

Six Safety Leadership Strategies

Energizing & Sustaining Safety Performance & Culture

By Robert Pater

Best leaders take time to reflect on what's been done, lessons learned and how to make future adjustments to get ever better.

When times are difficult, strategic leadership becomes even more needed. Wise managers know the margin for error evaporates in a resource-thin environment. All the while, organizational stakes mount, and there's less room for failure.

These pressures can result in an underlying sense of uncertainty among managers, where the most they can count on is reduced resources for contracting, slashed budgets, less time, rified staff, cuts in travel and other expenses. Many report working harder just to keep performance above water, to barely hang on.

In counterpoint, pressures ratchet up to glean the most from every expenditure—whether new procedures, equipment, organizational communications or training systems—like attempting to squeeze every bit of toothpaste from its tube. In these environments, many companies prioritize those interventions that actuate higher-level, efficient actions and reduce waste.

Yet, new initiatives too often prove disappointing. Some never take root and just fritter away resources. Others produce marginal results but don't flourish, showing flashes of promise without ever realizing full potential benefits (or, as one corporate safety director said, "I can't help but feel we're leaving money on the table"). Still others get better results but aren't the missing, ground-breaking link that engenders the step-changes executives long for.

In this kind of milieu, strategic leadership can make significant differences both in maximizing gains from new actions and maintaining positive, forward momentum with those safety initiatives already in place (as long as these previously have been effective).

An alert: Attempting to implement multiple strategic approaches can become jarring/out of sync, overwhelming or counterproductive. Some strategies might neutralize others, like plugging in a dehumidifier next to a humidifier, further wasting time and resources, missing potentially fleeting opportunities, losing credibility—and possibly endangering a professional's career development. One self-neutralizing example is instituting individual safety incentives while simultaneously promoting team engagement. These initiatives often pull against each other in many ways.

However, six synchronized safety leadership strategies and methods for nurturing and main-

taining positive energy toward safety objectives can elicit prized multiple gains: turning around safety disinterest into safety advocacy; redirecting certain workers' "I'm an accident waiting to happen" mentality to

one of surefootedness and self-control; changing the norm from lackadaisical, leery or left out to confident, concentrated and committed.

Each of these six seamlessly dovetails with and overlaps the others. These strategies aren't theoretical. They've been developed out of experience working with numerous, predominantly Fortune 1000, companies worldwide.

The Leadership Six



Selecting a Path

The first strategy involves selecting objectives that: a) are executable; b) will make a significant difference in reducing blockages to higher performance; c) align as many key organizational members as possible; d) may be relatively easily measured; and e) transfer those specific skills and actions that improve performance.

In planning change, the best leadership strategists appreciate that it is essential to account for/reduce barriers to sustaining change. In his work on field theory and force field analysis, Kurt Lewin contends that lasting change is much more likely to occur when initiators identify and reduce blockages (he calls these "restraining forces") rather than trying harder by adding additional forces (which he named "driving forces"). For more, see my article, "Leadership: Letting Forces Be With You" at <http://tinyurl.com/LeadershipForces>.

When it comes to bringing a change aboard, leadership strategists should decide whether to introduce this as "new and different from what we've done previously" or, alternately, to show this is an extension of the existing system. This choice is best based on strategic assessment and decision whether to break the mold/shake things up or to move at a slightly different angle/reinforce what we're currently doing.

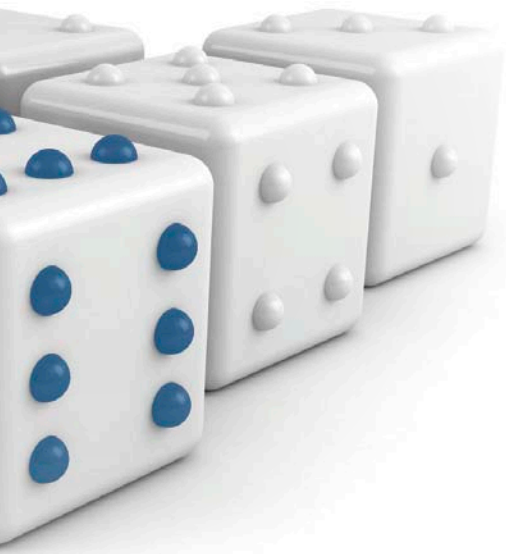


Projecting Forward

Projecting forward as a leadership strategy entails planning and setting vision, getting buy-in and creating shared milestones toward



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successful implementation. It specifically requires setting expectations of timing, return on investment, simultaneous and multiple objectives, and returns for “hitting three bullseyes with one arrow,” rather than merely focusing on “robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

To accomplish this, effective implementers communicate and work through realistic expectations of improvement with all key players—as early as feasible. Typically, those involved in an improvement process have assumptions of what will occur during the implementation, what changes will be visible, when they might realize improvements and to what degree.

The professional must surface and manage these expectations. We’ve seen executives with unrealistic expectations prematurely pull the plug on implementations that were going well because these senior managers expected faster or more far-reaching returns than what was actually occurring (which, in some cases, showed healthy progress).

Make sure you get the right go-ahead in advance from all players (levels of managers, employee leadership, other departments). Go beyond the obvious—consider who you may have missed (e.g., administrative staff who shape many organizational messages, key contractors). Then, sequence logistics to account for critical steps of buy-offs, signatures and timing.



Energizing Internally

When hard resources are constrained, it is even more critical to focus where you can most easily make a difference.

In other words, if you can’t afford new hardware (e.g., tools, major equipment

changeovers, significant plant redesign), then upgrade your software by applying efficiency of motion, igniting bursts of refocusing and aligning contacts in the same direction toward safety objectives.

To make this happen, think about Newton’s first law of motion: A body at rest tends to remain at rest. A body in motion tends to remain in motion. Physically, momentum is defined as the product of mass (size) and velocity (speed) moving toward a given direction. In terms of safety leadership, I define momentum as continuing movement along a chosen path.

How can a leader engender positive momentum? By disturbing the inertia of either doing nothing or continuing along a pathway that has been shown to, at least lately, elicit minimum positive results.

Maintaining momentum necessitates working with a site, business unit or the company overall to spark the energy of motivation (which means creating movement) developing and progressing toward tangible cultural objectives. At the same time, it entails making it more likely that each organizational member is internally/

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personally motivated to work toward objectives that are consistent with the company's desired direction. This may entail generating movement out of stillness (those set in their ways) or, more often, redirecting current momentum in a slightly different direction.

Regrettably, there are no perpetual motion machines. All interventions are slowed by the friction of emotional resistance, complacency and the seemingly universal desire for something new. Even initially strong attention, interest and excitement can slowly dissipate into disregard.

Energy input is required to break any inertia. It is easier to redirect forces that are already in motion (e.g., workers who are suspicious, upset or angry about safety requirements—or distrustful of management) than it is to rev up workers or a business unit from a cold start (e.g., those who have given up, feel hopeless, are counting the moments until retirement).

Of course, everyone—worker, supervisor, manager, executive—has his/her unique wishes, plans and motivations. The keys to internal energizing are to a) get the attention and interest of each organizational member through hoped-for results/benefits they value; and b) align their attention, interest and actions toward common goals.

The key to the first part is to make safety personal, offering individual benefits that go beyond avoiding a negative outcome (as in “do this so you don’t get hurt”) and toward seeing tangible, positive new results from actions taken. For example, we’ve had significant success showing people how to improve in hobbies and personal pursuits that are already important to them, helping protect loved ones, becoming immediately stronger/balanced/more assured.

Energy is a critical component of change on any level—chemical, atomic, new skills transferred into daily actions and organizational improvement. Think of changing organizational energy as key to understanding, generating and redirecting momentum toward a positive direction.



Harnessing Inertia

In an atmosphere of significant resistance, the next leadership strategy entails, on one hand,

utilizing the strength of inertia and stability, and on the other, disturbing inertia to improve receptivity to change.

Rather than fight resistance to change, channel it to working for safety. Many people resist change that is thrust upon them, over which they perceive having little control. They may dig in their heels to change.

Here is where inertia may be harnessed. Plan and communicate changes as temporary (“Would you try this new technique for just 2 weeks to see if it makes a positive difference?”). Monitor use of and reactions to the equipment. After the trial period, get back to people promptly to see whether they perceive a positive difference. Often, using the new method will become a short-term habit after this period. Now resistance to change works toward change.

Harnessing inertia may include in setting habits, utilizing a “melt-move-refreeze” approach to reducing resistance. But it always refers to making resistance to change work for, not against, higher safety and organizational objectives.



Maintaining Liquidity

During times of great flux or uncertainty, some financial experts counsel their clients to remain liquid. In other words, to maintain a significant portion of assets they can quickly and easily access without penalty. Similarly, to overcome a dysfunctional “stay the course” approach during times of uncertainty or great change, strategic leaders don’t overcommit resources. They investigate alternate interventions, apply those selected in strategic pilots, perhaps try several different approaches in various arenas to see which one(s) might best work. In other words, they don’t go out on a limb, where, even if a chosen intervention doesn’t achieve expected results, they can still easily recover and move in another direction.

Maintaining liquidity also means understanding and applying the principle, “Be water not rock. Be rock not water.” Know when to stand firm when others are emotionally panicking/operating reactively without strong strategy versus when to flow around objections and obstacles to change (that may be only thrown up to subvert changing the status quo).



Conditioning for Momentum

Build individual and organizational muscles for sustaining improvements, not holding at the same level. This mind-set is based on creating and reinforcing an ethic of, as Bob Dylan wrote, “He not busy being born is busy dying.” Do not rest on your laurels—no matter how previously good safety performance may have seemed.

This requires helping individuals and the organization elevate their automatic actions. For example, individuals learn to transfer skills for lifting, using PPE, understanding MSDS both at work and at home. They become unconscious competents in preferred safe actions such as locking in a seatbelt right after sitting in a vehicle.

For companies, this could include resetting default messages when an injury occurs (e.g., immediately expressing concern rather than criticizing/blaming the injured person), or always planning for extending momentum of a new initiative in the earliest adoption phases.

Seeking and making ongoing adjustments is essential to strong implementation/execution, rather than reflexively (or stubbornly) staying the course. As a plane travels cross-continent, east to west, it’s often pointed slightly too far north or south; it must be continually re-steered toward its destination. This is also how drivers accommodate drift on a straightaway even in a well-aligned vehicle.

For energy and time efficiency, master pilots maintain control by catching and adjusting off-target flying as early as possible. The same approach is true for piloting an organization toward a desired destination. Highest-level leaders read early results of any newly instituted change and make continual course corrections.

Best leaders take time to reflect on what’s been done, lessons learned and how to make future adjustments to get ever better. By applying these six leadership strategies, you can more effectively energize positive change and keep momentum for improvements alive and growing.