

A group of five diverse industrial workers in a factory setting. They are wearing hard hats and high-visibility safety vests. One man in the foreground is wearing a blue hard hat and a yellow safety vest, looking at a tablet. Other workers in yellow, red, and orange hard hats and safety vests are looking on. The background shows industrial machinery and a large factory space.

The Seven **Best Practices** of Effective Safety

White Paper

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DEKRA has been engaged in helping organizations improve safety performance for decades. A solid performance-improvement approach should ensure that the activities completed contribute to the desired improvement. This cause-and-effect relationship is the engine of continuous improvement. DEKRA conducted research with several organizations to determine how exposure-reduction implementations were making a difference. One of the key findings was that organizations that had a greater reduction in injury rate also had more active and engaged leadership.

This finding, that more engaged leadership leads to greater reduction in injury, is consistent with other bodies of work in the organizational development field. Once it was determined that effectively engaged leaders drove injury reduction, we worked to define the actions of effective safety leaders.

In the field of leadership, there are numerous articulations of what leaders should do. DEKRA developed the seven leadership best practices based on research and our collective experience in driving safety improvement.

Our research shows that best practices done well drive transformational leadership. The transformation we are looking for is described as going from “safety is something I have to do” to “safety is a core value, and I am obliged as a leader to protect others.”

In addition, transformational leadership done well relates to lower injury rates. Leaders who effectively perform these best practices drive reduction in injuries.

Think of these seven best practices as a balanced investment portfolio. Some practices will be more prominent at times. Not having all the practices can affect your ability to lead.



The Seven Best Practices

Vision. Define your vision for safety for yourself and your team. Once you have defined your vision, share it. Putting your vision into words sharpens it. And discussing it with others moves the vision from thought to actions. Defining your vision is a fundamental best practice.

Credibility is a cornerstone best practice. Get this right and you can build on it. If you do not build credibility, your leadership foundation will be unstable. Credibility has the following four elements: (1) competence, (2) integrity (3) honesty, and (4) respect. Competence means having the knowledge and skills to do something well. If you've never spearheaded a project, it will be a challenge to be a successful project leader. Being responsible for your actions and how they affect others is accountability. Keeping your word and telling the truth builds trust and respect — the fourth element of credibility.

Action Orientation. Build a bias for action on safety-improvement items. This action is best done with input from others. This orientation takes you from discussions to actions. Follow-up and execution are important as well.

Competence + Integrity + Honesty + Respect

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Credibility

Communication. Communication skills are critical to connecting, building, and maintaining relationships with others. When discussing safety, balance talking and listening. Active listening skills lets others know that they are important.

Collaboration. With safety concerns, there are many stakeholders. Front-line employees, supervisors, managers, executives, safety professionals, and organizational development professionals are among them. Identify other stakeholders and endeavor to work well with them as well.

Feedback and Recognition. Give constructive feedback. Feedback helps improve consistency or adjust performance for future behavior. In safety, consistently doing things that protect us and others from harm with intention is important. Positive feedback promotes that consistency. Guidance feedback allows us to adjust future action to reduce exposure the next time similar tasks are done. Providing effective feedback takes good communication skills. Ensure that the receiver of the feedback understands the intention, and remember to focus on the behavior (not the person). This helps prevent the person from getting defensive.

Recognition applies to actions already taken. Recognizing past performance builds the leader's relationship with team members. Recognition is a great motivator. It helps others to keep striving toward their goals, oftentimes, putting in extra effort.

Accountability. And finally, accountability is another critical best practice. It builds on all the other best practices. Look at accountability as a cycle involving three major steps. Accountability starts with setting expectations. The more specific you are on what is needed, the more likely those expectations will be achieved. Once expectations are set, check in regularly with your team. This shows you care and that the expectations are important to you. During these meetings, you will find out whether expectations are on track or need an adjustment. Continue to provide feedback.

It's important to treat situations in which discipline is required as unique. While it can be part of practicing accountability, it is an exception. Consider that "accountability" combines "account" and "ability." It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that the person has the ability to be successful — skills, knowledge, resources, clear expectations. Only then is the leader positioned to have an accounting of performance. Discipline can disrupt the culture. Leaders are responsible for communicating the results of both performance and nonperformance. Fairness, consistency, and respect will help minimize the impact of discipline on the organization.



These best practices are best done within the context of the leader's day-to-day activities.

Best Practice	An example of when to use each best practice
Share your vision	One-on-one or in small-group conversations. Use the opportunity to help others see how they are part of the future.
Build credibility	Tell the truth even when it is difficult to do so or when delivering difficult information.
Act on reducing exposure	When you see a hazard or discuss an exposure with others. When you see exposure, stop and control it.
Collaborate and communicate	During briefings, tailboards, small-group meetings. Find ways to bring others into the discussion or problem-solving.
Provide feedback	Go out and see what is going on, and then have one-on-one conversations on exposure. Look for opportunities to give success feedback for reinforcement. And share guidance feedback when a behavior must be shaped differently.
Be accountable	Practice these two steps: (1) Ensure that others are set up for success. (2) Lead an accounting of performance focused on reinforcement or redirection. For example, when an SIF exposure exists, stop the work, and remove the potential for injury; then talk about what is needed for success. Confirm that it is enabled, and discuss the differences in performance and nonperformance.

What do you do next?

- Build on an existing strength. Select a best practice that you are doing well with, and find ways to further leverage it. Help future leaders build capability in that practice as well.
- Identify a best practice that you want to strengthen; then focus on building your capability. Ask for feedback from others as you strengthen this practice.
- The quest of pursuing culture transformation is not only honorable but also practical. Building your skills in these seven safety leadership practices will help strengthen your influence as a safety leader. The bonus is these seven best practices will make you a better leader.

Interested in developing future safety leaders?

Connect with us

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