Do you really want to move toward global-class safety performance and culture? Experience has shown that high-aspiring companies do this by expanding their approach to safety leadership.

Begin by seeing the whole picture and identify the current leadership culture in your company. I have frequently shared my experiences raising safety cultures through four levels. In an updated summary, these are:

1) **Done-to-people culture**, with bare-bones, go-through-the-motions safety. Here, leadership is what I term harsh command and control, dictating bare-bones safety. Leaders rule by position, talk and do not listen, and believe they are the sole repository of innovation, strategy and decision making. Organizational performance (including trailing safety indicators) generally falls in the lowest fourth quartile. When safety records are poor, leaders typically rail against workers for being careless or lazy.

2) **Done-for-people culture**, another top-down approach, where managers and experts design and implement safety for workers. Here, leadership is more benevolent command and control, with managers exhibiting more concern for workers than do Level 1 leaders. But, they see employees as wayward, ignorant or impulsive individuals who cannot contribute to their own and organizational improvement without being closely watched and controlled. Overall safety performance is typically below-average in the third quartile.

3) **Done-with-people culture**, where senior management understands that to attain improvements in overall and safety performance, workers must participate in suggesting and implementing positive change. Enlisting buy-in and expertise improve as workers are involved in both designing safety processes and putting these into place. Safety performance is above average in the second quartile.

4) **Done-by-people culture**’s hallmark is shared leadership, characterized by workers willingly taking control of their personal safety at work and at home. Overall, each individual thinks of him/herself as the leader of his/her own life; in line with that, people embrace the belief that each person contributes to the company’s success. Safety performance is superior in the first quartile.

Stepping up from Level 1 through 4 cultures requires mind-sets, actions and statistical performance evolving in several ways. Overall, the hallmark of a Level 4 done-by-people culture is that leadership is also on a cellular level, dispersed throughout the company.

**Identifying & Diversifying Leadership Functions**

Leadership means generating positive change by working with and through others. Companies need much more of this; what they do not need is people who shame and blame others for failures to improve.

Old-school approaches to leadership focus on a powerful individual leader, but this has decreasing application in a world of large organizations and/or those that are geographically spread across different cultures (e.g., leading the cultures of distribution vs. manufacturing, service vs. transportation, day vs. graveyard shifts, or even with a plant in Texas vs. a similar one in New Hampshire). While core leadership is needed to set direction, dispersed leadership is essential to actually setting daily improvement into place.

Emphasis on one or a handful of powerful, all-knowing leaders whose decisive rule is not only anachronistic, but also ineffective. In today’s complex, ever-changing, competitive world even the smartest person cannot know everything, be an expert in the full range of swirling forces currently affecting a company with rapidly updating data, shifting markets and changing ground rules.

The traditional “I tell and you do” centralized style has limited success with the current evolving workforce. Many older, experienced workers can be jaded about the honesty, wisdom and level of concern for them expressed by old-style organizational leaders. This has been borne out by polls that reveal discouragingly sinking levels of trust for management. In addition, many younger workers often do not respect authority for its own sake. In fact, they frequently rebel against those they see as driving inconsistent performance.

Now stir into this mix the increasing number of dispersed, autonomous employees who frequently work with minimal supervision. Like it or not, they cannot be practically made to work under the command-and-control thumb of headquarter/office-based leadership many miles or time zones away.

Ultimately, because no one person or group can see everything, quick-trigger, one-leader decision making often backfires when subtle or peripheral—but important—data or potential repercussions are not perceived or considered. Snap decisions only serve well during times of crisis; ironically, I’ve seen how this ego-driven leadership approach, when applied on a daily default basis, leads to varying degrees of crisis.

Furthermore, eliciting buy-in is critical to leadership. The baseline of safe actions is what people...
Systematic leadership theory focuses on two types of functions required for an effective organization: 1) task leadership through which one makes things happen efficiently; and 2) team building through which one helps people work together smoothly by building on each other’s efforts rather than undercutting because of dysfunctional jealousy or conflict.

Task leadership functions include initiating, requesting information, offering opinions (stated as such), clarifying complex data, coordinating, developing procedures, mentoring and providing helpful feedback (positive or negative).

Team-building functions include encouraging, expressing reactions, relieving tension, compromising to come to agreement, delegating, bringing people from distant stances together, working through conflicts, interpreting what someone says in unemotional terms, listening to draw out ideas, supporting, helpfully challenging to go beyond and self-set limits. (For greater perspective on a strong maintenance leader, see my article, “The Curve of Leadership,” at http://tinyurl.com/leadershipcurve.)

Focusing on task accomplishment to the exclusion of team-building frequently results in high-level organizational members becoming disillusioned, overly self-protective and often leaving the company for more supportive environments.

All of these functions are too much to fulfill for any one person or even a team even when they know they are not closely observed. After all, diagnosing an illness and prescribing the healing medication does not help unless people willingly take their medicine when no one is watching. It is critical to have versatile leaders who can relate to various people across different age groups, backgrounds, gender and other dimensions to understand their concerns and to motivate them according to their priorities.

Level 1 and 2 cultures typically focus on one person (or a select few) directing followers on what to do and how to do it. Insight and power are invested in these apex people who are assumed to be smarter, more insightful and more decisive than others.

In contrast, what seems to work is for expertise, perspective and leadership to be shared across many people and organizational levels. When conflict of ideas is handled dispassionately and respectfully, better and more creative decisions are made. In addition, many foresee potential problems and alternate solutions in advance, rather than relying on just one person (who may be more readily blindsided).

Ultimately, leadership is about changing attention and decisions. For better and worse, people ultimately make their own decisions; these decisions drive what they do (as well as their inactions), where they look, what processes they apply, whether they use PPE, how they use tools, to what degree and which methods they adopt to protect themselves. The key to improving safety performance is to:

1) Improve the level of personal decisions.
2) Elevate personal safety skills, physical and mental (here, most important, are abilities to direct attention).
3) Change actions, so that people apply decisions and skills to what they actually do, at work and at home.
4) Reinforce positive decisions, skills and actions.

Some will likely be more effective decision makers and safety applicers than others—even before being trained in these specific skills. But, almost all can learn to become better leaders. The key is to elevate everyone up the leadership effectiveness continuum. At the highest tier, Level 4 companies exhibit a leadership culture, where there is a rising tide that lifts everyone’s abilities of judgment, planning, decision and action skills organization-wide.

I have yet to see a company with too many safety leaders; most organizations lack sufficient active safety leadership. Author Tom Peters wrote, “The best leaders don’t create followers, they create other leaders.” It makes sense to develop engaged safety advocates and practitioners who also serve as models and reminders to others. These people lead with their actions, not just their words (in line with George Bernard Shaw’s explanation, “I pointed ahead—ahead of myself as well as you”).

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All of these functions are too much to fulfill for any one person or even a
small cadre of people. Rather than a leader-dominated culture, the highest performance organizations are those where leadership is spread among as many as possible who contribute to ongoing organizational improvement.

Creating Safety Leaders: Avoid These 7 Don’ts

When creating leaders, it is as important to know what to sidestep, as well as what to aim for. It is akin to a main tenet in the medical Hippocratic Oath, “Above all, do no harm.” Begin by identifying what does not work to prevent falling into leadership development traps. Avoid these seven common pitfalls:

1) Not communicating specific and cogent expectations of what it means to lead. People are not mind readers. Leaders must clearly communicate their intentions and expectations. But first, leaders must be clear about what they themselves are trying to accomplish.

2) Forcing people to lead. Volunteering others is inherently inconsistent, akin to trying to force yourself to relax.

3) Guilt managers into leading safety because it is the right thing to do (e.g., “If you don’t lead safety to the standards I expect, you are subpar both as a leader and as a human being”).

4) Insincerely delegating up or down, expecting designated leaders to be mindless mouthpieces, mimicking without question either someone else’s directives or the safety party line.

5) Not providing skills that people need to lead, expecting them to lead by determination or force of will, without providing them with the strategies, methods and skills they need to be effective.

6) Failing to support them, whether with nonexistent or inadequate follow-up, or opportunities for them to receive and provide feedback, or not offering needed logistical support. One of the best ways to turn off employee/peer leaders is to fail to provide the little things they need to function as improvement agents. These might include rooms reserved/ready/open at scheduled meeting times, needed audio/visual and other equipment or perhaps worse, canceling peer leaders’ meetings at the last minute (which conveys an unspoken message that the meetings are unimportant).

7) Neglecting to feedback the results of their leadership actions. In general, people must hear back even small successes that result from their decisions and directions. This is especially important in motivating busy, higher level managers to continue to actively lead safety.

In the February 2014 issue of PS, I will focus on how to reach and develop three levels of safety leadership. Creating activated, committed, knowledgeable leaders on all levels is essential for both moving toward and sustaining global-class safety performance and culture.