Why do so many executives and safety leaders actively seek the grail of employee engagement? Perhaps it’s because they know that engaged workers become more receptive to change, committed to safety, aligned with company objectives, satisfied with work and creative. Returns on engagement are especially attractive in times of widespread suspicion, distrust and resistance. Therefore, leaders have tried various strategies to help employees climb aboard the safety train.

Last month, we identified blockages to safety engagement and reasons why workers opt out. Our underlying strategy for improvement is based on Kurt Lewin’s force field analysis, which indicates that most efficient and lasting changes arise from reducing the forces working against employee engagement. If one lowers or removes restraints to active participation and involvement, these will naturally elevate. By not forcing buy in, there is less likelihood of unintentionally engaging what leaders don’t want—worker pushback or opt-out.

The most effective leadership approach to elevating engagement is to harness the energy-engagement connection. Have you ever heard a manager say that the company doesn’t have the time or the resources to change direction? But then, someone with organizational skills becomes inspired, and motivates the company to find the time and arrange for the resources to make a new direction happen? The key to engagement begins with engaging leaders—from executives top-down and peer leaders bottom-up— who become interested and activated then pass it on.

Strategic leaders keep the energy-engagement connection in the front of their mind during planning. They understand that:

1) While it’s definitely quicker to give orders rather than invite others in, overall it’s not more efficient. As the song goes, “You can’t hurry love.” You also can’t force engagement. Forcing is highly limited and never results in high-level involvement, which, by nature, must be willing.

2) It requires energy to ignite and feed engagement. Available energy can be in short supply due to:

- draining worries (money, retirement, relationships, job insecurities);
- fatiguing work (many are working harder at age 50 than they did at age 30);
- aging energy fading;
- unmanaged stress, which wears people down;
- persistent aches and pains that decrease attention and energy;
- burning the candle at both ends (some have two jobs, others care for children, grandchildren, parents, or have outside activities).

Leadership must supply the initial energy to jump-start engagement (through planning and priorities, structural setup, budgeting and execution). Then, it comes from workers (participating, trying new ventures, offering ideas, volunteering, cogently suggesting and doing more than just their required work.

3) Engagement activates a circuit that can return energy manifold by spreading the load, which activates enthusiasm and creativity. This is the magic of engagement. The energetic return can result from the following ideas:

- **See success.** Identify initial positive results, let others know and find ways to build on them.
- **Release.** You likely know that soft-tissue tensions can accumulate with an experienced workforce. So, too, can emotional trauma. Changemaster Lewin successfully applied this principle to helping resistant people let go of preset, dysfunctional stances. If you think of disenchanted or anger as ice, here’s how Lewin helped melt staunch resistance to allow a new start to flow, which works for engaging people. Think of warming people up to discuss and evaporate sour memories generated by long-past events. Of course, this has to be done carefully with strong contact, respect and full attention.
- **Afford opportunities to try something new.** Anthropologists classify humans as a *neophilic* species, that is, change-loving. Desire for what is new drives purchases in fashion, cars, computers and other technology. Apply this to engagement by showing opportunities to do something different, pilot a new initiative or beta test a newly proposed tool. If you don’t have something new or different to start up, consider reexamining a problem or issue that needs to be solved or addressed with fresh eyes (or ask others who haven’t been involved with previous attempts to look at the problem from scratch). You always can address existing problems with new eyes and thoughts. This activity, itself, can be an opportunity to try something new to stimulate engagement.

- **Have a higher status by being engaged.** This can include membership in a successful team or meeting away from work for perspective.
- **Offer a chance to make a positive difference.** Some people will be motivated to engage in...
activities (e.g., incident investigations, studies, reports, presentations) that they believe can spur real change. Of course, no one size fits all.

Nothing here is merely academic or theoretical. We’ve seen significant, relatively quick and sustaining improvements in organizational safety performance and culture in all kinds of companies throughout the world result from rechanneling negative emotions, skeptical emotions and sour expectations into engagement, enthusiasm, and a willingness to commit time and energy to a new approach or strategy.

The mechanism for actuating this comes from applying the right structure and skills, not just will/trying hard or wishing that better engagement would somehow happen.

**Northwest Natural Approach to Safety Engagement**

Northwest (NW) Natural is a 150-year-old gas company operating in Oregon and Washington. Like many utilities, it has a longstanding, aging workforce. A transitioning workforce is the undeniable handwriting on its wall—this includes retirement of experienced workers (many of whom have never worked for another employer), employees continuing to work past the age at which previous generations of workers would typically retire, reduced workforce and younger new hires on the horizon. And, the company is dedicated to raising its safety culture level from good to global class.

While several similar companies bemoan the chance to engage an experienced workforce in safety, NW Natural is making significant strides. Safety manager Leslie Kantor has the active support of senior management in its engagement mission. The company employs a continuous improvement approach focused on reaching everyone. Practically, Kantor indicates that the biggest obstacle to engagement is scheduling. To reduce this as a blockage, NW Natural’s approach is to involve a few employees up-front who then take it back to others.

How does the firm accomplish this? It selects employees from operations to work full-time on a project for a week. Structurally, the company ensures that involved workers are rotated in order to include as many as possible overall. During the week, there is typically a 50/50 mix of union and management representatives who all work on the same level. Expectations going in are that this is a time to problem solve, be positive (rather than dwelling on problems or seeking blame), and for the diverse group to receive appropriate training on how to make a real difference. During the week, team members are reminded of the importance of their problem-tackling mission, are fed, fast-tracked and provided a skilled facilitator. But they, not senior management, are ultimately in control of this process.
After being presented with important challenges, they decide how to create improvements and craft solutions that are their own. Because these challenges are multidimensional and often long-standing, some teams start the ball rolling toward ongoing problem solving.

What have these continuous improvement teams actually accomplished? They’ve generated workable plans for:

1) Improving NW Natural’s safety recognition program so that it elevates safe performance without encouraging hiding injuries or becoming a buy off that people take for granted. This has been completed and is currently in the reevaluation cycle.

2) Restructuring safety committees to be representative, action-oriented and better conduits for communications and generating solutions. The team is now working on fine-tuning its approach for practical implementation.

The next challenge is to improve its incident investigation process to a high-grade one in order to: a) better review and determine root causes; while b) minimizing defensiveness; and c) maximizing the ability to discern actual critical contributors.

Of course, this is not the only approach the company has put into place to further engage workers and safety managers. For example, the utility is in the midst of a larger sustainable workforce initiative to redesign tools, equipment and tasks to better suit the transitioning workforce. As part of this, to elevate workers’ safety skills, the company is training peer instructor catalysts who, in turn, train coworkers on effective strategies and techniques for preventing common injuries, then coach and reinforce workers to support ongoing use of new techniques.

10 Safety Engagement Keys
1) Make It Personal. Begin With the Leader

It is critical that changemasters lead the way by first engaging themselves. This signals sincerity in ways that volumes of words never can. Leaders do this by putting engagement high on the leadership priorities list, building it into everything. Others tend to watch with suspicion whenever a leader aims to move culture and actions to a higher level, especially when morale is uneven. They silently question whether it is real or just another flavor of the month. But, leaders must be careful to not sabotage themselves.

2) Welcome Openings

Engaging leaders open the door when opportunities appear. Others will see and register the interest; in stark contrast, faking commitment to engagement will backfire, sooner rather than later.

Leaders will achieve greater return on investment from tapping into natural, already-existing enthusiasm rather than attempting to light a fire under others. For example, note which things workers (or managers) are most animated about when talking. Sporting events? Current news? Personal hobbies? Family accomplishments? Then invite a tie-in to safety (“I heard about the soft-tissue injury to our team’s first baseman. We’re having similar strains. Would you be willing to start off our safety meeting by describing what happened to the injured player, and what the team is doing about it?”). Again, the key is to continue to sincerely invite people to talk about what they are already interested in.

Wise leaders also know that when people are riled up, it is a good opportunity to turn a negative engagement around. One caution is that even if a group revs up toward a wrong direction (complaining or off on a tangent), strong leaders know it is more important to win the war rather than each battle. If a group becomes sparked by a topic, do not shut them down too quickly, as this undercuts the larger engagement objective, even if it creates discomfort.

Leaders who truly value engagement must be willing to sincerely listen and consider what they may personally think is irrelevant to the larger, overall goal. The payback? Everybody who is involved notes the demonstrated interest and sincerity, and this enhances leaders’ credibility.

3) Be Invitational

Most successful leaders draw rather than push engagement. Think of magnetizing attraction, rather than pressuring/turning up the heat. Or, as Anil Mathur says, “Paint a vision they want to be part of.”

Inviting implies developing and communicating a set of expectations. Next comes weaving this in with employees’ natural interests, while being both consistent and persistent (of course, without pushing). At its root, inviting stems from a leader’s first managing his/her expectations of him/herself. A wise leader understands that not every
invitation will be met with overwhelming enthusiasm, and that some criticism and skepticism is not only natural but actually welcomed. Handled well, this can alert people, help them voice concerns and participate in problem solving. A wise leader understands that there is typically keen interest in how s/he handles criticism and skepticism, as this is where the level of sincerity is truly evident.

4) Make Good Contact
To engage the gears in a car’s manual transmission, the clutch must intermesh with the flywheel, which in turn interlocks with the drive shaft, then transfers force to move the wheels. Similarly, to engage a workforce, leaders have to make contact, get close (bridge distance on many levels with strong communication contact), then move themselves in order to start workers’ gears. Leaders must first be convinced that a new initiative or tool will really make a difference, then they need to get close and allow their natural enthusiasm to motivate others. This is not a hard sell, but rather transferring comfortable conviction about the power of future changes.

Developing good contact can be a work in progress. Especially in a low-trust, high-suspicion climate, don’t expect people to understand or accept attempts at building bridges, no matter how good the intentions. But, be consistent, inviting and welcoming, as this can build bridges in a relatively short time.

5) Energize First
The E in engagement stands foremost for energizing. Retire the tired. Put aside safety programs that no longer elicit employee attention. Are supervisors prefilling/photocopying safety observation cards? If so, then it is time to change. Leaders always can bring back these interventions and reintroduce them as fresh.

Connect to workers’ and managers’ current passions. Tie in safety to seasonal sports, holidays, family activities and more. One organization has successfully brought safety energy and engagement home by training one member of each employee’s family as a home safety leader.

By enlisting the processes of discovery and kinesthetic involvement (where workers can immediately feel for themselves the results of slight changes they’ve made), many companies have seen workers make clear modifications in their daily actions, which have then resulted in significant reductions in soft-tissue and other injuries.

6) Reduce Blockages & Make Engagement Easy
Reduce obstacles and activate through bite-sized pieces. The less you expect people to do differently, the more likely they’ll do something. The best leaders make it easy for everyone to change. Make it easy for all to become engaged in some way. (See Pater’s article, “Leadership Made Easy” at http://tinyurl.com/easyleadership.)

7) Design Different Approaches for Different People
Invite all to become engaged in their own way and timeframe. This may be as small as taking a few minutes to respond to questions about their view of the company’s safety atmosphere. One international manufacturing company invites all managers and workers to create a personal safety objective for the year, which they discuss at each safety meeting. Ask workers to contribute their opinion to a written survey, or to talk about their favorite hobby or how they’ve adapted their work to reduce cumulative forces.

8) Encourage Going Viral
Watch for any engagement or involvement that seems to gain interest or catch on. These are already internally rewarding to participants (planning a safety event, membership in a successful team). Reinforce excitement/spontaneous engagement by strengthening identity. Distribute team shirts or hats for committee members, arrange for group progress reports to senior management and at conferences.

9) Structure It In
Like NW Natural, ensure that your engagement approach has structure. Provide resources, especially release time, for workers to effectively engage. This might entail advanced training for an ergonomics committee, providing a budget to a safety committee, release time for peer catalysts to speak with and reinforce their coworkers and more.

10) Monitor & Report Back
Directing ongoing attention to engagement raises its value. It also is important to determine to what degree engagement efforts are working. One way to accomplish this is to develop leading indicators for engagement.

For managers:
• Ask, “What do you see as other managers’ commitment to safety?” To what degree is safety at our company personally meaningful to me? How much do you participate in safety meetings? How much does your boss ask for your thoughts or ideas about safety? How receptive are you to receiving feedback on your safety leadership, even when it’s not perfect?”
• Observe: Notice whether they listen actively and interestedly to safety conversations. To what degree do they show up at safety meetings or conferences? Do they take an active role? Do they serve as point of contact (champion) for new safety initiatives? Monitor time of possession during safety meetings (amount of time workers speak vs. how long the manager or supervisor lectures). Anil Mathur refers to shared discussions as the “quality of safety conversations” and believes this to be among the most important leading indicators of safety culture.

For workers:
• Ask: “Do you discuss safety with coworkers? Do you talk about safety with your family? Attend (at least parts of) safety meetings and conferences? Help set leading indicators for safety and engagement? How do you react to a request or criticism involving safety from a manager or coworker?”
• Observe: How much do workers participate in making safety presentations? How many usable ideas for safety improvement do they offer? How effective are employee committees at listening to concerns, reinforcing effective actions and at leading change?

Conclusion
We’ve seen many companies gear up managerial and employee engagement in a relatively short time. In each case, significant improvements in safe actions, safety performance and culture soon follow. We invite all leaders to raise the level of safety engagement and energy in their company to further attention, interest and commitment to safety, at work and at home.