

Leadership and the Knowledge Worker:
A paradigm shift for people-based safety

Since 2003, the topic of my professional development workshops at the annual ASSE and NSC conferences has been “people-based safety”. Each of these workshops were well attended, and the course evaluations were quite good. Participants typically state appreciation for learning a “positive, informative, useful, and different approach to safety.” Several affirm renewed energy, confidence, and self-efficacy to become a more effective safety leader and change agent.

However, the comments from these evaluations are not uniformly rewarding. For example, the following negative reaction to my last NSC workshop in November 2006 jumped out from the rest, “Blah, Blah, Blah—cannot be used in a strong union environment.”

This is not the first time I’ve received personal testimony that a people-based approach to safety would be difficult or impossible in a union environment. Why is this the case? Why should an evidence-based approach to injury prevention encounter roadblocks in a union environment? This question and the “Blah, Blah, Blah” comment activated the content of this article.

A Leadership Issue

Unions are a product of the Industrial Revolution—an age when machines and human-factors engineering enabled 50-fold increases in the productivity of the manual worker in manufacturing. Stephen Covey calls it the “Age of Control” whereby workers followed rules and standards developed and controlled by top management. Unions developed to give hourly workers a “voice” in this top-down-control environment. Looking out for employee health and safety was a primary mission of these unions.

Thus, it is not rational to believe interventions that can effectively prevent injuries to workers can not be implemented effectively in a union environment. On the contrary, unions

should enthusiastically adopt each and every intervention process with data-supported potential to improve safety. I maintain it's not unions that thwart the acceptance and application of an effective safety process, but lack of appropriate leadership.

Some managers are stuck in the past, believing we are still in the Industrial Age of top-down control. They do not appreciate nor embrace a paradigm shift in the 21st Century, identified by Peter Drucker as the "Age of the Knowledge Worker".

From Manual Worker to Knowledge Worker

The "Blue-Collar Band of Brothers" described by Joanne Dean in her *ISHN* article (October 2006) contribute more than manual labor. They bring unique skills and experiences to their jobs, and willingly offer thoughtful and relevant advice when asked. They are open to learning and applying new ways to making work routines more effective and/or more safe. But will their knowledge be used to improve job safety? Will they receive opportunities to learn and apply the human dynamics of injury prevention?

Leaders from both the management and union sides of an organization determine whether people-based skills are learned and used to increase safe production. What kind of leader is open to receiving advice from hourly workers regarding ways to achieve more safe production? What does it take for employees to provide input for decisions relevant to the safety of their jobs? How can leaders encourage knowledge workers to hold their peers accountable for safe work practices and promote the development of self-accountability?

Leading the Knowledge Worker

In his latest book, *The 8th Habit: From effectiveness to greatness*, Stephen R. Covey provides a concise answer to these questions. Specifically, Dr. Covey advises leaders to communicate the right vision and set high-priority goals, while constantly looking for the

potential in people by “modeling the courage to determine a course and the humility and mutual respect to involve others in deciding what matters most” (p. 272).

For safety, the Covey paradigm implies doing more than holding people accountable for top-down safety rules. While OSHA rules define a general course of action for injury prevention, leaders need to empower workers to provide their own action plans and accountability systems. This is more than rule-following behavior. It’s an ongoing, interactive process of team members identifying hazards and potentialities for personal injury and then defining specific ways to avoid them. This is the safety responsibility of the knowledge worker. What kind of leader can make this happen?

The Humble Leader

The Covey quote above includes the leadership quality I believe is most critical for obtaining safety-relevant information from the knowledge worker. Managers and safety professionals alike need to publicly acknowledge they don’t know enough to keep their employees safe. Indeed, workers on the job are in the best position to observe potential for injury and recommend practical prevention strategies.

Thus, the humble leader continually asks advice of followers with relevant experience. Realizing behavior-based feedback is essential for improvement, the humble leader also asks for feedback. When a worker answers “okay” to the question “How am I doing?” the humble leader then asks “What can I do differently to be better?” With a quick-fix answer of “nothing,” the humble leader probes for more candor. “Come on, no one is perfect, tell me one thing I could do more or less often to promote safety.” Some might be reluctant to reveal an observed weakness in a leader. Why? Because they fear negative consequences. They have insufficient trust.

The Trustworthy Leader

Dr. Covey reminds us that “trust” is both a noun and a verb. In other words, you can have confidence in the integrity, truth, ability, intentions, and character of a person. But, you also trust when you rely or depend on people to meet your expectations. Sometimes entrusting a person to go beyond the call of duty for safety motivates relevant action. Dr. Covey puts it this way, “Trust becomes a verb when you communicate to others their worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves” (p. 181)

I have discussed trust in previous *ISHN* articles. In March 1998 I explained the distinction between trusting a person’s intentions versus abilities, and shared a 12-item survey to measure these differences in a work culture. In my following *ISHN* column (April 1998), I entertained strategies for increasing trust in a work culture. These trust-building interventions were organized around the seven C-words listed and defined in the sidebar: consistency, communication, caring, candor, commitment, consensus, and character.

<Insert Sidebar about here>

These words and their dictionary definitions activate a variety of practical ways to augment the extent people trust the intentions and/or abilities of others. I recommend using the sidebar to stimulate trust-building discussions in group meetings. Ask participants to define specific behaviors that reflect each of the trust words. You might also ask the group to describe occasions when a particular trust word was lacking, and then to suggest improvement strategies.

In Conclusion

This discussion began with a testimony that people-based safety cannot work in a union environment. I based my defense on leadership. I claim it’s not unions but leadership that determines the acceptance and application of new evidence-based approaches to improve safety-relevant behaviors, attitudes, relationships, and culture. Then our discussion focused on one

critical safety-improvement strategy—obtaining more safety-relevant information from a knowledgeable workforce.

I hope readers do not consider these leadership recommendations relevant for only union environments. Furthermore, these suggestions are certainly appropriate for improvement domains beyond safety and for settings beyond the workplace. Bottom line: Continuous improvement depends on continuous input from people with relevant information, and leaders who are humble and trusting receive such information.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply research-based knowledge toward improving leadership for safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by relevant workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com or call SPS at 540-951-7233.