Strategies for Leading Engagement
Part 1
By Robert Pater and Craig Lewis

D o you remember the last time you met someone who was recently engaged, graduated or hired? They likely exuded energy and life, positively anticipating what the future might bring while feeling validated and chosen.

There’s a parallel in employee engagement. Many strategic executives and safety leaders realize that workers’ enthusiasm propels positive change in productivity, effort, quality of work, innovation and safety. Many leaders focus on elevating worker engagement, moving beyond calculated “buy-in,” to help engender a workforce that is stimulated, involved, inspired, receptive to change and goes well beyond just being present.

A 2011 study by Industrial Safety & Hygiene News asked respondents to identify what steps they would take the following year to improve workplace culture. The two top selections (multiple responses were allowed) were, “Engage employees more in safety activities”; and “Get leadership more involved in safety activities.” We interpret the second choice as a desire for safety engagement, but on the part of managers.

Clearly, especially now, many see worker engagement as essential to balance the scales against a background environment of economic uncertainty, thinned resources, transitioning aging workforces, remote/minimally supervised staff and hypercompetition—along with withered expectations for higher performance.

Perhaps due to these forces, a significant gap exists between the real and desired states of employee engagement in many organizations. A significant gap exists between the real and desired states of employee engagement in many organizations.

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Leaders have their work cut out for them to bridge this gap, to overcome switched off employees and to reinspire their resolve to be active players in the safety process, both individually and within their work group. After all, safety culture is comprised of the interactive and cumulative effects of every company member, from CEO to line worker. Further, leaders’ additional challenge is to set a positive participative tone so that future hires start off on the right track.

But, there is good news. Numerous companies have gone from cultures where workers historically ignore to actively embrace safety; from employees moving from resistantly opting out of safety leadership positions to actively seeking to serve; from declining to try out new safety procedures, training or PPE to expressing interest in applying these to chosen tasks at both work and in personal activities.

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Types of Employee Disengagement

- Passive withdrawal: disinterested on active duty; not giving attention to safety policies and procedures; checking out; not actively absorbing training methods; not reporting close calls; not offering suggestions that might make processes safer; not fully or honestly participating in incident investigations; going along with the crowd/nlot speaking up about safety concerns or pointing out newly observed potential hazards; declining to volunteer serving on safety committees or as peer safety catalysts; not valuing safety; not going out of their way to reduce risk.
- Active resistance: generally angry or dig-in-their-heels actions such as showing who’s the boss or “they can’t control me” responses that workers specifically use to put themselves at higher exposures than needed; follow only the letter and not the spirit of safety rules; sabotaging safety meetings through horseplay and other behaviors; undercutting transmission of safety intent and messages to coworkers.

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Real turnarounds are possible. Often, determined leaders can brush aside the charred surface of disengagement and discontent to find embers of interest still burning, or at least smoldering. Then, they feed and fan these suppressed sparklets into a roar of strongly ignited interest, application, culture and results. Here’s how: methods that have worked in the real world and in companies throughout the world for unleashing and sustaining significantly higher levels of worker safety engagement.

Start by enlisting what we call “the power of negative thinking” by identifying blockages to engagement. Change guru Kurt Lewin, in his pioneering work on force field theory and analysis, demonstrated that any state, such as the level of employee engagement, is dynamic, not static.

Actually, the present state is the resultant of opposing forces operating on it: 1) those that drive it to its current level; and 2) those that block it from improving. Further, Lewin demonstrated that in the real organizational world, sustaining improvements are much more likely to come from lowering forces in a system. You can apply this powerful principle by identifying and reducing forces that block engagement.

**Identifying Why Workers Disengage**

Organizations frequently report that once-engaged, or at least neutral, workers will become disillusioned and disengaged over time. Consistent with the method of recognizing then reducing blockages to engagement, let’s again apply parallel thinking by considering some possible reasons one member of an engaged couple goes from in love and excited to breaking off the engagement.

- **Feel taken for granted?** This can happen if one is not given the same attention and concern that was applied to when s/he was won over (when the theoretical commitment was made). The same dynamic may occur for consumer companies that entice new customers while playing hardball with existing ones, which often results in difficulty retaining the latter. Ask yourself and your team: To what extent do employees feel their safety compliance is taken for granted?

- **Cold feet?** Maybe one is afraid of the consequences of committing to do something that is important or time-consuming. Or afraid that the relationship or intervention is doomed and s/he doesn’t want to be part of a losing team or even blamed for its likely failure. This is a type of buyer’s remorse in advance. To reduce this...
potential blockage, assume that rather than winning workers’ commitment just once, it must be periodically re won through reassurances that they have made a good decision, and that they can and will be able to make a real difference.

- Better offer? Whereas another potential mate might sweep an engaged person off his/her feet, in companies, the enticement to stray usually comes from fellow employees amidst an existing culture of disenchantment. “Get involved with safety and you’re just playing into management’s plans to squeeze more profit.” Or, “you’re a fool for believing the latest snake oil claims.”

Sometimes the better offer is that of saving time or energy by not participating in a thankless or seemingly hopeless safety cause. (So, how can leaders convince safety committee members and other somewhat engaged workers that their efforts are indeed meaningful and appreciated?)

- Didn’t get what they expected? To avoid turning off workers’ potential safety commitment, it’s essential not to bait and switch or misrepresent. Monitor for early employee perceptions that management has a secret agenda or is planning to use a new safety intervention for ulterior purposes. We’ve seen engagement in some ergonomics initiatives be torpedoed by the fear that management was less interested in reducing discomfort and trauma than in thinning staff by ramping up efficiency.

Let workers know honestly and up front what you can and cannot do, and what they’ll receive. Most important, explain the benefits to them and the real differences, even if not earth shattering, that their signing on can make.

- Changes in priorities or crisis? Sometimes outside events can divert interest or attention away from committing to a relationship.

- Not striking while the iron is hot? Ever have a budding flame flicker then die because of waiting too long to adequately feed it? Similarly, a protracted engagement can send the message that the “asker” is all talk and no action. It’s important to roll out changes while interest is still high.

- Growing apart? Workers come to believe that original values and interests espoused by leaders have shifted. Or that a leader is more interested in taking credit for any positive movement than in nurturing change. As the expression goes, “It takes two to tango.” If employees perceive leaders to be less engaged in safety, it’s likely they will pull away as well.

- Conflicts over power? In already charged environments where trust is uneven at best, there can be posturing between employee leadership and management over positioning. During one period of tense labor contract negotiations, the bargaining unit leadership of one Fortune 500 manufacturing company proclaimed it would fine any of its worker-members $500/day for participating in any safety-related activity (e.g., incident investigations, safety committee meetings).

Strategists understand that every situation has both positive and negative aspects, that there are times (e.g., during logjammed negotiations) when temporary disengagement can actually help reduce conflict. But in general, engagement is a clear sign of success in safety. Experience shows that as companies move toward higher levels of safety culture, engagement in safety rises on all organizational levels. This can be a chicken-and-egg function. (For more detail, see Robert Pater’s articles on cultural leadership in the March and April 2012 issues of PS.)

- Workers’ Personal Blockages to Engagement

The previous section focuses on reasons that once-engaged people eventually become disillusioned or distance themselves from previous interests or commitment. Sometimes, in addition to these organization-related reasons for being disengaged, blockages to engagement can arise from personally limiting views that can block active safety participation.

- “Don’t need it”/“Doesn’t affect me”/“There’s no value”/“Who cares?”

- “This is the way it’s always been around here. Nothing will change.”

- “The problem’s not me. All safety problems are only the result of the work environment/tools/management/ others.”

- “Safety is just boring.” “Safety only gets in the way of my doing my job.” “You’re pressuring me to do more in less time and at the same time put up all these stupid safety rules.”

- “I’m too busy.” “Getting involved takes up too much time.”

- “You stick your neck out here and it just gets chopped off.”

- “Why bother? Nothing I can do will make any difference anyhow.”

- “They say safety’s important but everyone knows all they really want is getting product out the door as quickly as possible.”

- “You can’t teach an old dog. I’m not going to change.”

- “Safety meetings are the only time I get a real break to relax.”

- “You can’t make me get involved. Don’t push me.”

- Blockages to Leaders’ Effectively Engaging Workers

On the part of the engager/leader, blockages to elevating engagement may include:

- “Looking for the on switch or magic bullet to make others become engaged and buy in. Quick-and-dirty answers usually become more muddy than efficient (e.g., back belts to solve all lower back injuries).”

- “Writing off engagement as impos...
sible. These situations usually have an underlay of blaming others for being recalcitrant, impossible or unsupportive. Sometimes, would-be leaders disbelieve benchmarks of other organizations achieving higher levels of engagement. It’s almost as if attacking these other companies’ results diverts attention away from their own lack of success. Regrettably, the same people who bemoan “lack of personal responsibility for safety” rarely look at their own role in taking personal responsibility for this lack of improvement, where they might be obstructing change.

- Dismissing engagement as too time consuming or not believing that there would be a payoff. This stems from undervaluing the returns from engagement. A safety-engaged workforce aggressively identifies risks at earlier levels, takes personal actions to reduce risks, watches out for coworkers, communicates more quickly, accurately and less defensively about close calls/near-misses and incidents, and supports safety change. While growing and sustaining higher levels of engagement require time and effort, we’ve seen significantly leveraged returns on these investments from heightened safety performance and culture.

- Attempting to force engagement. This can run the gamut from calling on workers to answer during safety meetings to “volun-telling” employees to serve on safety committees. At best, you can make someone show up, but you can’t force them to be interested, engaged, participative or supportive.

During the Korean War, singer Jack Crosby (son of the more famous Bing) went public about his strong intent to enlist in the U.S. Army in order to fight, not sing. But after Crosby enlisted, the Army placed him in Special Services as an entertainer. The press flocked to Jack, asking about the big point he made about wanting to fight and not sing. What was he going to do? Jack’s response: “They may be able to make me sing. But they can’t make me sing good.”

Nor can any manager force a worker to be engaged or participate “good.” And it’s a lot easier for workers to quit their job outright or add to the statistics of presenteeism—going through the motions, working at only a fraction of their abilities—than it was for Jack Crosby to separate from the Army.

When asking someone to become engaged, the desired indicative answer has to be “Yes!” To break through from disengagement to higher levels of active participation and buy-in, leaders must identify their and others’ reasons for being disengaged, then help reduce the number or, at least, the magnitude of those blocking forces.

In our follow-up article in next month’s Professional Safety, we’ll focus on identifying strengths and limitations of seven prevalent approaches to engaging employees and how to elicit “yes” through 10 keys for engagement, how leaders can reduce blockages to engagement, and how one utility, with a long-standing workforce that was under significant pressures for change, was able to elevate engagement for and interest in safety with relatively little time and resources.

Real and substantial improvements in safety engagement are not only possible, they are happening right now in companies throughout the world. And with the right approach and discipline—that includes leaders being engaged themselves in propelling safety engagement—it’s possible for companies to achieve significant and growing results.
The most effective leadership approach to elevating engagement is to harness the energy-engagement connection.

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 to peers—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. Changemaker Lewin successfully applied this principle to helping resistant people let go of preset, dysfunctional stances. If you think of disenchantment 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.

• **Aford 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.
Leading Thoughts

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 where 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.

Leaders must send consistent messages, both expressed and nonverbal, that they want and value others’ participation and ideas, even when they have different preexisting thoughts. For example, when working with an activated group (either angry or interested), at times it may be best for leaders to step back from something they want to say or do, if people push in another direction. Leaders may be tempted to give in to the desire to get the upper hand with the group, to keep them on (the leader’s) track. But, this could extinguish the budding flame of engagement.

How leaders react to undesirable engagement levels also is important. In these cases, masters of engagement invite again, gently ask again in different ways, make it obvious that they value responsiveness, that they were not just going through the motions, that active participation is a top priority.

Leaders can make engagement personal by telling stories and asking for reactions or similar tales. They can make impromptu introductions or go out of their way to keep everyone—executives, managers, supervisors, workers, employee leaders—in the loop by providing coming attractions of changes in procedures, practices and equipment, then asking for their thoughts and reactions. Engaging leaders also personally recognize and thank above-and-beyond efforts in front of others (like family members) who are valued by the hero/heroine.

Another suggestion is to create a database of personal employee interests and skills. We’ve seen people surprised by and interested in the background and skills of those they may have worked alongside for decades. Then, find ways to tap their individual interests and strengths.

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