

Safety Leadership Formula: Trust + Credibility x Competence = Results

*A guide to safety excellence through
organizational, cultural and personal change*

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo

SAFETY LEADERSHIP is both simple and complex. Successful safety leaders advocate a few basic principles—such as ensure goals are shared and clear; set the example; create trust by trusting people; view mistakes as learning opportunities rather than fix blame—to establish credibility and gain support for safety initiatives. According to these leaders, technology and procedures are important to safety performance, but none of it works if people do not believe that the leader cares and is sincere.

These principles are simple, common-sense concepts. Yet, as anyone who has struggled with a poor safety culture can attest, they are difficult to implement. Why? Because safety deals with people. Take this real-life example. A plant manager talking to his second-in-command about the importance of safety was moved to the point of tears as he talked about his closest friend dying in a mining accident. Yet, employees say he is the biggest detriment to safety. They fear him and are at the point of filing civil rights suits over workers' compensation issues.

While his intentions are to save lives and prevent injuries, this manager is perceived as vindictive, uncaring and self-serving. How is this possible? It is because he is unaware of the effects of his actions or the messages they communicate. He is dealing with people who have diverse needs, desires, motivations, fears, cultural backgrounds and experiences. Thus, he cannot successfully lead without some degree of self-awareness and the ability to work with diverse viewpoints.

This story illustrates why achieving excellence in safety is largely about building relationships. It is about communication. It is about establishing a

foundation of trust and credibility that motivates people to follow and enforce safety procedures because it is the right thing to do, not because it is mandated. Safety is 90 percent about people—this is what makes leading safety both simple and complex. Precisely because of this paradox, one needs a simple leadership model with a set of concrete behaviors to serve as a guide through the complexity of organizational and human factors that ultimately affect safety performance. The model presented in the safety leadership formula addresses this need.

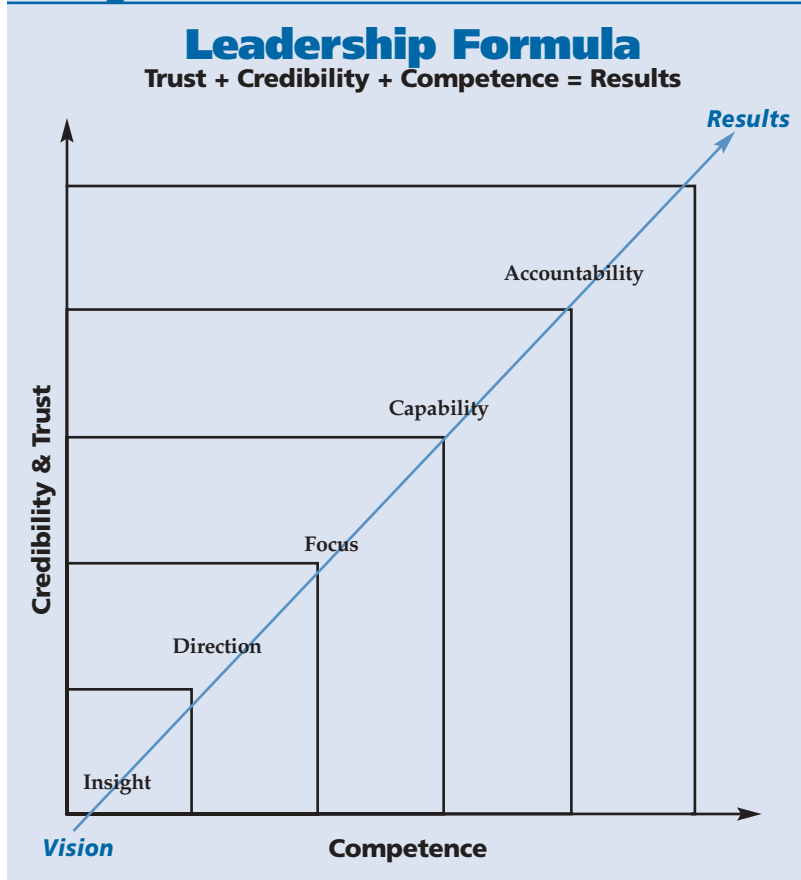
Two factors give this model credibility. First, this model is based on the extensive research of authors who have spent their careers studying successful leaders and their ability to create change that gets results. Second, it is based on factual case histories of leaders who used this model's concepts to turn unsafe, negative environments into positive, successful enterprises with excellent safety records. These people applied the safety leadership formula. They developed both personal trust and credibility while developing the competencies for safety excellence in their organization.

**Trust + Credibility x
Organizational
Development = Results**

The three-dimensional model for safety leadership that is shown in Figure 1 is

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Figure 1



based on the concept that people move from vision to implementation via three dimensions which operate simultaneously:

- 1) gaining personal trust and credibility;
- 2) organizational development (developing the ability to achieve the vision);
- 3) five-step leadership pathway—insight, direction, capability, focus and accountability—that will guide a person's actions to successfully develop trust, credibility and an organization capable of safety excellence.

This model was developed as a result of the author's extensive research into how people and organizations change. The five-step leadership pathway is a direct result of this research. The concept of adding the concurrent dimensions for personal and organizational actions was adapted from Ulrich's well-known model, Leadership Charge: Credibility x Capability (Ulrich 1996). Let's examine how each dimension provides leadership guidance.

First Dimension: Trust & Credibility

Based on interviews with more than 200 plant sites, the author has discovered that lack of trust and credibility between labor and management is the most-frequent obstacle to improving safety cul-

tures (Carrillo 1999). It is logical, then, that any large-scale safety effort requires trustworthy and credible leadership—leaders who have the personal habits, values, traits and competencies to engender trust and commitment from those who take their direction.

One of the best examples of creating personal credibility was the action taken by Johnson & Johnson's leadership when the company had stores pull all Tylenol off the shelves as soon as the first cases of cyanide poisonings were reported. Within days, the company repackaged its products to prevent tampering. Today, Tylenol remains one of the most-successful over-the-counter drugs on the market.

Compare this to the action taken by the leaders of Bridgestone-Firestone. The company initially deflected responsibility for the tire failures by blaming poor customer maintenance. One year later, Bridgestone Corp.'s shares are worth 50 percent less than their high of \$215 in August 2000. Which leadership actions inspired trust and credibility?

Such critical incidents can build or destroy trust with the public and employees. However, leaders face smaller trust-building issues on a daily basis. The way they handle these issues heavily influences their credibility.

Yet, no simple formula for responding exists. People can always deliver an incident, a hazard, an experience or a story to substantiate their mistrust. The answer appears simple. Identify the problem and address it; fix the hazard, apologize or right the injustice, and the problem will be solved, right? Not necessarily. A company can fix the specific, but that in itself will not negate years of negative experience, assumptions and mistrust.

Safety leaders describe it as a Sisyphus experience, named after the Greek myth in which the arrogant hero's punishment is to roll a boulder up a mountain only to have it roll back down as soon as he reaches the top. Thus, he is forced to begin over and over again.

Building trust and credibility is similar. Carefully negotiate a deal. Correct one thing, only to find some new problem taking its place. Establish a tenuous trust line only to learn that the promised safety bonus for reaching the goal fell through due to low corporate earnings. Thus, the cycle begins again—trying to establish credibility and trust that the management/company really cares about safety.

In the myth, Sisyphus comes to accept his ordeal and learns to take pride in his accomplishments of the moment. Breaking through the cycle of mistrust requires a similar attitude from management; it is only through keeping commitments and repeatedly producing results despite apparent setbacks that a leader eventually wins over his/her followers.

In the following case history, a union leader describes the process that he and his plant manager employ to establish trust and credibility through commitment. It is a moving success story that has inspired many turbulent organizations to attempt the journey toward safety excellence.

Mark Hidalgo's Story

Tom, the plant manager, made the commitment. No one believed him when he said, "I'll shut this refinery down before I let you work unsafe." He spent the money. He committed people's time to get involved. I worked on safety for two years full time. Tom himself would go out in the field and call us on anything unsafe going on in the yard. He went out with me on tours. If Tom said he wanted something fixed, it would get done. Supervisors would never ask people to do something unsafe because they knew Tom would fire them.

My advice is don't start a program if you're not willing to spend money to get things fixed. When I started supporting the VPP program, they just laughed at me. One of the first things we did was print the outstanding safety concerns and work orders. It generated a computer list two inches thick.

We attacked the problem by setting up a stewards program. Each person was elected in his/her area by peers. A monthly steward and supervisor meeting was held to talk about safety issues with the head operator. They established a list of priority issues and threw the old list away.

Leadership is not just management, it has to be on both sides. You have to prove that you're going to work together before people will believe you. If you stand up there together and say this is why you have to wear your personal protective equipment, people know you're serious.

It's tough. You can do nine things right and one thing wrong. The wrong thing is what they remember. They tried to vote out VPP for political reasons. We kept right on talking to people and listening to their concerns and addressing them. That's how we made it. Commitment is everything.

Second Dimension: Developing the Competencies for Safety Excellence

So, the first dimension of successful leadership is creating personal trust and credibility. The second focuses on developing the organization's capability to succeed. This entails developing people and creating the processes, structures and skills to support safety excellence.

The following story about Tom Moeller, oil refinery manager for Exxon-Mobil, provides an excellent example of this leadership dimension.

Tom Moeller's Story

When I came to Beaumont in 1992, this plant was in serious trouble. We had lost \$90 million. Our expenses were in the fourth quartile on the Solomon survey that said we were at the bottom of the heap of all the refineries in the U.S. Today, we have the lowest cost structure of all the refineries in the

world, and we have one of the best safety records of all the Exxon-Mobil refineries in the world. During the time we made these improvements, we downsized 400 people. In my opinion, our culture is far better today than it was in 1992.

We did it by setting up and training a lot of teams among our employees. There was a team there that worried about sling inspections, inspections of our cranes, making sure that we met all the OSHA standards, making sure that the repairs were made when they should be made, and that preventive maintenance was done. We had OSHA come in and train everyone. There is a team in the weld shop and there is a team pretty much everywhere that says to the hourly folks and supervisors, "This is the OSHA standard." We also gave them the freedom to spend the money to do what they had to do and to set people aside to get the job done.

We spent a fair amount of money. The other side of the coin is our heavy equipment reliability is way up. Big pieces of equipment might cost a million or half a million dollars, so you don't want them out of service much of the time or you will have to replace them by renting a piece of equipment. There aren't any injuries. While we spend a lot of money to train people, the workers now have responsibility for it. They spend money for the appropriate repairs. I think we probably made it back several times over.

This case history provides concrete examples of the types of leadership activities it takes to develop the people and systems to support safety excellence. It also illustrates that substantial resources are involved in achieving the vision, and that there is a large return on the investment.

Third Dimension: From Vision to Safety Excellence

The third dimension of the model is a five-step leadership pathway to turn vision into actions to reach safety excellence. Together, these steps form the core capabilities to fundamentally change the way people think: the ability to aspire, reflect and view organizations as systems. Figure 2 illustrates examples of specific actions for each of the five steps.

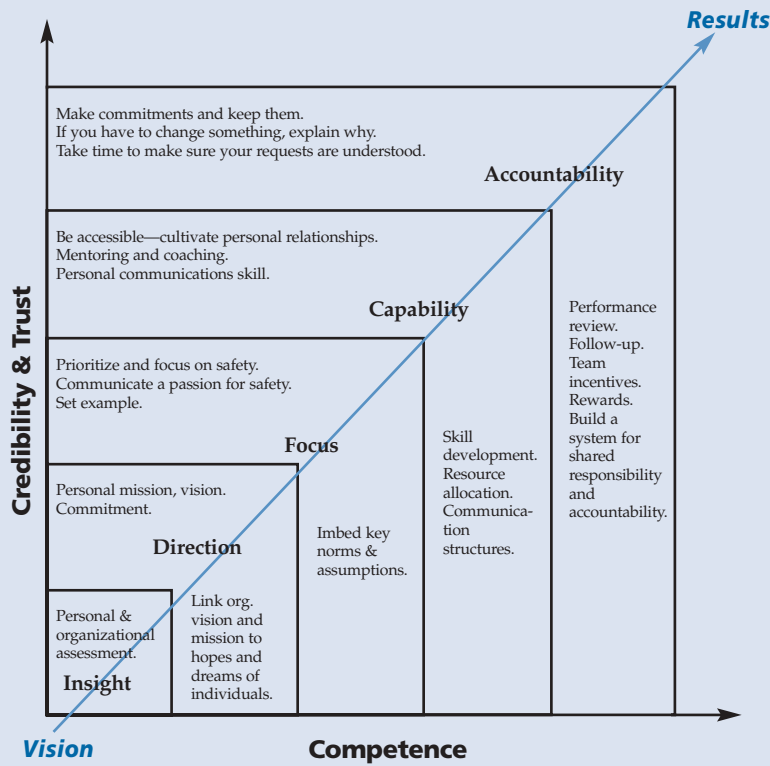
- 1) Insight: the ability to see the ways people (self and others) contribute to the problem.
- 2) Direction: the ability to aspire and inspire.
- 3) Capability: seeing the organization as a system and being willing to acquire a profound understanding of the problems.
- 4) Focus: single-mindedness and perseverance.
- 5) Accountability: having mental models to give and get commitments.

The actions on the left side of the five-step dimension build personal credibility and trust, while the actions to the right develop an organization's ability to perform at the desired safety level. The next sec-

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Figure 2

Five-Step Leadership Pathway



tion will provide specific examples of leadership actions for each step and illustrate the power of this model through a factual case history. The name of the plant manager and the company have been changed to protect privacy.

Five-Step Leadership Pathway Actions & Case History

Step One: Insight

Leaders need to assess their personal as well as their organizational strengths and weaknesses to gain insight into the issues that must be addressed in order to reach safety excellence. If a leader does not know who s/he is, that leader cannot change the things s/he does, and if the leader does not have a clear picture of the situation, nothing can change organizationally. A candid assessment from supervisors, peers and employees can help a leader see the world as it is, not as s/he would like it to be.

A general manager discussing the topic of self-assessment said, "Nothing ever got better until I stopped asking, 'Why won't they take responsibility?' and I started asking myself, 'Why don't I let them?'" He was amazed at how quickly people started to accept responsibility once he empowered them with the authority and resources to do so.

The ability to question one's own role in keeping things the way they are is critical to leadership success. When things are not going as desired, it is too easy to blame others and, thus, claim no control over the results. By looking instead at personal shortcomings, lack of leadership skill or inability to see obstacles that must be removed, a person can act on things s/he is able to control and improvement will be evident.

Case-history: This case history begins with Tim, a plant manager dedicated to developing people and meeting customer expectations. He spent a good deal on top-notch training, education and program development. That is why he found it puzzling that his plant was known as the company's most-negative place to work, and that even though his group met production goals, it could not improve its safety record.

He decided to confront the issue and called for an off-site meeting that included union employees, as well as supervisors and managers. The subsequent dialogue uncovered a long-standing cycle of mistrust. The list of specific events and perceptions was overwhelming, but by the end of the meeting, the group had devised a list of actions everyone was willing to collaborate on to make things better.

This was only a beginning, but Tim had gained tremendous insight into the covert and nondiscussable issues pervading his organization and how his failure to address them had impeded progress for seven years.

The next required step was to set a direction for the organization. The workshop had given them a list of specific items to fix, but it did not provide an overall vision of a preferred future.

Step Two: Direction

Setting direction and inspiring others comes in many forms: vision, strategy, goals, vision, action planning and example-setting. The visions and goals of successful safety leaders have certain similar characteristics:

- 1) They are shared and meaningful.
- 2) They are big.
- 3) They do not focus on numbers but engage people's hearts and minds.

The first step is for a leader to create his/her own vision and mission. The second is to get others to participate in creating one for the organization. Discussions about vision statements are so frequent that these statements may seem hackneyed. But, if a group really writes something it finds meaningful, those involved will discover that in order to do so, they must know a lot about themselves, their values and the mark they hope to leave on the company. This is hard work, but it is the foundation that will hold up when things get difficult.

Case-history: Shocked by the negativity and hopelessness expressed by his workforce, Tim sat down to write a personal vision statement of the kind of place he wanted to work. He had trouble at first, because he had been mired in the daily grind of

stress and negativity for so long that the idea of changing that environment was difficult to imagine.

Writing the vision became a process of self-discovery and declaration of freedom. He had already undergone double bypass surgery. There was no guarantee on life. He needed to change his life now. This insight caused him to declare, "Either this place will change or I'll find my vision someplace else."

Once it was completed, he decided to share the vision with his staff. This was hard at first because it was personal and he felt his staff might perceive it as imposing his thoughts on them. But something wonderful happened when he read it to his staff. They, too, were tired of working in a negative environment. Instead of feeling imposed upon, they felt hope that they might be able to work together and transform their workplace into a positive environment. Each decided to write a personal vision. They were combined to form one simple organizational vision that included safety performance.

The vision provided the impetus to focus the organization's energy in a positive direction. This leads to the next step: the leadership pathway.

Step Three: Focus

Edgar Schein, a leading author on the topic of organizational culture and leadership, states that one of the most powerful mechanisms leaders use to create and reinforce culture is what they pay attention to, measure and control (Schein 1985). Paying attention can mean anything from noticing or commenting on something to systematically rewarding or measuring specific results. Paying attention is especially powerful when it is focused on a few important priorities and the leader sets the example.

Setting the example lends credibility to focus because it is not enough to say, "Safety is our first priority." When conflicting priorities arise, leaders put safety first in their actions. It is not enough to say, "Everyone has the right to shut down an unsafe job." When someone shuts down a job or requests to shut it down, there must not be negative repercussions or second-guessing. It is not enough to finance a safety observation program; a leader participates in the observations and holds others accountable for their participation.

Case-history: Tim decided to make safety the focus of his culture change. This made sense; the union was supportive and, once the safety action item lists that emerged from the trust-building workshops were analyzed, it turned out that correcting those systems would affect the entire organization. For example, among the action items, roles and responsibilities should be delineated more clearly; reward systems should reinforce desired outcomes; and communication systems should be vastly improved.

To begin, three new communication venues were created to focus the organization on safety and the new direction. First, a daily morning meeting was held with all supervisors to discuss work, changes and safety issues. Second, a quarterly meeting was scheduled between the plant manager, safety man-

ager and each shift. The meeting covered a progress report on each of that unit's pending issues, followed by open discussion on new issues. The third important structural change was the institution of an empowered safety team led by employees and supported by plant management staff.

This level of communication, focus and follow-up had never existed before. Tim gained credibility as he focused on a few key priorities and relentlessly pursued them by building individual and organizational capability to deliver results.

Step Four: Capability Development

Most companies are willing to spend money to reach for excellence, but few will spend adequate time. Leaders must be willing to be accessible to people to give their ideas and input. They need to schedule events and meetings to articulate the vision and make necessary plans to reach goals. If a manager tells employees a safety discussion meeting is important, yet only shows up for the kick-off, s/he immediately sends a message that safety is not a priority. Likewise, leaders need to allocate organizational resources such as building competencies through training, shaping teams, reengineering work processes to include safety and building communications networks.

Case-history: When it came to developing capability, Tim faced a challenge. He had already brought in the best training programs to teach communication skills, how to adapt to culture change and other work-related skills training courses. Safety training was always at the top of the list. So, what would be the best way to spend his time and money to develop capability?

Safety was one of the poorest performance indicators for this plant. So, Tim decided to empower a team of employees to find a safety improvement process that fit the vision. The team selected a process that focused on developing the culture and systems to support safety. Among other factors, this approach stressed the importance of trust in making any program work. It came as no surprise when a subsequent safety culture survey indicated that trust was considered to be one of the weakest elements in the plant's culture.

At the team's recommendation, Tim decided to have workgroups attend a workshop that focused on trust building. They learned how mistrust becomes a cycle and how it can be broken. To succeed, all involved had to undergo a process that helped them let go of the past, agree on issues they were willing to solve together, and approach potential and real conflict in a positive way.

Three full days of dialogue for each workgroup were required to reach the point where people were willing to learn and try these skills. Every plant employee went through these workshops in intact workgroups; by the end, the atmosphere at the plant was notably more positive. Employees credited these workshops as the turning point. By the end of the first year, another safety culture survey showed a 20 point positive jump in 80 percent of the survey

The ability to question one's own role in keeping things the way they are is critical to leadership success.

Table 1

Findings on the Relationship Between Follow-Up and Perceived Leadership Effectiveness

	-1	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
	Less effective			No change		More effective	
No follow-up	4	6	10	34	28	12	6
Some follow-up	0	1	2	9	44	39	7
Consistent follow-up	0	0	1	4	9	31	55

Source: Goldsmith 1996.

scales. Accountability remained one of the weakest areas, so this became the next focus for Tim.

Step Five: Accountability

It is interesting that many people in the workforce identify lack of accountability as a barrier to effectiveness (CCC 1999). Most of this data is gathered from manufacturing plants, but similar experiences have been reported by consultants who work in the healthcare and telecommunications industries. Although many people identify accountability as a problem, conversations with managers and employees reveal their unwillingness or discomfort with holding people accountable. Managers dislike performance reviews; leading management consultants such as Peter Block deride them as ineffective performance tools. Employees feel it is management's job to hold peers accountable. "I'd probably get a black eye if I went up to someone and criticized them in any way." It's time for a new look at the concept of accountability.

The first order of accountability is to hold oneself accountable, the second is to hold others accountable. A leader is responsible for maintaining a performance management system that makes expectations clear, in which everyone understands how and when they will be held accountable, and to which everyone agrees. Effective standards and expectations are arrived at by mutual agreement, but once they are set, how can managers support the behavior change required to bring these new expectations to fruition? Apparently systematic follow up can help.

Keilty, Goldsmith & Co. conducted a study on the relationship between follow-up and perceived leadership effectiveness with more than 8,000 employees in a Fortune 100 company. The study involved managers who had received feedback on their leadership effectiveness via an evaluation and were asked to develop an action plan for self-improvement. Managers who followed up with their subordinates to find out whether they were improving received much higher effectiveness ratings in the post-study than those who had not. In the debriefing, managers and employees expressed the opinion that the peri-

odic request for additional feedback produced greater growth.

When the evaluations were repeated approximately 18 months later, the findings were dramatic (Table 1). The degree of change in perceived leadership effectiveness was clearly related to the degree of follow-up. The managers who did not follow up were perceived as only slightly more effective than they were 18 months earlier. More than half were rated as unchanged or less effective. The managers who did some follow-up experienced positive shifts, with 89 percent being rated as more effective. Consistent or periodic follow-up had a dramatic, positive impact, with more than half of those who followed up rated in the highest possible category.

Case-history: Tim began to think about the importance of accountability, and felt he was back at step one on the leadership pathway—insight. He not only had to develop an action plan for himself and the organization, he had to integrate follow-up and accountability into the way work was performed. He had already written his own vision and set out a plan of personal actions to achieve it. Now, he wrote down the names of all of his direct reports, along with a list of his expectations for the performance of each. Next, he set up one-hour meetings with each one to discuss the expectations, and for Tim to ask for honest feedback on his own effectiveness. Agreements were reached, timelines set and, in addition to the regular staff meetings, monthly, one-hour individual conferences were scheduled for follow up with each direct report.

Once accountability was established at the top, each manager and then each supervisor was asked to complete the same process with his or her direct reports. As a result of these and the previous

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actions, by the end of the second year, production goals were being met and surpassed. However, the plant's proudest achievement was zero recordables for two years.

Conclusion

The five steps on the leadership pathway are insight, direction, capability, focus and accountability. Completing each step helps to create trust and credibility as well as to convert vision into reality at both the personal and organizational level. Those on this path or just beginning must ask the following critical questions:

• **Credibility and trust.** Do I have credibility with those with whom I work? Do individuals respect and trust me? Do I cultivate relationships with my peers, subordinates, customers and supervisors? Do they share my understanding of the goals?

• **Ability to perform.** Do I have the ability to make the organization succeed, make its goals? Do I have the ability to shape a vision, create commitment to the vision, build a plan of execution, develop capabilities and hold people accountable for making things happen?

• **Change mindset.** Do I have the courage for self-assessment and the willingness to change? Do I have the ability to engage people in powerful conversations that influence thinking, behaviors and relationships?

The model described here is based on the path safety leaders have provided as an example for others to follow. It is not the only way, and these leaders would be the first to say that the concepts are constant but the specifics are ever-changing. It is a safety leadership formula that relies on:

- trust as a way of doing business;
- fundamental belief that people do not want to get hurt;
- willingness to keep going despite many setbacks;
- shared leadership as opposed to command and control;
- everyone holding themselves and each other accountable;
- safety as an ongoing process.

These simple assumptions provide guidance to meeting the complex demands of leadership, and can produce results that meet or exceed your vision. ■

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