



Committing to Safety: **Why Leadership's Role** in Safety Excellence Is Key

White Paper

Introduction

Leadership has the power to transform an organization through their behavior and vision, which can result in the creation of an organizational culture that supports safety excellence and world-class safety performance. Yet, when leaders fail to understand how their decisions and actions impact safety throughout their organization—or blame others when injuries occur—unintended outcomes can occur, negatively impacting results.

The key is understanding that their position is holistic. Senior leaders have the power to make safety a value in every corner of their organization, from the front line to the C-suite, through a commitment to creating and executing a safety strategy that delivers exceptional safety performance.

Rather than checking off boxes, senior leaders must create a culture that incorporates safety on all levels within their organization. One of the key actions senior leaders must take is to ensure that they have the skills necessary to be effective safety leaders. They must invest in resources, both people and processes, to ensure that current practices are effective, while developing new strategies that reflect a full commitment to safety throughout the organization, from management to the front line.

What Makes a Good Leader?

For senior leaders to get to that place where they deepen their understanding of safety and create and execute a strategy, they must first possess qualities and skills that

enable them to become change agents within their organization. What makes a good leader? According to the American Management Association, a nonprofit industry group based in New York City, there are five essential attributes quality leaders need in order to become effective in their role.

Leaders must be comfortable playing a variety of roles. Indeed, wearing different hats according to the situation makes leaders more effective and knowledgeable about the factors that impact their organization. These roles may include:

- **Leader.** Looking at the big picture rather than the day-to-day in order to move their organization forward in a positive way.
- **Manager.** Establishing challenges, setting direction to overcome them, and providing the tools to be successful.
- **Influencer.** Joining in with the task of generating ideas and practices.
- **Coach.** Encouraging employees to develop skills that will create greater motivation, while providing feedback.
- **Facilitator.** Generating a greater cohesion and teamwork among employees.
- **Observer.** Focusing on how the organization achieves its goals, and establishing how they can produce additional positive outcomes.
- **Innovator.** Serving as a change agent to determine which traditional practices can be broken in order to deliver better results.
- **Organizer.** Creating processes and structures to deliver new goals.

Leaders must communicate effectively. Communicating effectively is key when delegating, coaching, evaluating performance, and providing general leadership. The

four qualities necessary for effective communication are:

- **Clarity.** Be specific and clear.
- **Accuracy.** Transmit information that is true and verified.
- **Completeness.** Close any loopholes that could cause confusion.
- **Timeliness.** Communicate when it is necessary, not retroactively.

Leaders must delegate effectively. Leaders need to have the confidence to allocate responsibilities and a defined amount of authority, which helps subordinates accomplish tasks. Those closest to the exposure should have the most input into how to control, or eliminate, that exposure.

Leaders' feedback must be useful. When leaders speak, they must be aspirational and influence change. It is important that leaders deliver feedback. Without feedback, employees will not have a reason to change their behaviors, or they will ignore the feedback. Worst yet, they won't believe what the leader has just told them, and the leader loses the credibility and ability to influence long-term and sustainable change. It is essential that employees believe that when leaders give employees information, that information will better their situation.

Leaders must effectively manage performance. Leadership needs to focus on performance so that there isn't a negative impact on growth and operations. Just getting by is not acceptable. Instead, successful senior leaders recognize that performance is directly linked to overall company goals. The skill is in aligning performance by applying both transformational leadership and key managerial techniques.

What Makes a Good Leader in Safety?

Being a good safety leader is the foundation of being a good leader. The two are

not siloed. Instead, a good safety leader recognizes that to change an organization's culture, strong safety leadership techniques and strategies are required.

The shift is understanding that the goal of the organization is not just building the bottom line but keeping all employees safe from harm. Only when that is internalized, can they make decisions, allocate budgets, and advocate for safety to the fullest within their organization. Achieving a values-based approach is essential to success.

Challenges to Safety Culture: Lack of Commitment and Resources

The challenges to establishing a safety culture within an organization occurs when leadership does not take safety seriously, blames employees when injuries occur, or takes a one-size-fits-all approach, when it comes to strengthening safety. Whenever there is a failure of commitment by leaders, safety is diminished throughout the organization.

The [2019 Safety and Health national survey](#) shows that organizations are not committing enough resources to overall training. The majority of respondents (27%) reported that their company spent less than \$5,000 on training, and the majority (62%) said that their budget remained the same.

Findings like these tell employees that leadership is not fully invested in safety. Training not only exposes workers to the latest technology and practices but also improves skills to ensure that potential hazards are identified before they lead to injuries or fatalities. In fact, the same survey showed that the top five reasons for conducting worker safety training are:

- To reduce injuries and illnesses (94%)
- To prevent complacency/to refresh (78%)
- To go beyond compliance (54%)

- To be in compliance (53%)
- To improve the bottom line (21%)

DEKRA's Skills to Improve Executive Leadership

DEKRA has established a program that organizations can use to improve the skills of executive leadership in developing and executing world-class safety.

The Executive Leading with Safety® Approach helps leaders strengthen their personal safety ethic and move their culture in a way that places an increasing value on safety. A change in safety leadership behavior creates a higher shared organizational value for safety, which motivates everyone to help reduce exposure and results in the creation of a zero-harm culture.

Each engagement is unique, reflecting the organization journey, the leadership's objectives, and the level of safety skillset of the organization's senior leadership. The purpose of the engagement is not to create executive safety professionals. The purpose is to give executives the expertise and skills to transform their culture of safety and to create world-class safety performance that supports their shared organizational values.

An engagement includes some, or all, of these four elements:

Team Working Sessions. This phase engages leadership teams in targeted working sessions that challenge individual and group theories and beliefs regarding culture, world-class safety, and human behavior and regarding how exposure drives safety improvement, effective employee engagement, critical leader actions, safety leadership and what it takes to achieve safety excellence. These working sessions are designed to build alignment within the team and to set clear organizational direction. Each module involves knowledge-building and high levels of discussion about the implications of the concept to the individual leader and to the organization, followed by the development of an action plan to drive execution.

Individual Safety Leadership Assessment. The assessment measures each executive's leadership of safety, using DEKRA's Safety Leadership Diagnostic Instrument. This instrument assesses perceptions of how they use a transformational leadership style, as well as safety leadership best practices. The report shows strengths and opportunities, and it also builds a personal development plan based on their results.

Individual Coaching. A crucial third element is pairing individual leaders with an adviser or a mentor who has extensive expertise in changing organizational culture, exposure causation and prevention, human performance reliability, effective safety leadership, and overall safety. The coaching focuses on establishing an effective safety-excellence strategy and application of key senior-leadership behaviors to drive safety culture change, demonstrating the ability to influence the entire organization toward intentional, desired outcomes.

Effective Safety Governance. Structuring proper governance and accountability, when it comes to executing the safety strategy, is another element of world-class safety. Even though it may be well defined, failure to understand the magnitude of change involved in strategy implementation can leave the organization vulnerable to poor execution. Investing in strong governance that drives the change process is the best insurance senior leaders can take to ensure that the safety strategy will take deep root on all levels, both today and into the future.

Conclusion

Companies need to understand that getting to world-class safety goes beyond just having an effective safety organization. It takes commitment from the executive layer to create an effective, holistic safety strategy and then to execute that strategy effectively. For some, this is a transformational way of thinking. Nevertheless, it is required if an organization seeks to become a world-class safety organization.

Embracing the journey to safety excellence starts with motivated leaders who know what world-class safety means and possess a willingness to invest in the creation of that environment. It also requires them to understand the factors influencing safety functioning. With a strong safety-strategy-development process in place, leaders show their commitment to safety excellence. And the employees believe it when they hear "Safety is a value for our organization."

Are you ready to start the journey to safety excellence?



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