

We Need More Safety Leadership Than Management

It seems safety pros use the term "management" more than "leadership." This is reflected in the title of the ASSE Professional Development Conference held in Las Vegas last February entitled, "Best Practices in Safety Management." However, in his keynote address for that conference, John Nance used the term "leadership" rather than "management." He discussed the need to redefine safety leadership and tear down the organizational and cultural barriers that prevent open discussion about environmental hazards and at-risk behavior. In his words, "good leaders invigorate the flow of interpersonal communication" and "orchestrate others to achieve synergy."

Later at this ASSE conference I heard Tom Krause define leaders as people who "inspire people to want to do something" as opposed to managers who "hold people accountable for doing something." This distinction was perfectly consistent with the topic of my presentation at this conference, "How to develop personal accountability for safety." The theme of my workshop was that a Total Safety Culture requires people to take personal accountability or responsibility for safety. I discussed specific ways to help people feel more responsible for safety, as I covered previously in my *ISHN* columns last year (see especially May and June, 1998).

As a follow-up to these prior articles and inspirational talks at the 1999 ASSE Management Conference, I'd like to consider some specific differences between safety management and safety leadership. This is not to belittle management or even to suggest we need less management. However, I do suggest we need more leadership in safety and this is not the same as management. But managers can be leaders too!

Leaders Focus on Process

Managers are typically held accountable for outcome numbers, and they in turn use outcome numbers to motivate others. In safety the outcome numbers are based on the relatively rare occurrence of an injury. They are reactive, reflect failure, and are not diagnostic for prevention.

Safety leaders hold people accountable for accomplishing proactive process activities that can prevent injuries. And when people see improvement in the process numbers, they are reinforced for their efforts and develop a sense of personal responsibility for continued contributions and continual improvement.

Leaders Educate

In industry, training is a more common term than education. This reflects the concern that employees know exactly what to do in order to complete a particular task effectively and safely. With a "training" mindset, however, managers can come across as demanding a certain activity because "I said so" rather than because "it's the best way to do it."

Education involves an explanation of the principles or the rationale behind a particular set of procedures. Education enables the listener to understand why a certain protocol needs to be followed. Then people can develop responsibility for an action plan rather than doing something a certain way because a manager is holding them accountable.

Proper education of principles can also inspire creative customization and ownership. In other words, when leaders offer rationale and examples rather than policy and directives, individuals or work teams can select procedures that best fit their

situation. And in the process of refining a set of procedures, people assume ownership and follow through from a self-directed or responsible perspective.

Leaders Listen First

Under pressure to get a job done, managers often speak first and then listen to concerns or complaints. This is a reasonable strategy for efficient action. After all, the challenge of management is to make things happen according to an established plan, and this requires specific directives and a mechanism for motivating compliance. After describing an action plan and accountability system, managers answer a lot of 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. This is not the most efficient approach to getting a job done. It requires patience and a communication approach that asks many questions before giving advice. In this way an individual or work team can customize an action plan or process for achieving a particular outcome.

Leaders Promote Ownership

When the development of an action plan involves the people expected to carry out that plan, ownership for both the process and the outcome is likely to develop. In other words, when leaders give a reasonable rationale for a desired outcome and then offer opportunities for others to customize methods for achieving that outcome, they facilitate a special kind of motivation. This motivation comes from inside people, and is commonly referred to as internal or self-directed motivation. In this state people participate because they want to, not because they have to.

When managers direct by edit for efficient transfer of an action plan, they might get compliance, but they might 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 are likely to cease when they cannot be monitored. This happens, for example, when personal protective equipment is used at work but not at home for similar or even riskier behaviors.

Leaders Set Expectations

All behavior starts as other-directed, meaning it is performed because someone asked for it. The important issue is whether the behavior remains other-directed or advances to self-directed. This depends to some extent on the method of asking. A behavioral request that comes across as a mandate or an unconditional statement is likely to stay other-directed. This is often the management approach to safety, as illustrated by regulatory compliance issues and the common slogan, "Safety is a condition of employment."

Leadership can facilitate a shift from other-directed to self-directed motivation by initiating a process or action plan with expectations rather than mandates. What's the difference? Both approaches specify desirable outcomes and establish the need for certain behaviors as process activities. However expectations imply choice. While a certain outcome is anticipated, there is room for individual and group decision making regarding procedures and methods. When people realize what's expected of them but perceive some personal control in how to reach specific goals, they are more likely to own the process and transition from an other-directed to self-directed perspective.

Leaders Look Beyond the Numbers

Managers focus on the numbers, and in safety that means injury records and compensation costs. When I discuss behavior-based safety principles and procedures with managers, I inevitably get the question, "What's the ROI or return on investment?" Managers want to know how much the process will cost and how long will it take for the numbers (as in total recordable injuries) to improve. This analytical approach to safety is obviously inspired by the popular management principle, "You can only manage what you can measure."

Leaders certainly appreciate the need to hold people accountable with numbers, but they also understand you can't measure everything. There are some things you do and ask others to do because it's the right thing to do. Leaders believe, for example, it's important to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and a sense of belonging throughout a work culture.

In prior *ISHN* articles and in my books (see for example "*The Psychology of Safety*," CRC Press, 1996), I've discussed these five intangibles as feeling states that influence people's tendency to actively care or go beyond the call of duty for another person's safety or health. Here I simply want to make the point that leaders do things on a regular basis to inspire these feeling states in others but don't worry about measuring their direct impact on these intangibles. They have faith in the research-supported theory that promoting these five states is important. Similarly, people take vitamin pills regularly even though they don't notice any measurable consequences.

Now and then it's a good idea to assess whether certain actions are influencing people's subjective feelings in desired direction. But this can be done informally through personal interviews, unaided by a score card. And, it's a given that certain interpersonal and group activities are useful. For example, genuine one-to-one recognition increases self-esteem and self-efficacy; behavior-based goal-setting builds personal control and optimism; and group celebrations facilitate a sense of belonging. Leaders perform and support these sorts of activities without expecting to see an immediate change in the numbers of an accountability system.

Leaders don't need a monitoring scheme to motivate their attempts to help people feel valuable and part of an important team effort. This kind of leadership is self-directed and responsible, and it helps to inspire self-directed responsibility in others.

In Conclusion

This article described seven approaches leaders use to help people transition from an other-directed perspective about safety to self-directed responsibility. Although I contrasted each leadership quality with a typical safety management perspective, my intent was not to criticize or demean management. In fact, all behavior is initially other-directed, motivated by an external accountability system. And some people remain other-directed for various types of behaviors and situations. Managers are needed to keep these people going.

On the other hand, it's usually more desirable for people to be self-directed than other-directed, especially in the domain of safety and health promotion. When people are self-directed with regard to safety they do not need an external accountability system to keep them performing safely. Plus, they are prone to actively care for the

safety and health of others. The leadership characteristics described here can help build self-directed responsibility for safety. The contrasting management styles can stifle this among people who are internally motivated to avoid at-risk behavior and prevent injuries.

The bottom line: safety management is necessary at times to motivate people to do the right things for injury prevention. But it is not sufficient to achieve a Total Safety Culture. Safety managers need to know when to become safety leaders and build responsibility rather than hold people accountable. And most importantly, whether or not you have a safety management position, you can be a safety leader and help people transition from an other-directed to a self-directed motivational state. Few manage but many must lead.

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