Cultural Leadership
Raising the Level: Part 1
By Robert Pater

Leadership and culture are undoubtedly intertwined. Like an evolving plant and fruit, best safety leadership simultaneously reflects a company’s current safety culture and also drives its progress.

There’s a balance to artful leadership: 1) bolstering and maintaining the stability of a company’s present strength, while at the same time 2) shaking off status quo adhesions that would otherwise lock in staid, marginally effective approaches when cultures typically push back against change. But moving beyond current bounds must occur in order to move performance to a higher level. As the saying goes, it’s unlikely to get different results from just redoing the same things.

Here is another way of looking at it: Organizations get the results they lead, while concentrically a company’s working climate shapes leaders’ messages and actions.

Of course, stability and mobility are inversely correlated; the more stable something is, the less mobile—and vice versa. Like many applications, this is easier to see in the extremes. For example, with stability there’s low kinetic potential for falling when lying on your back, but it’s hard to move nimbly from this position; in fact, some people even have difficulty getting up after they’ve fallen. Alternately, high mobility lowers stability. Ever see a great running back brought down with just grazing ankle contact?

The same is true for an organization. The more settled it is, the less mobile. So here’s the tipping question master leaders might ask: “How can I be a strong proponent for reaping the benefits of our current, honed systems while also serving as a force for continuous—and sometimes dramatic—improvement?”

To go a step further, leaders gain the greatest leverage developing others as leaders, not just attempting to create submissive followers. So leaders should also question the degree to which overall organizational leadership should innovate versus settle in. There’s no simple solution for all the far-flung branches of the same organization, much less one right answer for every company—especially where circumstances are in flux.

Think of culture as a surround system of what workers actually do, when watched and also when they know they’re unobserved. It refers to the unwritten rules, guidelines and ethics in an organization. What do you have to do to garner the attention of make-it-happeners? Receive accolades? Get promoted? Gain critical budget approvals? Alternately, where is the line that you have to hover above to stay out of trouble or worse? What actions are actually accepted, as opposed to what’s just espoused? What kinds of conflicting signals are transmitted throughout the organization?

How are company members motivated, trained and reinforced? What do senior leaders really think of workers, and vice versa? How does each think others value them?

Safety culture is a microcosm of overall organizational culture; safety, productivity, quality and engagement/morale are inseparably linked. In fact, I have yet to see global levels of productivity reached and sustained without equally high-grade safety culture, attention and performance.

And safety culture doesn’t just reflect, it can catalyze: Broadly raising personal safety engagement and actions can propel widespread gains in organizational effectiveness on many levels. For example, J.J. DiGiovanni and other United Airlines leaders have applied the hidden acculturating powers of safety during the recent merger of two transportation giants, United and Continental Airlines. They have employed safety, among other strategies, to accomplish concentric objectives—smoothing the cultural transitioning process and satisfying requirements of regulators such as Federal Aviation Administration.

At the very least, during a merger, there can be significant gains from unifying best practices and getting different operation mind-sets on board toward the same destination. But, more than that, during any changeover, high-flying leaders can apply innovative safety strategies to reassure everyone internally that the company is concerned about worker well-being, provide tangible support affected by change or stress and to elevate en-

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gagement overall. (If you’re interested in finding out more, DiGiovanni will make a presentation on United’s planning, results and lessons learned at Safety 2012 in Denver, CO.)

Safety has the potential to be much more than “just” injury prevention. In fact, because of concerns that the label safety has longstanding, less-than-positive associations, some companies wishing to see significant organizational change have harnessed safety-related interventions they instead refer to as work-life, engagement or transitioning workforce corporate initiatives.

Who Are Culture Changemasters?

Though they may differ in personal style, culture changemasters are guided by principles that thread through a range of excellent leaders:

• **They are yin-yang strategists.** Rather than one-sidedly approaching objectives, wisest leaders both preserve and propel safety culture. They are able and sure to distinguish between baby and bathwater, neither reflexively discarding hard-won improvements for the sake of change nor, on the flip side, shielding current cultural weaknesses as if everything were sacrosanct. They know that success in part comes because of what the culture promotes and partially in spite of organizational limitations. They continually discern between weeds and grain, protecting, culling and resowing their fields.

• **They have a bias toward action.** Others rarely realize how much great leaders plan for the unexpected—it is akin to the hours of conditioning, practice and opponent familiarization that great athletes expend, then appearing naturally gifted during the game. Similarly, great leaders—although they perform a significant amount of unseen what-ifs and weigh multiple alternatives—know this is not enough. They understand Will Rogers’s advice, “Planning gets you into things; hard work gets you out of them.”

Changemasters know that no matter how well they plan, they cannot predict or control the future. Because they know that confusion can lead to freezing, when they have doubts about a planned course, they respond by first working through their concerns internally prior to acting. Perhaps more important, they trust themselves to

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think on their feet, to act in accordance with underlying proven principles.

Of course, there are times not to take action, to watch for the right moment to act, like a cat alertly waiting during a hunt. But leaders cannot default to inaction (analysis paralysis?) due to being uncontrollably racked by doubts or indecision.

• They read and utilize openings. They know that due to differing levels of resistance and styles of management not every part of an organization will simultaneously change; this is especially true for larger, more dispersed companies. It’s like picking up a long, stretched out rope; it’s unlikely you can do this in one short motion. So they look for opportunities—areas/divisions/leaders that actively welcome change, times when outside events widen receptivity to considering something new, or internal pressures that increase selective openness to going beyond the same-old.

• They understand change is rarely linear. While consistency of focus is critical, this doesn’t mean strategies should be rigid. For example, culture catalysts know that when the tide comes in, only every third (or fewer) wave moves closer to the shore; similarly, changing culture often means moving three steps forward then two steps back. So they maintain their perspective and patience—not giving up when change momentum slows.

• They craft both mobility and stability. They realize that building safety culture means first forging then continuing to reinforce a desired surrounding system. Place new brick, then mortar it. Remove, replace, remason when you don’t get desired results. The key is to assimilate/stabilize each new bite-size change. Ideally, change that when looking back seemed to have occurred quickly, actually feels gradual while in the midst of movement. Cultural change mastery entails crafting new ways and anchoring them rather than overloading people with too many initiatives at once.

• They work top-down and bottom-up and from the middle. The irony is that, while it’s usually most effective when senior managers first buy into cultural change, higher-level safety culture is ultimately generated and sustained at as close to grassroots level as possible, along with the active support of frontline supervision. Sure, commitment initially flows downhill—senior management to middle management to supervisors (with these last two often the weaker links in the buy-in chain). But getting cultural changes to hold fast without totally slipping back requires employees’ active acceptance. So change artists are careful to enlist safety committees and other worker leaders at an early level.

Expert cultural changemasters realize messages and motivations may not be passed along without degradation (recall the children’s game of telephone). So they work with people at all organizational levels to get each aboard, customizing their approach to each to maximize reception and action.

For example, Honda Indiana recently received Risk & Insurance magazine’s first-ever PreVent award in recognition of its sterling safety culture and performance. Getting cultural ducks in a row has been one significant process underlying the firm’s accomplishments. Safety professional Jeff Burke, senior ergonomist José Banaag and other Honda leaders were instrumental in lining up support and eliciting commitment on all organizational levels, then garnering funding and necessary time for proposed cultural improvements. While this prework didn’t happen overnight, once there, cultural and performance gains occurred relatively quickly.

• They focus on creating energy, not just on “shoulds” or rules. Anil Mathur is CEO of Alaska Tanker Co. (ATC). With his strong and uncompromising safety leadership, by January 2012 the company had completed a decade with only one lost-time injury. Anil—a recipient of ASSE’s 2011 President’s Award and also noted by National Safety Council as “one of the CEO’s who gets it”—has taken ATC from a Level 2 to a Level 4 safety culture (see below) by elevating energy, enthusiasm and emotional intelligence within both ship crew and land-based personnel. This company is widely regarded as the safest and most environmentally responsible oil tanker company in the world. Anil is quick to distinguish between intellectually knowing about safety and energetically internalizing safety.

I’ve heard many professionals and managers ask, “How can we develop a safety culture?” But every company always has a safety culture; these leaders are really asking how to develop a higher-level culture. The answer is: 1) start by identifying the strengths and limitations of the current culture, then 2) take steps that climb up the performance risers.

Part 2 of this column (Leading Thoughts, April 2012) will focus on identifying cultural and leadership characteristics of the four safety cultures I have identified in my 27-plus years’ work:

• Level 1. Forced culture, where safety is done to workers.
• Level 2. Protective culture, where safety is done for workers.
• Level 3. Involved culture, where safety is done with workers.
• Level 4. Leadership culture, where safety is done by workers for themselves.

Part 2 also will provide strategies that dissatisfied, high-expectation leaders can use to help mobilize their organizations to a higher level of culture and performance.

Remember that leadership for improving culture is ultimately as much of an art as a science—perhaps more so. Principles and knowledge provide a good leadership foundation, but the art that distinguishes able leaders from cultural changemasters is in knowing how to actually apply these to changing situations, when and how to flexibly shift.

In our experience, changing culture is the only way to realize and lock in quantum changes in safety performance. And even quantum improvements in leadership and culture are doable and can occur in a much shorter time period than some might think. Turnarounds are possible—and this is happening right now in companies throughout the world.

Look for Part 2 of this column, “Cultural Leadership: Stepping Up the Four Levels” in the April 2012 issue.