

Empower, Trust & Resource

The Role of Executive Leaders in Safety

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo

Leadership in the safety arena is the same as it is in the overall organization. Yet, safety leadership has come to be seen as a field unto itself.

The impetus for this article was an experience with the top leadership team of a 3,000-employee company. The team had decided that the injury level was unacceptable and wanted to improve the safety culture. When asked in a confidential survey what they saw as their biggest challenge to succeeding, these leaders responded, "lack of bandwidth." There was palpable anxiety over adding yet another initiative to their 70-hour workweeks.

Leadership in the safety arena is the same as it is in the overall organization. Yet, safety leadership has come to be seen as a field unto itself, an additional set of tasks that must be added to an already full plate. Why might that be?

Could the reason be related to the predominant perception that leaders have to put safety first or hold safety as a priority over production? The intention of such phrases, clearly, is to highlight safety's importance. But, is separating safety from the rest of the organization a realistic and viable approach to ensuring that it is an integral part of work? Or do these phrases put safety and production into competition?

The apparent conflict between safety and production can become an emotional divide between employees and managers because it is entwined with the question of which is more important, people or profit. This conflict extends far beyond incident prevention to other issues facing companies such as ethics, quality and customer care. Managing each of these areas effectively requires robust, streamlined processes. Safety is no different.

All of these areas also require the same level of dedicated participation from executive management. But, from a leadership perspective they are not separate initiatives. Would it be possible for a food manufacturer to create safe products that meet customer expectations and have employees with unsafe work practices? Your experience is probably responding that it is not possible. A food manufacturing plant with a high incident rate probably has poor housekeeping, which leads to potential contaminations that lead to rework or excessive waste and unhappy customers.

Let's look first at the overall leadership competencies displayed by successful executives (these

competencies are derived from interviewing the direct reports of more than 100 executives during 360 assessments).

- Set clear direction.
- Ground the vision in actionable directives.
- Fulfill your responsibility as a role model, coach and mentor in alignment with the vision.
- Create opportunities for conversation to encourage the open exchange of information.
- Make it okay to fail and try again.
- Empower, trust, support and provide resources.
- Provide timely feedback to develop your direct reports.

These leadership competencies are required at every level of the organization. But, they are especially critical at the executive level because these leaders are the source of all other messages about what is important that will transmit throughout the organization.

The executive team is not responsible for designing or implementing programs. It sets direction and operational principles, then it empowers and resources the appropriate people to design and implement. For example, programs that involve supervisor coaching should not be designed without supervisor input.

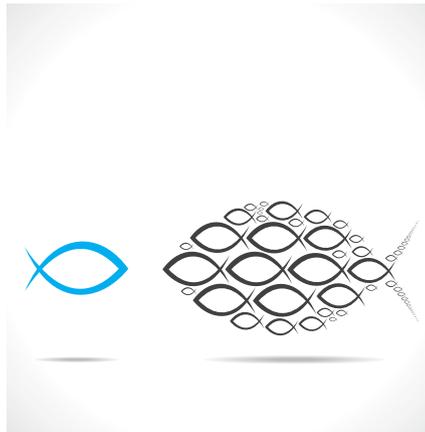
Frontline employees know the hazards and barriers better than anyone, thus they must be included in any efforts to engage employees.

An excellent format for the executive team to use in setting direction is the purpose statement using the following format:

- 1) The purpose of our focus on safety is to _____.
- 2) Our goals are to _____.
- 3) We will support the achievements of these goals by _____.
- 4) We want these goals to be accomplished in a way that _____.
- 5) We believe that accomplishing these goals would result in _____.

A completed purpose statement might read:

- 1) The purpose of our focus on safety is to make (organization name) one of the safest places to work.
- 2) Our goals are to prevent injury and death, provide a safe and healthy workplace.
- 3) We will support the achievement of these goals by providing resources, empowering the right people to design and implement the best processes and procedures, setting the example and promoting open communication through mindful conversation.



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4) We want these goals to be accomplished in a way that promotes trust, open communication, mutual respect and caring about each other.

5) We believe that accomplishing these goals would result in a safer workplace and a great place to work.

Once the executive team is on the same page about the desired direction for safety, each leader can fulfill his/her responsibility by focusing on a few critical activities to leverage his/her influence:

- Build relationships.
- Communicate face to face.
- Listen.
- Ask, don't tell.
- Charter and empower teams.
- Sponsor elimination of redundancies to build streamlined, robust processes.

Why are these critical activities? Good working relationships are the foundation of organizational effectiveness. Without them, communication fails resulting in missed sales, production, quality and safety targets. Good working relationships are founded on a common purpose, mutual respect and shared understanding of each other's work.

Therefore, communicating face to face and listening accompanied by in-depth questioning become critical. "Ask, don't tell" can become a mantra to avoid a range of problems such as jumping to conclusions, or appearing disrespectful or intimidating. It means to ask questions before offering advice or correcting someone's behavior unless that person is in imminent danger.

It is important for everyone to practice listening and inquiry to achieve excellence. Chartering and empowering teams to solve problems also means training them in communication skills. Using the executive purpose statement, the teams need to create their own charter that can be approved and supported by the executive team.

Finally, adding new initiatives without deleting or streamlining existing ones creates resistance and overload throughout the organization. GE has a successful process called "Work-Out," initiated by Jack Welch when he eliminated most of middle management. Entire plants would get together and each function would recommend ways to streamline the workload. These were presented to the whole system so that

functions could alert each other on any potential negative impact on them.

An overflowing workload at the executive level presents a significant barrier to leaders' involvement in improving safety performance. The suggested leadership activities to improve safety are essential to achieve excellence in every aspect of the organization. Instituting these practices in safety

and extending them to include quality, production and customer service will transform the way work is done so long as emphasis is also placed on eliminating nonvalue-added activities. Conversely, if these practices already exist, then including safety will also produce the desired results without adding to the administrative burden of most executive calendars.

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