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WHITE PAPER

Executive Coaching for the Safety Leader: Create a comprehensive safety strategy

DEKRA

Not long ago executive coaching was an activity reserved for the struggling. Coaches would help a leader address a specific leadership or relationship issue with a focus on achieving a baseline level of performance. Over the past decade, we have seen a transformation. Organizations have expanded their thinking and embraced executive coaching not only as a vehicle to bring executives to minimally acceptable performance, but as an acceleration vehicle for overall organizational performance. By developing general leadership skills of executives and then supporting them as they apply those skills to achieve specific leadership goals, organizations can move their senior leadership to peak performance. In many cases, organizations now assign coaches to all their senior leaders, and even to some of their high-potential managers. In a relatively short period of time, executive coaching has gone from being a remedial solution for struggling executives to a developmental strategy for creating organizational change.

This shift in mindset has provided a tremendous opportunity for organizations that want to improve safety performance. Data increasingly show a strong connection between the quality of leadership in an organization and its safety performance as measured by hard metrics. Concurrent developments in our own understanding of how leadership influences safety performance (for instance identifying the specific cultural dimensions that predict downstream outcomes), has refined the

discussion even further. Developing a concrete strategy for improving safety leadership is no longer a theoretical exercise, but a very real, and powerful, activity. The key to using coaching successfully is to define an appropriate framework and strategy.

The Case for Coaching the Executive in Safety

Several years ago a highly competent and well-respected leader took the position of general manager for a large oil refinery. Understanding the importance of safety to the organization's success, he wasted no time recruiting a top-level HSE executive to improve the site's safety systems. However three years and many systems improvements later, the site's OSHA recordable rates showed no improvement. An assessment of the site's culture found that employees still perceived risk as "part of the job" and accidents as things that "just happened." Worse, while employees were aware of the new safety systems, they continued to take shortcuts that put them at risk.

Further investigation showed that employees were simply responding to the cues they received from site leaders. They pointed to seeing the general manager himself emphasizing productivity in his talks, promoting managers with mediocre track records in safety, and even taking other executives for tours through hardhat areas without requiring them to wear the proper equipment. Not surprisingly, employees continued to perceive safety as a lesser priority—inadvertently frustrating the good intentions and considerable investment of the general manager.

This site's story is not uncommon. For the past several years safety professionals have come to recognize that the role of leadership in safety performance is extremely important, and more intricate than previously thought. Safety systems and mechanisms, while essential, are relatively easy and can be managed. Leaders play an important role in setting the direction of such systems and allocating resources for their success. Certainly the general manager of the refinery performed this role better than most. The difficult part of safety improvement, the place where the general manager and many of his colleagues fall short, is in creating a culture in which safety is a driving value.

To his credit, the general manager recognized the role his leadership played in site's poor results. So, he did what other leaders might do if they faced a challenge in productivity or meeting profit targets: he engaged the help of an executive coach. The coach was able to help the general manager clarify his vision for safety, identify and leverage his actions as a safety leader, and change how his intentions were translated throughout the organization — ultimately improving the culture and moving the site's stalled safety performance forward. Today, other organizations are integrating executive coaching into their overall safety strategy in an effort to create more comprehensive and sustainable safety performance. Emerging data support the efficacy of this approach. Companies using leadership development activities such as coaching in addition to employee-driven safety methods show markedly greater improvement than companies using employee-driven safety alone. Coaching helps organizations derive more benefits out of the systems and procedures they have in place because they help leaders act in ways that support the use and improvement of these systems.

Figure 1. The BST Leadership Model

The Elements of a Leader's Success

At the heart of a leader's ability to successfully build the kind of team and organizational culture needed to accomplish their objectives in safety, as in any performance area, is the nature and strength of the relationships he or she establishes with the individuals on his team and the relationship between his public persona and the organization at large.

Coaching for safety leadership focuses on building strong, effective relationships and enhancing the leadership depth of his team, helping a leader resolve or mitigate the barriers which are natural challenges for all leaders. This process requires developing significant self-knowledge. However, the effort is rewarding. It makes the leader a stronger person as well as benefiting his relationships and organization. It makes him a more effective leader by making it easier for his followers to follow. The net impact is a high-functioning team and a high-performing organizational culture.

An effective coaching strategy relies on defining the framework within which the leader influences safety outcomes (see figure 1). This framework comprises four basic elements:

The Leader's Personality, Values, and Emotional Commitment

At the core of who a leader is, and consequently his or her effectiveness, is the leader's personality, values, and emotional commitment. These elements strongly influence how a leader interacts with subordinates, the priority the leader puts on safety, and what she is driven to achieve in the organization.

How the Leader Influences

Over the years, research literature has identified two basic styles that leaders use when interacting with subordinates: transformational leadership and transactional leadership. While a strong transformational style is more characteristic of effective leaders, increasing evidence shows that the two styles are not mutually exclusive. Different situations call for different styles and great leaders are adept at using the mix that is appropriate to a given situation.

What Leaders Do

Creating the kind of culture where safety is a driving value (or isn't), is something done by leaders through their day-to-day actions. In the most effective safety leaders, certain behaviors have been seen to recur, including vision, credibility, action-orientation, collaboration, communication, recognition and feedback, and accountability.

Organizational Culture

The culture, or "how we do things around here", is strongly influential of the results an organization realizes, and research points to measurable cultural characteristics predictive of successful safety outcomes that fall into three basic categories: Organizational Dimensions, Team Dimensions, and Safety Specific Dimensions.

The Coaching Disposition: Action and Context

Executive coaching has traditionally been characterized as "a sympathetic ear and a little advice." As the coaching process has evolved to become a strategic tool for executive and organizational development, another change has taken place. Leaders have begun to require that the coaching process be tightly linked to the business goals of the organization. Without minimizing the value of that sympathetic resource, developmental coaching as used for safety leadership integrates a more rigorous approach with two key elements:

A Focus on Action

One of the reasons leadership often seems so mysterious, and consequently so hard to improve, is that it is frequently discussed at the characteristic level. It's quite common to hear leaders described as "charismatic," "compelling," "visionary," or even "Machiavellian." These descriptors can be generally informative, but they are of little value to individuals who want to know the concrete and specific things they can do to improve. All we ever know about others is based upon what they do or say, in other words, their actions. A leadership characteristic is really a perception we come to through direct or indirect observation of a leader's actions. If we can break down the esoteric characteristics into the underlying actions, or behaviors, we can then begin to help leaders think about how to change behavior to enhance their overall effectiveness. Instead of telling a leader she needs to be more "decisive", developmental coaching identifies the specific behaviors that led to the perception that she lacks this quality – and helps her to tailor actions to change that.

A Focus on Context

Effective coaching for safety leadership also needs to occur within the context the leader already finds herself in. Both the leader and the coach must have a firm grasp of how the executive's leadership behaviors support or impede her ability to drive the organization's agenda. The most successful coaching relationships are based upon a well-structured and data-driven approach and are measured by how well they help ensure the organization achieves its business goals.

Six Critical Steps

In order to ensure a constructive and successful coaching relationship, executive coaching for safety leaders follows six steps:

Step One: Determine the Context

The overarching goal of a developmental coaching relationship is to help the leader understand how his behaviors impact reports, peers, and managers, and to influence his ability to meet personal and organizational goals. Since leadership is both highly situational and highly contextual, one of the first things the coach must understand is the environments in which the leader must lead. Is he in a situation in which he can gather input before making a decision (something normally viewed as

a positive leadership behavior), or do the circumstances make such a time-consuming process inappropriate? Does his organization require knowledge of tactical details normally delegated to lower-level leaders or is he expected to be more strategically oriented? Establishing the leader's individual circumstances helps the coach to approach the leader's improvement activities from an informed viewpoint – and avoid inadvertently coaching the leader out of alignment with his organization.

Step Two: Clarify the Goals

In the next step, the coach and leader meet to identify the goals and objectives of the coaching. This initial meeting serves two purposes. The first is to identify what the leader must achieve to meet the requirements of his or her role. The second is to examine the leader's personal goals and values and how well they fit with and support his or her professional goals. While the role requirements may be well documented, the personal goals and values are often overlooked. Alignment of both types of goal is essential; disparate goals can lead to high stress and a sense of mediocrity in both career and private life.

Step Three: Gather Data and Make Recommendations

Once coach and leader are clear regarding personal and professional goals, the next step is to gather data on the leader's performance from which to make recommendations. Typically, the data gathering involves conducting a series of interviews. Since we are looking at the leader's overall impact within the organization, a 360-degree assessment usually provides the most comprehensive picture. This includes conducting confidential interviews with the leader's boss, a number of direct reports, and even some of the leader's peers. The challenge at this stage is to get beyond characteristics to ensure the data gathered is truly behavioral. For instance, when asked how someone views the leader it is common to hear comments such as "Mr. Jones is arrogant" or "He is indecisive." The coach's job is to identify the actions behind such perceptions, for instance, "he doesn't make eye contact," or "he doesn't listen when others speak." In addition to pinpointing behaviors, the questions are calibrated to gauge the impact these behaviors have on the organization.

At this stage the coach begins to consider recommendations. It's important to note that this approach is not judgmental. The underlying task for the coach and leader is to determine whether a behavior supports the goals and values of the company or whether it gets in the way. Rather than suggest the leader should change this or stop that, an effective coach reviews with the leader the consequences resulting from a specific behavior or pattern of behaviors. Reviewing the data with the coach helps the leader understand the repercussions of his behavior. Those behaviors which support the goals and values of the company can often be leveraged to change those behaviors that impede company goals and values.

Step Four: Develop the Plan

Using the information gathered on the character and behaviors of the safety leader and the assessment of the impact these have on his organization, the coach helps the leader develop a plan that will close any gaps and play to his advantages. An effective plan has several important components:

- It must be the leader's plan, not the coach's – The coach may give advice, offer suggestions and carry out the important supporting role in implementation and evaluation but it is the leader who must make the plan his own and use it fully.
- The plan must be concise and focused – For optimum effectiveness, the leader and coach should limit their focus to only the top three or four issues, prioritized by the impact they have on the organization. It is not advisable nor generally effective to try to take on too many behaviors at once. Issues of lesser impact can be queued up to work on at a later date.
- The plan must be simple – Behavior change is difficult. Coach and leader should list in the plan the action steps each will carry out and set the plan to a calendar with benchmarks. A brief description of the action steps (behaviors) and the gap they are intended to address help to make the plan doable

Step Five: Implement the Plan

At this point, what actually transpires in the coaching relationship depends on the gaps identified in the assessment and the subsequent planning process. The coach's role is to support, suggest, measure, cajole, nag, and provide input. It is the leader's job to "do" – to make the changes that will ensure the objectives established in the plan are met.

The coach's work at this stage may include observing the leader in situations in which he or she will be applying the new behaviors and providing both corrective suggestions and positive feedback. The coach can also help the leader to think through methodologies, techniques, meeting agenda, and communication tools that will help him achieve the desired outcomes. And of course, provide a "sympathetic ear and a little advice" when called for.

Step Six: Assess the Impact

The coach must gather data, allowing a sufficient time for any behavior change to have an impact, on whether the plan is having the desired effect. This "circling back" allows the coach and safety leader to update the plan and make refinements but, more importantly perhaps, it serves as a "consequence" for the leader's effort. Accountability creates a powerful incentive to stay on task and to avoid slipping back into the old behaviors.

Case Histories

The following three case histories illustrate the experience of the authors and their associates in applying this coaching methodology.

Case Study 1: From Last to First at a Consumer Products Manufacturer

In the latter half of 2002, the management team at this personal care products site was faced with a tough challenge. Since 2000, the site had gone from first place safety performance for its division to last. Due in part to product line changes and resulting staff reductions, the site's remaining 750 employees were under tremendous pressure to perform. Ongoing efforts seemed to make no difference; by 2002, the site's accident frequency rate had climbed from 0.25 to 1.03. Quality issues began to plague the site, and the site's population, already divided along salaried-hourly lines, suffered from low levels of trust.

The site's new plant manage levels. While many of the site's managers were highly competent in their areas of expertise, they were not effectively leading in safety. Hourly employees were underreporting incidents and even avoiding raising safety concerns for fear of negative repercussions. A diagnostic assessment of the culture showed sharp disparities between levels, affecting how these levels approached safety activities. Because the site lacked a reliable mechanism for capturing information about risk upstream of injuries, managers were further hampered in their ability to make meaningful improvements. The plant manager wanted to introduce an employee-driven safety process to capture such data, however the cultural indicators suggested that without significant improvement in safety leadership, the effort would not survive. Consequently, the plant manager engaged a leadership coach to help define the role of managers in safety activities and improve the relationships they had with hourly workers.

The coach first worked with managers to evaluate their actions and how they were perceived by those who reported to them. Using these results as a benchmark, the coach help individual leaders develop a plan for improving the quality and quantity of their interactions, focusing on behaviors such as finding opportunities to provide positive feedback and ensuring understanding of company goals. At the same time, the site also gave special skills development workshops for their supervisors to strengthen the connection between top management and hourly workers. The supervisors learned how to give better feedback to their reports and to perform more successfully their dual role as advocates for reports and executors of company objectives.

Less than two years after undertaking this multi-level intervention, this site has reclaimed its position as the division's top safety performer. Incident rates have dropped by nearly 92% and the employee-driven safety effort is performing so well that it has been integrated with other EHS activities and the site's TPM (Total Production Maintenance) process. Injury reporting has increased, a sign that employees have more trust for management, and site leaders are actively using thenew skills they've learned to strengthen the site'ssafety culture.

Case Study 2: Changing Course at a Chemical Manufacturing Site

Leaders at a large chemical manufacturing site sought to lower the site's injury rate to meet the division's rigorous new standards. Already performing relatively well, site leaders recognized that creating the kind of sustained world-class performance called for would require an intervention that went broad and deep. In addition to reviving the site's employee-engagement effort, the site administered a diagnostic of its culture. The results, while mostly encouraging, showed that employee perceived a marked lack of support from the organization and didn't see the site's management as very credible. Not only would such perceptions create a potential barrier to the improved performance the site was trying to achieve, these results pointed to an underlying gap between the good intentions of the site's leaders and how their actions (or lack of action) were perceived at the front-line level.

The site engaged a coach who helped administer a diagnostic evaluation of the leadership style and best practices of each of the site's leaders and who led an alignment workshop to help the leader's clarify their goals and objectives. Afterwards, the coach worked one-on-one with each leader to help him develop a personal action plan.

To extend the benefits of a coaching relationship even further, the plant manager provided supervisors with a coach. The coach helped supervisors learn how to respond to exposures

brought to their attention and how to alter the manner in which they gave feedback and recognition. Exposure identification, not just injury prevention, became a cause for recognition.

Within 12 months of initiating leadership coaching, the site recordable rate dropped from approximately 1.2 to below .5. Employees were capturing critical information about exposure. Better data made for better barrier removal. In addition, a follow-up assessment of the site's culture showed a marked improvement across critical organizational characteristics, raising most levels into the 90th percentile or better compared to hundreds of other organizations that had administered the same diagnostic.

Case Study 3: Strengthening Good Leadership at an Agricultural Products Producer

The Florida operations of this agriculture business had already received the Agri-Business of the Year award when it decided to improve its safety leadership. The location, which is made up of three major facilities over a four-mile radius, relies on strong leaders to maintain its high level of production and its status as the low-cost producer in the industry. Site leaders saw leadership coaching as a means to supporting this objective, as well as a way to support an employee-driven safety system implemented a year earlier. Coordinating resources and objectives across such a large area would require finely-tuned alignment on what the company wanted to accomplish and how.

The site engaged the help of a leadership coach. Before defining a leadership development strategy, however, the coach worked with the site's leaders to define what their vision of safety was. The coach challenged them to think outside of traditional safety ideas and articulate their own vision in strategic terms. By asking questions such as, What does safety really mean to your organization? Where does it fit in the scheme of other objectives and initiatives? What does it mean to your place in the market and the bottom line?, the coach was able to help the leaders reframe their thinking of leadership in safety. As a result, they developed a list of principles that they wanted to define their actions;

- Uphold safety regulations even if cost or production is at stake,
- Communicate frequently and effectively up, down, and across the organization
- Ensure that people have the information, authority and resources they need
- Treat others with dignity and respect

With a clear picture of what they wanted their leadership to look like, site managers worked individually with a coach to design personal strategies for improving their interactions with those who report to them, and enacting their new vision. In particular, they had to define what their successes would look like. The coach then helped them identify ways to gain feedback on how well they measured up to the new safety values.

Less than a year after starting the leadership development initiative, the organization was able to reduce its injury rate by more than half, including a six-month streak without a recordable injury. Within just a few months of defining their new safety vision and starting their personal action plans, most leaders were able to document changes in their relationship with departments, showing the effectiveness of the new safety vision.

Interestingly, this site's parent company initiated similar leadership development activities at a few other locations. After a year the sites using executive coaching for safety were compared to those locations without the development activities. The sites receiving safety leadership coaching showed a significant change in their incident rates- averaging improvements of 40%. By comparison, the other sites showed no significant improvement.

Conclusion

Ultimately, safety initiatives share one basic goal: reducing exposure at the place where employees interact with equipment, facilities, and procedures. Many factors play into achieving this goal and it would be remiss to laud one solution to the exclusion of others. However, research and experience both show that the quality and strength of leadership is one of the most decisive in terms of downstream safety results by virtue of its influence on other safety systems and its affect on the culture that determines how they function. Experience also shows us that executive coaching can be a powerful tool for leveraging this critical area. This is not to say that the coaching process is a cure-all, or that it can turn a mediocre leader into a Winston Churchill. The coach, after all, must take the individual leader where he is and with his unique set of strengths and weaknesses. When done well, however, executive coaching can help a leader augment his strengths, compensate for his weaknesses and ultimately the gap between good intentions and desired safety results.