

Effective Safety Leadership

Understanding Types & Styles That Improve Safety Performance

By Dominic Cooper

S*afety leadership*, defined as “the process of defining the desired state, setting up the team to succeed, and engaging in the discretionary efforts that drive the safety value” (Cooper, 2010a) is widely recognized to be critical (HSE, 2001), especially when the prevailing safety culture is weak (Martínez-Córcoles, Gracia, Ines, et al., 2011). A company’s safety culture is driven by the executive leadership team that creates, cultivates and sustains a company’s journey to excellence (HSE, 2008). These executives set the vision and strategic direction, provide resources, and constantly emphasize and reinforce the importance of safety to people and the business.

Thus, ineffective safety leadership hinders the ability of many companies to achieve success (Cooper & Finley, 2013). Seeking to provide practical insights for safety practitioners, this article highlights several characteristics of effective safety leadership that result in safety culture excellence. These insights can be put to good use by safety practitioners, operational managers and employees.

Benefits of Effective Safety Leadership

Effective safety leadership is known to be financially beneficial to a company’s bottom-line performance (Veltri, Pagel, Behm, et al., 2007). It positively affects employees’ safety behavior and attitudes, helps reduce injury rates and insurance premiums, and contributes to increased productivity by eliminating production bottlenecks. Operational and safety excellence go hand-in-hand. Companies that are good at manag-

ing safety also manage operations well (Fernández-Muñiz, Montes-Peón & Vázquez-Ordás, 2009).

Effective Safety Leadership Has a Purpose

The working world has two types of leaders: positional and inspirational. Positional leaders lead by virtue of the power vested in their position of authority. Such leaders operate by telling people what they want them to do. Thus, people follow because they have to.

Inspirational leaders are genuinely passionate and enthusiastic about their cause (Zenger, Folkman & Edinger, 2009) and, as a result, they inspire others. Inspirational leaders (those who are not solely reliant on positional authority) are driven by a purpose, cause or belief; they lead by passionately and precisely communicating why it is important for people to do the things that leaders ask them to do (Avolio & Bass, 2002). By focusing on the why, inspirational leaders inspire people to discover for themselves what feels right and what is most advantageous to them. People follow because they want to for themselves. Of course, positional leaders can be inspirational

IN BRIEF

- Safety leadership is widely recognized as a critical element of business success. Ineffective safety leadership hinders the ability of many companies to achieve business goals.
- This article highlights several characteristics of effective safety leadership that result in safety culture excellence.

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leaders if they also passionately believe in what they are doing.

Inspirational leaders truly believe in safety, and this is reflected in their body language, tone, words spoken and their daily actions. They also clearly articulate a vision that paints a compelling picture of the future while selling its benefits. For example to paint a compelling picture, such leaders might say, "We absolutely do not want to harm anyone while making our product, as we do not want to orphan our colleague's children or cause their families to lose their home because we killed or maimed their main breadwinner." The vision of the future might be, "Therefore, safe production will be our number-one priority to ensure that we avoid all incidents."

Inspirational safety leaders also invite people to join them and get involved to achieve the articulated vision. For example, "Regardless of downtime cost, if our operations create a hazard to our workers, we will immediately stop that activity and eliminate any threat before someone gets hurt. If you believe we are not living up to this ideal, phone me and we will work to get the matter resolved." Inspirational leaders also know that reinforcing people's optimism and enthusiasm for change is a multiplier of effort (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, et al., 2004). Knowing that success breeds success, they follow up on corrective actions to address problem issues and communicate progress to show people that the change effort is sincere. In some cases, such leaders help develop people's knowledge, skills and abilities so they can more fully participate in the safety effort.

Effective Safety Leaders Are Caring & Controlling

Effective safety leadership is also about maintaining a balance between caring and controlling (Bass, 1999). Effective leaders show that they genuinely care about people by involving everyone in safety; showing appreciation; genuinely trusting people to do the right thing; listening to their followers; and acting on relevant information. They also control activities and results by setting a clear direction for action, clarifying expectations, accountabilities and responsibilities, and setting and maintaining improvement targets. Performance is optimized when a leader can perfectly balance the two; too much caring or too much controlling leads to underperformance. A 2-year construction case study involving 47,000 third-party nationals, achieved 121 million hours worked without a lost-time incident (out of 240 million hours worked) (Cooper, 2010b). From an emphasis on safety leadership, this case demonstrates what can be achieved when this balance is optimized.

Effective Safety Leadership Styles

Leaders also typically adopt one of three main leadership styles: 1) transformational; 2) transactional; and 3) servant. Transformational leaders shape and transform company culture by knowing where they want to go and doing everything possible to make it happen. Transactional leaders embed the culture into an organization by rewarding

or punishing defined performance. Servant leaders sustain company culture by facilitating other's needs to help them do their job properly.

Transformational leaders visualize, describe and direct in ways that motivate others to act. They describe the conditions necessary for success and encourage employee participation to achieve collective goals (Clarke, 2103). Creating a strategy to achieve the vision, they diagnose the issues and develop a strategic plan with measureable milestones to address them. Using positive language to sell the benefits, they try to connect their followers' sense of identity with the company's vision to provide real hope for a better future by promoting a can-do attitude among employees. Challenging and questioning prevailing assumptions, they constantly seek to drive change and move people beyond their own limitations. When talking to others they include at least one question (e.g., why is safety important to you?) that causes people to think about safety in a new way.

Transactional leaders clarify the relationships between performance requirements and desired outcomes to embed changes into the company culture (Lowe, Kroeck & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). They consider followers to be responsible for their work, and use performance monitoring with consequence management (e.g., praise, coaching, providing support) to reinforce people's behavior. This style of leadership is known to be important for ensuring compliance with safety rules and regulations. Characteristic behaviors would include a) personally conducting safety observations and providing feedback; b) challenging and addressing inconsistencies in systems, processes and people when a safety issue arises; and c) regularly acknowledging and reinforcing direct reports' good safety performance.

Servant leaders sustain cultural change by building personal relationships and conveying support to individual group members through dialogue promotion and open communication (Russell, 2001); coaching people when performance is suboptimal; and unleashing people's potential to make a difference. Servant leadership is about setting people up for success by facilitating their needs. This helps create a supportive environment to increase employee engagement that positively affects team performance. Example servant leadership behaviors include a) actively attending and being involved in safety committees, safety meetings, toolbox talks and similar activities; b) consistently seeking and facilitating people's ideas/actions to improve safety; and c) resourcing and following up on any corrective and preventive actions to ensure completion.

Each style has its time and place, with none being good or bad. It is how leaders use them that determines success or failure (Nixon, Harrington & Parker, 2012). In addition to being honest and treating people with respect (Effelsberg, Solga & Gurt, 2014), leaders who use goal-oriented, involving and engaging leadership styles (Muller & Turner, 2010) to help develop teamwork (Yang, Huang & Wu, 2011) will more effectively influence performance. A leader should adapt his/her style based

on the demands of the situation, the requirements of those involved and the challenges facing the company. Ultimately, it is not all about the leader's needs; it is much more about the followers' needs and ensuring the success of those being led.

Known Effects of Safety Leadership Styles

Meta-analyses take a large group of studies, correct for measurement error and calculate the average treatment effect size across the topic of interest. Effect sizes ranging from 0 to 0.3 reflect weak effects, those between 0.3 and 0.5 indicate a moderate impact, and those 0.5 or higher reflect strong effects (Cohen, 1988). Several researchers have used meta-analysis to examine published, peer-reviewed academic studies on safety leadership, and their findings show that transformational and transactional safety leadership styles moderately influence employee engagement and people's safety behavior, which in turn reduces incident rates (e.g., Clarke, 2013).

Servant leadership, on the other hand, creates a supportive environment that exerts a much stronger influence on employee engagement, safety behavior and incident reduction (e.g., Walumbwa, Hartnell & Oke, 2010). Engaging in meaningful dialogues, fostering a collaborative learning environment and facilitating other people's safety needs all help to create the supportive environment that appears to be so important for improving safety performance (Figure 1).

Other meta-analyses also show that the presence of known hazards and risks suppresses the impact of all three safety leadership styles (e.g., Nahrgang, Morgeson & Hofmann, 2011). The associated negative effects for hazards and risks were much larger than those for the positive effects of transactional and transformational leadership, and they also outweighed those of servant leadership. Therefore, known workplace hazards and risks left for another day neutralize supportive environments, decrease employee engagement and increase unsafe behavior, resulting in higher incident rates.

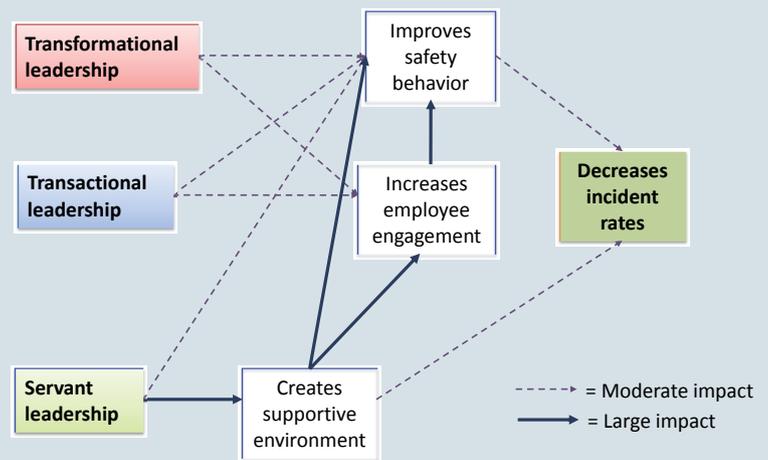
This negative impact is best explained by employee skepticism about the company's true commitment to safety. When known hazards and risks are not addressed, yet safety leaders simultaneously promote the virtues of safety, employees struggle to believe management is sincere and simply withdraw from the process (Cooper, 1997). For its leadership efforts to flourish, a company must eliminate or reduce known hazards and risks to a reasonably practicable level. To facilitate this, a company must provide a supportive environment and sufficient resources to managers so that they can address the known hazards/risks to maximize their safety leadership efforts (Figure 2, p. 52).

Effective Leaders Tackle the Last Mile Problem

Known hazards and risks that remain unaddressed are often the result of the last mile problem. This occurs when a company has no systematic means of addressing these hazards/risks, does not convert its intentions into action due to time and/or budget issues, and/or is unwilling to put effort

Figure 1

Positive Impact of Safety Leadership Styles



Note. All effect sizes were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

into resolving them (Lewis, 2011). Given that the presence of known hazards and risks undermines safety leadership, it makes good business sense to make decisions and take actions to make things safer. An effective safety leader constantly challenges the status quo, asks basic questions about why an issue remains unresolved and drives corrective actions. S/he also keeps people informed about the proposed solution(s), progress on completion and the results of any evaluations once implemented.

Effective Safety Leaders Are Set Up for Success

Ineffective safety leadership often stems from confusion about the company's safety management systems and associated policies. This leaves safety leaders uncertain about their responsibilities and accountabilities, as well as their autonomy to implement fixes (Cooper & Finley, 2013). To overcome such problems, safe companies clarify and define desired safety leadership behaviors that can be enacted, reinforced and measured, and codify them in a competency matrix linked to elements in their safety management system. In this way, safety leaders can understand and articulate the elements that are above the line.

Ideally, these defined behaviors include prioritizing safe production; communicating frequently and regularly on safety in multiple ways; encouraging comprehensive and meaningful employee involvement in safety; helping change at-risk behaviors; and following up with employees and resourcing corrective actions. Once defined, a company should provide high-quality education to ensure that each leader is informed about the company's safety management expectations; offer training that targets the defined competencies so that each leader can exhibit the prescribed desired behaviors; and offer ongoing organizational support to enable each leader's success.

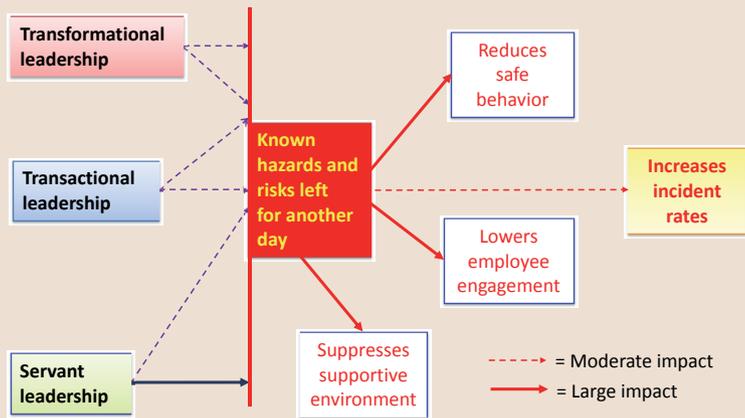
Effective Leaders Create a Safety Partnership

It is also important to recognize that safety is a social activity and that management cannot bring about good safety performance alone (Cooper &

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Figure 2

Negative Impact of Hazards & Risks



Note. All effect sizes were statistically significant at $p < .05$

A company must provide a supportive environment and sufficient resources to managers so that they can address the known hazards/risks to maximize their safety leadership efforts.

Finley, 2013). Stakeholders must participate as well. For example, management relies on employees to report potential or actual incidents, follow procedures, identify hazards and work safely. Similarly, employees cannot improve safety alone. They rely on management to set direction, develop supporting safety policies and procedures, allocate the necessary resources and complete corrective actions.

Thus, managers and employees should recognize that safety is a social activity whereby everyone must work as a team to achieve success. For example, a pharmaceutical facility in Indiana set out to create a safety partnership approach at the end of 2008. Employees conducted regular safety observations, and safety leaders conducted twice-weekly safety observations and conversations. By mid-2011, the facility had achieved a 67% reduction in incidents. However, moving from a traditional command-and-control model of safety to one in which safety is done with, not at, people is challenging. It requires a consistency of purpose, focus and execution from all involved.

Safety Partnership Benefits

Explicit in many recognized international safety management system standards (e.g., ANSI/ASSE Z10-2012, OHSAS 18001), employee engagement is an organizational approach designed to help ensure employee commitment to an entity's goals and values, while motivating people to contribute to that entity's success. Companies with high employee engagement experience around 62% fewer safety incidents; engaged employees are five times less likely to suffer a safety incident (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, et al., 2006), and seven times less likely to have a lost-time safety incident (Lockwood, 2007).

Such entities tend to possess a strong, genuine value for workforce involvement and participation, with clear evidence of a just and fair culture based on mutual respect between the entire management structure and the workforce (Reason, 1997). The key aspect is ensuring an understanding by all concerned that engagement is a two-way process to decide on the best way forward, with everyone acting together to make it happen. Managers deliber-

ately engage with employees on important safety issues, and employees in turn proactively and positively engage with management. This creates a genuine safety partnership between management and the workforce to improve safety performance, with clear financial benefits to be realized.

For example, 30 case studies involving a range of facilities from retail to oil and gas indicate that involving employees in hazard identification, risk assessment and problem resolution to tackle musculoskeletal disorders consistently shows a net intervention benefit of \$173,400 on average (HSE, 2006). Similarly, optimally designed behavior-based safety processes (Cooper, 2009) can deliver an annual return on investment (Cooper, 2010c). Other ways to meaningfully involve employees in safety include procedural reviews; incident reporting and investigation; inspections and audits; development of education packages (e.g., tailgate talks); and participation in safety culture assessments.

Practical Applications

Because company personnel look to them for guidance, safety practitioners are de facto safety leaders. As the research presented in this article shows, if they adopt the servant leadership approach of facilitating others' needs, they will become more effective and have a greater effect on safety performance.

Because selling the benefits of safety has a much more powerful influence on people's behavior (Vecchio-Sadus & Griffiths, 2004) than selling compliance (OECD, 2000), practitioners should emphasize that the purpose of OSH is to help protect people, the environment and the company from harm, and that focusing on safety has significant and positive financial benefits to the company. They also should help develop and support inspirational safety leaders who believe in and are passionate about safety; who can inspire others by selling the why of safety; and who do safety with people, instead of at them. In this way, employees will want to become engaged in safety in meaningful ways.

To inspire others, safety leaders must be inspired themselves, and they must seek as many ways as possible to involve others in safety efforts. One example is to help their company develop a safety leadership competency matrix that defines the desired safety leadership behaviors (e.g., leaders conduct safety tours, have a safety conversation with an employee twice a week) that will help to create a safety partnership between managers and employees. This offers the advantage of integrating and embedding safety into a company-wide leadership competency matrix, rather than human resources and OSH each creating separate ones.

This process should encompass a means to monitor ongoing safety leadership performance to ensure that defined behaviors are being enacted and reinforced (e.g., Cooper, 2010b). Another example is to involve employees by promoting and facilitating practical involvement strategies (e.g., conducting risk assessments, reviewing rules and procedures). Furthermore, employee contributions should be

visible, meaningful, seen to make a difference and celebrated when successes are achieved.

OSH practitioners must help organizational leadership adopt and facilitate an aggressive, formal risk-reduction philosophy that is enacted so that the notion that safe production is the number one priority becomes the norm. Reducing high levels of risk presented by known hazards left unaddressed will lead to higher employee compliance with safety, and significantly boost the impact of management's safety leadership activities on safety performance.

Conclusion

The evidence from safety research and practical experience shows that effective safety leadership adds to the bottom line in many ways. If all the strategies described in this article are enacted, companies will experience lower incident rates and improved safety culture, as well as spill-over benefits in quality, productivity, asset integrity and cost savings. **PS**

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