Leading Thoughts
Strategies for Leading Engagement: Part 2
By Robert Pater and Craig Lewis

Six Limited Strategies to Engagement

1) **Give up trying to engage/accommodate disengagement.** Some leaders don’t believe engagement is possible or realistic, either because their workforce is problematic or because there is too much water under the bridge to rechannel positive employee relations. Other companies may tentatively begin to invite engagement, but see their efforts rejected. Others briefly attempt several quick fix methods with disappointing results. Often these companies try initiatives that workers suspect are insincere or superficial, but are seen as palliatives, not changing a negative perception of employees. When trust is burning away, it is essential to address key issues, rather than merely putting new strings on a violin then fiddling louder to mask the sound of relationships charring.

When quick-fix methods (e.g., involvement games or buy-them-off incentives) are tried and then fail, managers tend to blame workers as deficient (“They’re impossible; they’ll never change”) or declare engagement is impossible. Such leaders frequently cast suspicion on benchmarked reports of other organizations’ engagement successes. Ironically, it is the pot calling the kettle black; such managers display suspicion about other’s good results similar to their own employees’ view of the leaders’ failed efforts.

2) **Force/demand.** Some companies resort to railroading engagement. This is akin to trying to pressure someone into liking and spending time with you; it usually backfires and can lead to him/her seeing you as creepy or worse. Force/demand is typically the hallmark of a level 1 safety culture (see Pater’s articles, “Cultural Leadership: Raising the Level, Parts 1-2” March and April 2012 issues of *Professional Safety*).

Of course, it may be possible to intimidate some workers into **appearing** to be involved by pointing a finger and calling on them to respond during a meeting, asking direct questions that put them on the spot, “volunteering” them for safety committee membership or other duties, writing policies and procedures requiring some kind of involvement on their part, creating sanctions for not taking part, etc. However, these actions generally result in workers’ pushing back or digging in their heels. In essence, forcing tends to cement disengagement, actually undercutting its ostensible purpose. Or create just a semblance of engagement; as former Intel CEO Andrew Grove wrote in *High Output Management*, “Fear never creates peak performance, only minimal performance.” You may get people to cover themselves and appear to comply when forced, but this won’t lead to high-level engagement, especially when workers know they aren’t being closely monitored (typically most of their time.)

3) **Create guilt.** This amounts to trying to make someone uncomfortable, that s/he owes it to themself, coworkers and the company to become more actively involved and interested in safety. We’ve found that for most people guilt is at best a weak motivator and requires lots of ongoing effort to maintain. Making someone feel guilty is typified by the number of “shoulds” in leaders’ messages, as well as “If
you really cared . . .” sentiments. This approach rarely develops enthusiasm and often engenders resentment among workers who don’t like being emotionally pressured or made to feel bad if they don’t do what’s expected of them. Creating guilt is typically a hallmark of a level 2 safety culture that is parental in tone.

4) **Repeat the same old approaches, strategies or rhetoric.** This approach assumes employee resistance will wear down if leaders continue to call for engagement. But for many, this comes across as nagging. But, what actually wears away is patience, replaced by resentment. Other workers will just ignore these ad nauseam calls for doing more or getting into the safety spirit, just as many have learned to tune out repeated messages about getting into better shape or adopting other healthy habits.

5) **Buy off.** In other words, entice them with rewards or incentives and they will come. Here, the underlying view of workers is that higher and better actions are possible through tangible goodies. Of course, safety that is externally incented is safety that has to continually be rebought forever with higher prices. How does a company buy off work safety actions (which are critical to form strong autopilot programs and for reducing cumulative trauma)? Many workers will take the money and run, and still resent being manipulated. And because the call for highest-level engagement springs from within, external rewards can actually muddy the lakes of self-motivated participation.

6) **Logically persuade.** This strategy employs good sense to make a case for employees to become more engaged. The underlying assumption in this academic approach is that people make decisions linearly and that thought is king. If leaders make the right persuasive arguments, they might be able to penetrate through worker resistance to become more highly involved. After all, doesn’t involvement feel good? Isn’t safety beneficial to all? The basic problem is, as in any debate, people rarely make logical decisions. In our experience, most are emotionally drawn to a course and soon after seek out logical ballasts that support their already chosen course. Besides, many have heard all this before and just tune out.