Cultural Leadership
Stepping Up the Four Levels: Part 2
By Robert Pater

What do changemaker leaders understand that others don’t? Not just in their minds but in action? Among other realizations, high-performance leaders know they are both:

• a product of their culture, reflecting its norms and expectations, defending its evolved systems;
• a producer of progress, innovative next-level change.

While it may be relatively easy to fill one of these roles, it requires significant insight and skill to unify “concentractize” and propel both missions.

For more than 15 years, I’ve written, presented and consulted on four levels of safety cultures identified in my global work with companies in numerous business sectors. Want to move performance and intangibles to the next level? Start by identifying where your company currently “lives,” then adopt some of the characteristics of next higher level safety leadership (without trying to leap two levels in a single bound).

To glean the most from this month’s discussion, bear in mind that—academic case studies to the contrary—companies do not neatly fit into one category, and that business units, branches, departments and shifts can vary greatly even in the same organization. So, rather than looking at the exceptions, this discussion will be most useful to readers who assess where their company or site predominantly resides.

In parallel, it is no surprise that 1) cultural leadership styles dramatically differ—not only between companies, but also, as frequently, within different organizational departments, shifts and sites; and 2) weaker leadership tends to be reactive, complacently floating at lower tidepools of performance. On the other hand, stronger leadership is a wave that lifts the safety ship ever higher.

Further, best leaders shed inertia; they do not just reactively support the status quo. Rather, they accurately assess their current cultural state, then take strategic actions to elevate step change. Master leaders embrace next level improvement as the perpetual objective, subscribing to Robert Browning’s “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp.”

Level 1: Forced Culture, Where Safety Is Done To Workers

The culture: In these dinosauric organizations, trailing indicator performance is typically in the bottom quartile. The organizational mind-set resents safety as getting in the way of production. Consistently, these companies spend as little time and resources on safety as possible, usually barely enough to stay above regulatory interference. Because managers see safety as irrelevant to their “real” objectives, they tend to take a hands-off/invisible approach. When things don’t go well, engendering fear often becomes the prime motivator and punishment is typically swift. Interventions are “quick and dirty,” and canned (not customized to actual work performed). In this low-responsibility culture, managers and professionals blame employees for poor work ethic and careless practices; it’s never them, always someone else (and employees follow this lead, blaming management).

Reactive leadership: Level 1 leadership is invisible/disconnected. Company leaders’ focus is anywhere other than on safety, usually on production or meeting customer demands. Leaders don’t attend safety events, rarely talk about safety and do as little for safety as possible to get by. Leaders’ communication styles range from seething to explosive. Some leaders spew anger and blast out blame, assuming squeezing up pressure will generate better results. Other middle managers and supervisors put their heads down, just “do their jobs,” and try not to be the raised blade of grass that’s lopped off. Leaders with strategic perspective leave Level 1 companies as quickly as they can; so these organizations’ leadership stock settles toward the bottom.

Step-up leadership: To help move their organization to the next level of culture, leaders should predominantly focus on chipping through blockages within senior management. Avoid talking about what is the “right thing to do,” as this will likely fall on deaf ears in these companies, as well as reduce credibility. (No executives are more focused on the bottom line than those running Level 1 companies.) Instead, promote consistent messages to executives about advantages of safety performance to what’s already important to these senior managers: reducing their personal legal exposures, reducing expenditures of resources potentially drained by regulating agency or employee complaints, satisfying customer demands.

Do your homework by first eliciting supportive evidence from regulating agencies and customers about their bottom-line expectations of company safety performance. Then, make the case for how small allocated resources can significantly pay back this investment. To reinforce positive executive actions, follow up with successful data—no matter how small—and with sincere anecdotal stories that applaud and thank executives for their leadership in safety. The key is to break the inertia of negative safety associations by taking small, ongoing, visible steps.

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Level 2: Protective Culture, Where Safety Is Done For Workers

The culture: Trailing indicator performance tends toward industry average, in the third quartile. These organizations see safety as having some importance, but do not trust that employees will work safely or without trying to game the system. Like a concerned young parent, management at these companies sees itself as in control, so it drives safety purely top-down. Protective cultures predominantly emphasize process safety, averting the large horrendous incidents that make headlines and draw all the wrong attention; on the other side, they do less to prevent common personal injuries. Focus is on minimizing costs by trying to make work environments idiotproof/foolproof (totally engineering out all work hazards, which is not possible), buying safe actions with rewards and incentives, legislating tomes of policies and procedures, scheduling “gotcha” external audits, postulating “safety is number one!” and pushing personal responsibility. These cultures tend toward looking backward, often “locking the barn door after the horse escapes”—focusing narrowly and energetically on stemming injuries that have already occurred.

Protective cultures barely contain an undercurrent of continual frustration: “Why don’t people just do as they’re told?” “What’s the matter with them? It’s in their own interests to act safely.” But the matter, of course, lies in good part with weak leadership.

Reactive leadership: Protective cultural leadership is directed, that is, it relies on direct force. However well intentioned, it pushes, pulls or motivates by pressuring to generate change. In essence, many leaders act as if they are concerned parents whose workers are clueless or wayward children. These leaders first try to benevolently request, then, when this doesn’t get the expected response, they force change on others. Push-back results and management’s ensuing frustration can cause it to steamroll workers, often seeking to fix any potential safety risks (an impossible-to-fulfill challenge) to remove need for employee compliance. These actions can create either push-back or the appearance of change. That is, people may comply only when they know they are being

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monitored (whether electronically, clip-board observations or in other ways). This style of leadership is markedly less effective with those who resent being treated like children—especially aging workforces, younger workers and those more independently minded.

**Step-up leadership:** The challenge for leaders in protective cultures is to help executives realize there is a strong disconnect between their espoused intentions of supporting safety, and the reality that a) their performance is just average because their actions actually generate a dependent-on-management culture; b) they can’t elevate safety by themselves; and c) they need the willing engagement of supervisors and workers.

Some Level 2 companies’ culture is in transition, with a rear foot still in a forced mode. Senior executives are typically the first to have the safety light click on—usually with the assistance of changemasters. The next step is to help executives identify and bring into the fold—without reflexively punishing—middle managers and supervisors who merely give lip service to safety or outright ignore it.

Begin the process of eliciting confidential safety feedback from workers and supervisors—then report back trends to executives (without identifying who said what). Help executives analyze trends and clearly see both progress from forced culture and organizational limitations of the current protective one. Applaud and thank them for their progress, and let them realize that they can accomplish even more with minimal time investment on their part (actually, much of their efforts in driving safety can eventually be at least partially offloaded). Bring in examples of other companies that have transitioned to higher-level safety cultures and performance. While continuing to strengthen process safety, begin to diagnose and prevent pervasive personal injuries (e.g., soft-tissue, motor vehicle crashes, slips/trips/falls, hand injuries).

**Level 3: Involved Culture, Where Safety Is Done With Workers**

**The culture:** Trailing indicator performance is above average, in the second quartile. These companies clearly value safety and understand that workforce engagement is important. They believe they know what they must do to have a safe workplace: recognize and publicize best practices, discern vector contributors to safety performance, both external (environment, tool) and internal (safe actions, leadership). They begin to educate and train staff in earnest at all levels.

These cultures implement recognition systems to a higher degree than do Level 2 organizations. And they value creating and measuring leading indicators (although they don’t always understand how to do this effectively). Also, they begin to focus on at-home safety, start to consider how to engage supervisors and try to work on acorns—not-oak trees strategic levels by capturing near-misses/close-calls.

While these organizations have stepped up toward clearly emphasizing improvement, it’s often up to a point for some (Level 3.5 cultures?). At times, involved cultures can get stuck and become frustrated when reaching a plateau. Their biggest block to continued improvement is self-pride in how well they’ve previously elevated their performance. Being good sidetracks them from moving to great.

**Reactive leadership:** Involved leadership level is invitational—opening the door and requesting others to enter, change and improve. Invitations have to be continually made because, as time passes and work pressures continue, people can lose focus and interest. At the Level 3 cultural stage, companies have become definitely better at observing and listening.

These cultures are indeed better than average and have accomplished a lot. But their strength also can become their weakness. Because they may show superior trailing indicators as compared to competitors, they may think of themselves as better than they are. Pride in previous improvements can get in the way. Managers may resist, even ignore, less-than-complimentary feedback. Some senior managers rate their culture as having arrived—which blocks thrusts for continuous improvements. They might become too inwardly focused, developing an “ain’t been invented here” mindset—set that they already know and can do anything they want and need.

Leaders complain about worker complacency—usually quietly or in back rooms, as this culture can think highly of itself and may not brook criticism. Ironically, these leaders may be missing the self-perception that their own leadership complacency—their “we’re great!” attitude—has set a rest-on-their-laurels tone. At the earliest stuck stage, leaders don’t look outward, mistakenly equating internally initially positive results with thinking they have all the answers. False pride prevents continuing to search for ever-better methods. Ironically, very good results can be temporary where a strong safety default is not part of workers’ DNA. At this stage, this can result in managers overlooking or employees hiding injuries to maintain a self-assumed stalwart safety status.

**Step-up leadership:** Balance positive feedback with unearthed opportunities for improvement. Help leaders on all levels overcome the pull of false pride. Gently but persistently remind everyone they can get better. If there’s too much internal pride, carefully show examples (perhaps from other companies) of how people tend to match leaders’ expectations; how this can be effective in the case of self-honesty and determined movement to improvement, yet, can block next-level performance. Balance any tendency to become too self-contained by sharing outside resources (books, benchmarks, external experts) that point the way toward even better performance. Find an open-minded leader as high up in the company as possible to help plan and execute pilots of new and potentially complacency-breaking initiatives.

Promote and exemplify reflection, a balance between internal recognition and self-satisfaction with a job well done. One way to do this is to build into every celebration of success a lessons learned expectation (“What would we do differently next time?” “Where do we go from here to achieve even better results?”). The most important principle is to remind everyone that there is a higher level of performance and culture that they can achieve. Challenge them to get there, with full confidence that they can continue toward highest-level safety.

**Level 4: Leadership Culture, Where Safety Is Done By Workers For Themselves**

**The culture:** Trailing indicator performance is global class, in the first quartile. Safety is personal and internalized in this culture. While executives and senior managers in these cultures are
typically active safety champions, they realize their commitment alone is not enough for reaching and sustaining highest-level safety. A high degree of trust exists that others will be as honest as possible and do what they say they will do. It’s expected—and for the most part occurs—that workers self-monitor and self-regulate; there’s little “It’s not my responsibility” blaming, either from managers or workers. At-home safety is seen as just as important as safety at work. This culture employs a “scissors” approach: Change occurs top-down, bottom-up and middle-out, often simultaneously. Emphasis is on developing leadership mind-sets and skill sets in everyone. Coworkers are seen as cocontributors and initiators rather than as tools to accomplish another leader’s objectives.

Reactive leadership: Fourth leadership level is “culturizing”—creating a safety-supportive environment—like helping a tree to grow or culturing a pearl—by providing the necessary nutrients and environment to facilitate positive change, so the plant becomes firmly rooted. Because people speak about “safety is for me,” this approach spreads credit for accomplishments rather than primarily honoring select individuals as movers and shakers.

Ironically, leaders externally support others to “do it themselves”; this is the highest form of leadership (see the article, “Leadership for DIY Safety,” Professional Safety, January 2012). Results are transportable to different tasks, tools and environments. Workers’ locus of control becomes more internalized as the light of personal interest, responsibility and control shines from inside each employee. This is what Lao Tzu refers to as, “With the best leader, the people will say, ‘We did this ourselves.’”

Leaders see their role as clearing paths and reducing obstacles to bringing in needed resources (such as legal or contracting hurdles). Typically, leaders are highly accessible to others in Level 4 cultures. They are willing and able to speak personally and honestly about safety, rather than just in statistical or general terms. Leaders take personal responsibility for the overall work environment—there are minimal “do as I say, not as I do” communications. These cultures usually relate powerful safety stories that most know. Training is provided in habit change, attention control and understanding safety principles, rather than just memorizing or understanding rules.

Leaders default toward being watchful, then make ongoing and relatively small course corrections, rather than implement something with great fanfare. Then they tend to not pay much further attention.

By design, workers have easy access to safety information and systems, with many trained as peer safety catalysts and reinforcement agents for first delivering, then sustaining new skills to peers. Safety committees in Level 4 cultures are active and alive, generally are highly prepared, have clear responsibilities (which they have some freedom to determine) and often have a budget to accomplish specific objectives.

The hallmark of this culture is the high level of engagement on everyone’s part—in setting and measuring a range of leading indicators, observing positive and at-risk actions and conditions, reporting close-calls/near-misses and much more. Safety is imbued in decision making of all kinds (e.g., promotions, purchasing, contracting with vendors). In these cultures, communication in meetings has the greatest measurable balance between one person talking and participants’ responding/initiating.

In global-class Level 4 leadership safety cultures, workers and managers monitor themselves more than watch others, continuously assess changing work conditions and readjust according to, and act effectively whether observed or not—on and off the job. Workers in these companies often make their own adaptations for improving safety (e.g., padding sharp or cold contact surfaces, crafting simple tools to reduce reaching, cushioning hard flooring), then pass these along. They also tend to generate the largest amount of effective suggestions for upgrading safety incentives.

Step-up leadership: No matter how well the company has done in the past, there is no guarantee of future performance. With this in mind, step-up leaders help everyone (including changemasters themselves) remain modest and not rest on their laurels. Highest-level leaders understand that “pride goes before a fall,” that they must continue to do what brought them success, and to improve and bring in new and different input to overcome stasis or self-satisfaction.

Such input might be highlighting strong internal practices of which not everyone is aware; introducing new food for thought (training, ideas, articles); piloting different initiatives that are generally suggested, then vetted at all levels—in general, aggressively seeking ever better practices. In some ways, leaders in these cultures have the unique, difficult challenge of trying to fix what isn’t broken. This requires maintaining strong relationships on all levels, along with the background work to support executives to allocate resources when performance is already strong.

Slips are more likely to occur when initially transitioning between different surfaces. The same is true when moving to a higher-level culture. When taking a cultural step up, a changemaster key is for leaders to especially watch that first transition area step so they don’t slip back or have a mishap.

Conclusion
In addition to keeping their feet underneath them, best cultural leaders employ both hands at once. On one side, leaders are the product of their culture and keepers of past gains. On the other, culturemasters are never satisfied, continually looking to become ever better.

By artfully combining this dual mission, honestly assessing their culture, then moving to next-step performance, best leaders can realize the benefits of both stability and change, and help their companies move toward global-class safety performance and culture.