cost can be loss of involvement, personal responsibility and resourcefulness.

Langer studied the impact of unconditional versus conditional instruction by introducing a collection of objects in an ordinary, unconditional way to one group. For example, "This is a hair dryer." "This is an extension cord." "This is a dog's chew toy." To a second group, the objects were introduced conditionally with the extra phrase "could be." Instead of "This is a hair dryer," the subjects heard, "This could be a hair dryer."

After objects were introduced, subjects were asked to complete survey forms. While the forms were being completed, the experimenter announced that the study could not continue because the wrong instructions had been given and no spare survey forms were available. However, several subjects in the conditional group suggested that the rubber

chew toy could be used as an eraser to correct the flawed forms (Langer).

Consider the impact of discussing safety rules as unconditional mandates versus discussing a certain safety principle that implies guidelines which can be operationalized according to relevant circumstances. Clearly, the second approach will stimulate more resourcefulness and ownership because it allows for adaptation to a particular work situation; this fosters ownership and commitment.

LEADERS LISTEN FIRST

Under pressure to complete a job, managers often speak first, then listen to concerns or complaints—a reasonable strategy for efficient action. After all, management strives to make events occur according to an established plan; often, this requires specific directives and a mechanism for motivating compliance. After describing an action plan and accountability system, managers answer questions from workers who want to make sure they will do the right thing.

In contrast, leaders take time to learn another person's perspective before offering direction, advice or support. Active listening is key to diagnosing a situation before promoting change or continuous improvement. It is not the most-efficient approach; it requires patience and commitment to ask questions.

LEADERS PROMOTE OWNERSHIP

Involving those expected to execute an action plan in its development helps develop ownership—for both the process and outcome. In other words, when leaders provide a reasonable rationale for a desired outcome, then allow others to customize methods for achieving that outcome, they facilitate internal—or self-directed—motivation (Geller "The Truth" 34+). People participate because they want to, not because they have to.

When managers direct by edict, they may elicit compliance, yet may also stifle self-directed motivation. Behaviors performed to comply with a prescribed standard, policy or mandate are other-directed; they are accomplished to satisfy someone else and will likely cease when compliance cannot be monitored. For example, this occurs when personal protective equipment is used at work, yet not at home to perform similarly hazardous tasks.

When people are self-directed with regard to safety, no external accountability system is needed to keep them performing safely. In addition, they actively care for the safety of others.

LEADERS ENCOURAGE CHOICE

The advantages of giving people choice are well-documented (Geller *The Psychology*; Langer; Steiner). Being given opportunities for personal choice increases both motivation and the sense of personal control. The greater an employee's personal control, the more likely s/he will participate in efforts to improve safety. In other words, people with personal control are more likely to actively care.

Research by Langer and colleagues supports the value of allowing people to make choices. For example, in one seminal project, Langer and Rodin gave one group of elderly residents in a Connecticut nursing home the opportunity to care for a plant and make several minor decisions about their daily routines.

One-and-a-half years later, these residents were more cheerful, alert and active than a similar group of residents who were not given such choices. Although those residents received a plant, the nurses cared for it. The most-remarkable result of this choice manipulation: after a year and a half, less than half as many residents in the choice group had died as had in the other group (Langer and Rodin).

Langer also suggests people can become more motivated and aware of personal control by becoming mindful of the many choices available during the course of ordinary activities. For example, a person chooses when to wake up in the morning, what to wear, what to eat for breakfast and how to travel to work. Because the routine is familiar, it is easy to overlook the personal control involved. However, one must recognize that many alternatives exist among each set of behaviors, and each person willingly selects an option.

Besides enabling choices, leaders help people become more aware of how they shape their days. This increases people's perception of personal control and, thus, their motivation. Helping people see options also helps them consider alternatives. Thus, when leaders help others become more observant of their everyday choices, they not only increase people's awareness of personal control, they also set the stage for more-effective decisions.

LEADERS SET EXPECTATIONS

All behavior starts as other-directed—performed because someone asked for it (Watson and Tharp). Therefore, the key issue is whether behavior remains other-

directed or advances to self-directed (Geller and Clarke). This transformation depends, to some degree, on the method of asking. A request perceived as a mandate or an unconditional statement is likely to remain other-directed. This is the typical management approach to safety, as illustrated by compliance issues and the common slogan, "Safety is a condition of employment."

Leadership facilitates this shift by initiating a process or action plan with expectations rather than mandates. What is the difference? Although both strategies specify desirable outcomes and establish the need for certain behaviors, expectations imply choice. A certain outcome is anticipated, but employees are given the opportunity to make decisions regarding procedures and methods. When people know what is expected, yet perceive some personal control in how to achieve those goals, they are more likely to own the process and transition from an other-directed to self-directed mindset.

LEADERS ARE CONFIDENT BUT UNCERTAIN

Langer proposes that "displaying a degree of uncertainty" is a leadership quality that is conducive to promoting innovation and initiative. She suggests that leaders should show confidence that a particular job will be completed, yet without being sure of the best way to achieve it. This fosters innovation and self-motivation—employees see their involvement as crucial. In addition, people are less likely to hide mistakes from a

confident-yet-uncertain leader. In such environments, workers willingly suggest ways to improve a process. As Langer says, "Admission of uncertainty leads to a search for more information, and with more information there may be more options" (143).

To test this theory, Langer assessed the general level of confidence among supervisors at a particular company, then asked them how many of their daily decisions have absolutely correct answers. In addition, employees completed surveys designed to assess their work relationships with supervisors. Results showed that confident yet relatively uncertain supervisors were perceived to allow more independent action.

Relating these findings to industrial safety, leaders should show confident expectation that appropriate precautions will be taken to prevent injuries. However, they should not pretend to know exactly how the injury-free job should be accomplished. Leaders realize that employees are the true safety experts—they know what hazards must be eliminated or avoided and what safety-related behaviors must be improved.

Certainty and familiarity also contribute to fatigue and burnout (Langer). When the job is seen as routine, energy and enthusiasm wane. Workers lose interest and their sense of choice and personal control is dampened. As a result, they can easily be lulled into a false sense of security that "I've always done it this way and never been injured." Such a mindset not only hinders innovation, it also contributes to feelings of burnout, which in turn puts people at risk for personal injury.

LEADERS LOOK BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Many managers focus on the numbers. In safety, that means injury rates and compensation costs. When assessing behavior-based safety principles and procedures, managers often ask, "What's the return on investment?" They want to know how much the process will cost and how long it will take for the numbers (e.g., total recordable injuries) to improve. This analytical approach is inspired by the popular management principle, "You can only manage what you can measure."

Leaders appreciate the need to hold people accountable with numbers, yet also understand that not everything can

be measured. For example, through their actions, leaders strive to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism and a sense of belonging throughout a work culture. They do not worry about measuring their direct impact on these intangibles.

In most cases, one should periodically assess whether certain actions are influencing people's subjective feelings in a desired direction. This assessment can be achieved informally through personal interviews. In the author's opinion, it is a given that certain interpersonal and group activities are useful.

For example, genuine one-to-one recognition increases trust and feelings of importance; behavior-based goal-setting builds feelings of empowerment; and group celebrations facilitate a sense of belonging. Leaders perform and support such activities without expecting to see an immediate change in the "numbers." They need no monitoring scheme to motivate their attempts to help people feel valuable.

LEADERS MAKE MORE DISTINCTIONS

Humans attach labels to identify certain groups of people—for example, student, patient, union representative, athlete. Each label elicits a particular image and set of characteristics—and influences how one views, judges and reacts to someone in that group. Such "premature cognitive commitment" leads to stereotyping, prejudice and interpersonal conflict (Langer).

Efforts to combat prejudice often stress that everyone should be considered equal and that categorizing people is wrong. In other words, to decrease discrimination, people are told to stop discriminating.

According to Langer, this is the wrong approach. Categorizing people and objects according to discernable characteristics is a natural learning process—it is how humans learn about and understand the world. The key to reducing prejudice is to make *more*, not fewer, distinctions between people.

As people become more attentive to the differences that exist among individuals and understand how these differences vary according to environmental or interpersonal context, it becomes increasingly difficult to place people in universal categories. As a result, it becomes impossible to view people and their behavior as

black or white, normal or abnormal, safe or unsafe.

Leaders put people's attributes and skills on a continuum. A person is not good or bad, skilled or unskilled, safe or unsafe; rather, s/he is a particular degree of good, skilled and safe.

Furthermore, since a person's quality level for a certain attribute can fluctuate dramatically from one work situation to another, leaders make more distinctions between people; as a result, they perpetuate fewer global stereotypes. This enables objective linkage between people's talents and job descriptions, and facilitates the kind of interpersonal trust needed for a total safety culture (Geller "Interpersonal Trust" 16+).

CONCLUSION

The 10 characteristics described can help people transition from an other-directed perspective about safety to self-directed responsibility for safety.

Self-directed behavior is highly desirable, especially in the domain of safety and health promotion. When people are self-directed with regard to safety, no external accountability system is needed to keep them performing safely. In addition, they actively care for the safety of others. The leadership characteristics described help build such responsibility, while typical management styles can stifle its development.

Bottom line: Safety management is necessary at times to motivate people to do the right things for injury prevention. But such activity is not sufficient to achieve a total safety culture. Safety managers must know when to become safety leaders and build personal responsibility rather than hold people accountable. ■

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