

7 INSIGHTS INTO SAFETY LEADERSHIP



Thomas R. Krause and Kristen J. Bell

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by Thomas R. Krause and Kristen J. Bell

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CHAPTER 3

SAFETY LEADERSHIP — THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING AN ORGANIZATION CAN DO TO SET IMPROVEMENT IN MOTION

Suppose you want to accelerate the safety performance of your organization, but you have limited resources to get started. You can only invest in one of the following strategies to improve safety: You could build a stronger safety culture, improve your safety management systems, build an inherently safer facility, reduce at-risk behavior, or strengthen safety leadership.

Where would you invest your limited resources? All of these things are important, and there are merits to starting with each. For example:

- *A stronger culture* leads to all the other positive outcomes. But unless you're starting with a brand new organization, changing culture is a long-term strategy. It takes time to embed a set of shared values, beliefs, and assumptions into the fabric of an organization. And when leadership changes, the culture will also change—for better or worse.
- *Improving safety management systems* means people will have better tools for identifying and reducing risk, and it will support “systems thinking.” Unfortunately, you can have the best systems in the world, and if people don't value and use them, they are worthless.
- *Building an inherently safer facility* has many advantages. It provides the opportunity to design

safety into the facility. But a safe facility with a weak culture is far from optimal. If the culture is weak the facility won't be maintained properly, new decisions will overlook safety factors, and eventually conditions will degrade.

- We will argue later that if you want to improve safety performance, you must create the conditions in which safe *behavior* can and will occur, and Chapter 6 is devoted to this idea. Behavior and performance are tightly connected. But worker behavior is the *result* of leadership, culture, systems, and facility design—not the driver.

Leadership is really the heart of the matter. The third insight is this: *Elevating safety leadership is the most important single thing an organization can do to set improvement in motion.* Leadership is the place you want to go first, with the most energy that you can, and that will innervate all the rest of the things that influence good safety outcomes. What does that look like?

Safety leadership is an extremely broad subject area that we've written about at length in the book *Leading With Safety*.ⁱ Keeping that in mind, there are dimensions of safety leadership that stand out to us as the place every senior leader should start: the value for safety projected by a leader; the vision that leader holds for the organization; and the credibility the leader establishes behind both the value for safety and the safety vision. Certainly there are additional worthwhile safety leadership practices, but in our experience, these three are foundational.

PERSONAL VALUE FOR SAFETY

What does it mean for a leader to have a *personal value for safety*? As you think about this, think about the people around you,

How deep is your resolve?

How deep is your resolve to prevent injury and illness in your organization? What are you prepared to do? Do you:

- ☐ Learn the basics of organizational safety—how organizational factors produce safety excellence?
- ☐ Lead development of a safety strategy: objectives, methods, actions, and accountabilities?
- ☐ Understand the things your direct reports must do in order to reach safety objectives?
- ☐ Assess the culture of your organization for safety and for the organizational qualities that support safety?
- ☐ Assess the safety leadership capabilities of your direct reports. Require each report to have a measurable improvement plan?
- ☐ Develop leading and lagging indicators?
- ☐ Understand how to prevent Serious and Fatal Injuries?
- ☐ Understand the hazards present in your work environment and how they are mitigated?
- ☐ Understand the critical safety decision points within your organization?
- ☐ Engage with employees at all levels about safety issues?
- ☐ Have uncomfortable conversations, show emotions, and ask for honest feedback and what you can do to help. Receive difficult feedback gracefully?
- ☐ Select and promote employees who are safety leaders?

and ask yourself, does each one value safety? How important is safety to them—not because it's supposed to be important, not because somebody else says it's important, but how important is it *to them*? And how important is it *to you*? Really, and truly, deep down, how important is safety to you? How deep is your resolve to prevent injury and illness in your organization, in your community, and in your family?

If you think about the people who hold safety as a core value, they share some things in common. To the person, they believe they can make a difference. They believe they can be successful. They take responsibility for their decisions and actions. They are self-confident without having all the answers. They spend time learning about safety, injury causation, and prevention. And they know what it means to lose a loved one, or to suffer a debilitating injury or illness. We believe everyone has an intrinsic value for safety; that's just how we start, regardless of whatever competing values we may also hold. A deep personal value for safety is the appreciation, prioritization, and cultivation of that intrinsic value, and we find it develops over time, with experience, and with attention.

Leaders who embody a strong personal value for safety allocate resources, recognize contributions, talk about safety, and get personally involved. They hold themselves to the same high standards that they hold others to. They educate themselves, they look into issues, and they ask questions. They take action when they see someone in harm's way, and, crucially, they also take action on issues before bad things happen.

VISION FOR SAFETY

Of course, wanting something is not enough. To make something happen, we need a clear picture of what we are aiming for. Safety leaders need a *vision for safety*. By vision, we mean

How clear is your vision for safety?

How clear is your vision for safety? Can you paint a clear picture of what your organization will look like when you achieve the next level of performance? How many of the following statements accurately describe your vision?

- ☐ I can see specific methods to achieve the safety improvement we need.
- ☐ I can give at least 3 reasons why we must improve safety leadership, culture, and performance.
- ☐ I can see specific ways in which our organization needs to change in order to improve.
- ☐ I have safety data showing where we are now, and where we need to be in 5 years.
- ☐ I can describe the top 3 exposures that we must manage better.
- ☐ I can describe at least one new exposure that we will face in the next 3-5 years.
- ☐ I can name 3 behaviors which I and my direct reports must do with perfect reliability.
- ☐ I can name 3 behaviors which I want to see from every employee in my organization.
- ☐ My vision extends to contractors, suppliers, government, shareholders, and the general public.
- ☐ I can describe how this vision will benefit me, my family, shareholders, employees, and contractors.

knowing what it looks like as safety improves day by day. So yes, we want to get to zero safety incidents, but has the leader broken that down into small, achievable steps? Can the leader describe what people will be doing differently three, six, and nine months from now? What's going to change? How is that going to appear in our lives as employees at work? The effective safety leader can see that, can articulate it in a compelling way, can recognize progress as it's happening, and thus convince people around them that they can and will be successful.

Leaders who have a clear vision for safety talk about it. They talk about it frequently. They talk about it in some detail. They talk about it in concrete, practical terms. They bring it up in conversation, and they lead with it in formal presentations. They talk about it from the point of view of those around them, and show how everyone will benefit. We could go on about this for some time, but our point here is to convey the depth and richness of actions that result when a leader really has a well-developed vision.

CREDIBILITY

A good vision will challenge people's beliefs about what is possible, and it will ask some to reach outside their comfort zones. In order for a vision like this to be heard, a leader needs credibility with his or her constituents.

Credibility is formed when people know they can count on you for something. It is based on how people experience you, and what that experience tells them. Can people see the consistency between your words and actions? If you tell someone that you will do something, can they see that you did (or didn't) do it? If you say something is important to you, do they see you show it? When you are consistent in these ways, your credibility grows and trust deepens. People can predict, with great accuracy, what you will do. You begin to get the benefit of the doubt. And people will listen to you.

What culture are you creating?

Based on your actions, reactions, and inactions alone, is it in someone's best interest to:

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Approach you | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | avoid you? |
| Report a problem | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | hide a problem? |
| Communicate openly | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | speak guardedly? |
| Collaborate with others | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | look after one's self? |
| Exceed expectations | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | comply minimally? |
| Take initiative | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | avoid responsibility? |
| Find room to improve | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | have all the answers? |
| Question flawed process | <input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/> | find workarounds? |

When leaders are credible in the eyes of those around them, they do not have to work nearly as hard to influence people in their organizations. People are less resistant to change, need less convincing, and raise fewer objections. This does not mean there will be an absence of resistance, because resistance is a healthy and natural part of any organizational change, but people will spend less time testing “Is this for real?”

YOU ARE ALWAYS CREATING CULTURE

Notice that a leader’s value, vision, and credibility are all established and conveyed through what the leader does day-to-day. This has major implications. We’ve all heard that leadership creates culture. And there’s no doubt that is true.ⁱⁱ What we are saying is a little stronger than that: we’re saying that leadership is *always* creating culture.

We’ll explore culture in great detail in the next chapter, but for now take a few moments to think about your day-to-day interactions with people. Consider the content and tone of your e-mails, phone calls, face-to-face conversations, the questions you ask, the comments you make, and your body language when you meet with people. Think about what types of things you respond to and what types of things you don’t respond to. Now try to imagine what others are taking away from these interactions. What are people learning from you about the best way to succeed in your organization?

Of course we want people to approach us, report problems, communicate openly, etc., and we hope that our actions, reactions, and inactions encourage such behaviors. Unfortunately, it doesn’t matter what we intend to communicate if there’s a gap between those intentions and what people actually take away from interactions directly with us, or even indirectly from others who are also interpreting us. What matters is what people see and what they experience when they interact with us and with our organization.

Note that you might not even be aware of the actions people are seeing, and you may not be aware of how people are seeing them. But the way you think about things—the things that you say, the things that you don't say, the way that you say it, the amount of emphasis that you give, your posture, your smile, your gestures—all of that 'stuff' matters. All of that stuff sends messages that people pick up and interpret. If you believe that safety incidents are inevitable, it's going to show. You can try to hide it, but if that's really what you think, it'll come through. It'll come through and it will affect the culture.

So when we say leaders are always creating culture, we don't mean that leaders are always *trying* to create culture. We don't mean that leaders are always *thinking* about the culture. We don't mean that leaders always have a program to work on their culture. Quite to the contrary, we mean that leaders are *always creating culture*, for better or for worse, whether they intend to or not.

If you want to improve safety, start with leadership and work from there. Have a vision for the safety culture you want to see at your organization. Put your values and credibility behind it. A shift in leadership can have immediate impact on performance. Safety systems, systems thinking, safe design, and safe behavior all flow from leadership. Impact on culture will be longer term. Your leadership will send some message about safety no matter what you do; why wouldn't that message be a credible one you really believe in?

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