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Leading Thoughts

Advanced Culture Change Leadership

By Robert Pater

So what's up and down with cultural change? Is it relatively easy or shake-your-head unmanageable? Can it be accomplished quickly or only over a protracted time? Are there hidden secrets to success or just simple strategies? Is it even doable or just impossible because organizational leopards don't change their spots? Perhaps all of the above are true.

Seminars and writings trumpet the newest and proclaimed-best methods for upgrading safety and overall organizational culture to stellar levels. Is this merely the latest trend or fad, the panacea that will finally cure all safety and organizational ills? It is easy to become overwhelmed or jaded. One thing most can agree on: culture affects everyone's approach and performance. So how do we separate the grounds from the coffee? I suggest applying some advanced strategic thinking.

Six Perspectives for Upgrading Safety Culture

First, not surprisingly, many prescriptions offer the same old elixirs with newer labels. But, culture is a complex compound formed from many particles. To actually transmute culture, leaders must first understand the underlying forces involved.

For example, to achieve real and sustaining engagement improvements, one must realize that many companies float in a sea of statistically eroding trust in leadership with too many just going through the motions at work to barely keep up with the expected workload. In general, be wary of those who are trying to sell their narrow products/services as the only needed propellant toward high-level culture. Would better PPE or visual acuity or incentives alone truly steer your company to the promised safety land? It is amazing how many otherwise savvy professionals, perhaps out of fatigue or desperation, jump aboard a simplistic magic carpet ride. If it seems too good to be true, it likely is.

To catalyze sustaining change, plunge below the surface of jargon and general proclamations. Arguably, few would disagree with, "Hold everyone accountable"; "manage the managers"; "execute flawlessly"; "get everyone engaged"; or "personal responsibility for all." Nice sentiments do not help much if they do not detail what to do in daily operations.

Second, pick your battles for maximum effect and efficiency. Real, significant and sustaining cultural elevation begins with leadership, which is most efficiently harnessed on multiple levels: executive, middle manager, first-line supervisor and employee. If you cannot reach all levels, the most critical for getting the ball rolling are: 1) activate at the very top for setting direction and tone; and 2) prepare peer change agents at the grassroots levels for actually carrying it out in practice (this simultaneous top-and-bottom-driven leadership is termed scissors change).

Third, general prescriptions are just principles at best. Medications and their effective dosages vary widely between individuals. Similarly, even mostly accurate overriding principles do not provide a blueprint for different organizations because each has a unique history and challenges. It is important to be wary of solutions that purport to fix everything for all companies, no matter what their stage of development (e.g., unionized or not, centralized or spread, encapsulated workforce or one more autonomous, long-term or high-turnover workforce, for-maximum-profit or regulated monopoly, or led by committed/thirsty-for-improvement leaders versus those who are highly skeptical or change-resistant).

It is amazing how often leaders attempt to port over another company's success formula verbatim as if it were sacrosanct, without adapting processes to their own unique situations. All solutions, plans and fixes must be customized, not just once, as forces and reactions continually shift. It is the nature of all general seminars and writings that cannot offer custom solutions to specific organizational needs. Direct and targeted help is needed, whether done internally or with external resources.

It is critical that leaders make quick and tangible improvements. Anil Mathur is CEO of Alaska Tanker Co. (ATC), a company that has a long-term record as the safest and most environmentally responsible oil tanker company in the world. Mathur says:

Generalities and passion cannot sustainably move the culture forward over time. The essential point is that credibility in the workforce for improving safety is enhanced by action on specific safety issues confronting the organization at the time. In ATC, we achieve this through our no-fault near-miss program. All near-misses are reviewed by the ships where they are generated, and then our safety director and his team review them. Unsafe conditions are corrected, and some 20 to 25 near-misses are circulated in the fleet and reviewed at safety meetings.

Such specific action to address specific problems over time changes safety culture in a lasting way. The workforce sees leadership commitment in action; in my view, this convinces the workforce in a way that words alone cannot.

Success with this approach requires a consistent steady focus over time. We have been doing this for well over a decade. As a result, near-misses are reported as a matter of course. We really do not have to exert any effort in receiving them.

Fourth, most higher-level leaders have a general direction toward where they want culture to move. Likely, almost all who aim for global-class performance already know that command-and-control leadership will not get them there. Ultimately, shut-up-and-do-as-you're-told managers seek compliance rather than putting in those efforts required to reach superior performance.

Alternately, most of those who harbor high aspirations have already made some progress along the way (perhaps not as far or fast enough for them). Each has a different starting point from which to launch higher. Because executives have several priorities, many need a few understandable and readily actionable methods that can potentially make a significant difference to improve safety performance and culture. More is not necessarily better; behooving executives to do more things may actually result in their shifting attention elsewhere.

Fifth, change is a step process. Too many leaders founder due to an impatient drive to be at the top tomorrow, although success may be several ladder rungs away from where they are. It is similar to attempting to reach the opposite side of a room in one step; attempt an overly ambitious leap, and it is likely you will fall.

On the other foot, global-class attainment need not require an exorbitant length of time. Stepwise progress does not have to be tai chi-like slow motion. Significant improvements can be relatively quick if done well and surely. I have seen eye-opening improvements in safety outlook, communications and actions within as short a period as 6 months, and in many companies in various sectors.

Organizations, like children, continuously grow, but are they growing in the desired direction? Changes may be difficult to notice when living with children, but they become apparent after being away from a youth for a period. The key for effective leaders is to progress their company's culture in the same way wise parents guide their children: First by carefully nurturing so they are moving positively, then gradually shifting to their making best decisions and taking positive actions on their own.

Clearly, highest level safety performance must ultimately emanate from within. Just as parents who cannot know what their children are doing moment to moment, it is not possible for even the wisest, most tireless professional or manager to watch over each employee at work and home, to control what they decide and do in each moment. As noted earlier, even attempting command-and-control in safety limits performance and glues back culture. This also leads to greater disconnection as well as loss of leaders' credibility and potential influence.

Leaders must work with what they have, not the ideal company they wish they had. Elevating culture is akin to remodeling the existing organization, rather than building a new one from scratch. Construction professionals know they will have many fewer surprises and much greater control when building with new materials on cleared land. Remodeling, akin to changing culture, is definitely more challenging (e.g., tight quarters, preexisting structural elements that may get in the way of new additions, people already living on premises). Staff may resist better structures just because they are used to living with what they have. Logic alone is limited when it comes to changing mind-set toward greater receptivity for change. In actuality, this requires changing energy.

Leaders must build on what already exists, and let go of preexisting, dysfunctional mind-sets and habits. Do not sustain old policies, procedures, expectations or methods just because you have always done it that way.

Sixth, and most important, keep in sight what really must be done. Successful safety cultural change requires elevating people's default beliefs, their outlook and, ultimately, their actions. To accomplish this, leaders must reach people individually (although not necessarily through one-on-ones with each employee). The irony is that "organizations" (the name implies aligning all toward a common mission) are often anything but. The reality for many leaders is that the workforce is often a mix of skeptical older workers and younger authority-resistant ones; these are professionals who should but do not functionally interact. Each company is actually comprised of individuals with their own idiosyncratic concerns, fears, preexisting conditions and motivations. Leaders must simultaneously reach each worker and manager on a personal level so they become more initially receptive, then embrace the effort it takes to make significant and sustaining improvements. Experience shows this is possible. Proclamations, exhortations, motivational speeches, guilt or even the most detailed policies and procedures are not enough.

Leaders must aim beyond a compliance-based, just-do-as-you're-told environment. Seeking ways to create compliant receivers will likely result in either mindless, automatic, go-through-the-motions actors on one hand or pushing-back resisters on the other. This approach can indeed change culture, but downhill, toward a low-level performance plateau where creativity is squelched and critical feedback for potential error correction is driven underground.

So how to get beyond the same-old, seemingly superficial elixirs to actually advance cultural shifts? Leaders likely know that doing the same things will at best generate the same results. And too often, quick-and-dirty interventions lead to performance fall-off as others get tired or jaded from hearing the same-old messaging that does not address core issues.

For more perspective, I have written in greater detail about some of many elements needed to move toward global-class safety and culture, and ways to measure these. For a relatively recent article, read the Leading Thoughts article, "Toward Global-Class Safety," in the January 2015 issue of Professional Safety.

Three "I" Drivers: Stepping Up Toward Stellar Culture

1. Inspiring

Energy is the carrier wave of change. Inspiration is the physiological term for inhaling breath and energy. Mathur tells workers to “bring your energy to work.” He further encourages managers (and reminds himself) to “light up the brains of the workforce.” This is not overly difficult to accomplish. It is a combination of a) filling all with oxygen through honest and appropriate (not canned nor trite) reminders and challenges; and b) reducing energy drains and anything that is pro forma mindlessly or half-heartedly going through the motions (e.g., overfocus on memorization; passive safety meetings or training; emphasis on procedures rather than understanding; reflexively locking onto old routines; incident investigation methods just because “we’ve always done it that way”; too much talk and planning that is not balanced with enough actual action). Remember to reinforce any desired changes in fresh, new ways. Do not bore or promote complacency. The right differences will get initial positive attention. Retire the tired in your safety culture. Inspire everyone around safety.

2. Involving

Actively engage everyone to the highest possible degree, no matter how small at first. Do this through energized, ongoing, sincere invitations. Engagement must be a choice. If it is mandated or pressured, it will likely create pullback. Draw out input, ideas and alternative methods that work, from employees’ current experience, from previous jobs or lessons learned and from safety applications they make to their favorite hobbies.

Involvement applies to more than increasing participation in company activities. It also means enlisting as many of each individual’s senses as possible: seeing, hearing, touching, experiencing each piece of new equipment, discovering for themselves how a new method works specifically for them during training, and more.

For more on this, see the two-part Leading Thoughts article coauthored with Craig Lewis, “Strategies for Leading Engagement,” in the May and June 2012 issues of Professional Safety.

3. Internalizing

Internalizing entails helping everyone in the company realize they have the greatest potential for guarding their own personal safety. This has to go far beyond just talk or holding them accountable, toward providing practical mental and physical skills for becoming more in control of themselves and their safety. Leaders must discipline themselves to move away from blaming others and toward exemplifying, not just calling for, personal responsibility (“What could I, as a leader, have done differently to make it less likely this incident did not happen?”).

Leaders set the tone in embracing personal control; even if this mind-set does not fully transfer to every worker, at the very least it will permeate the culture and elevate personal leadership power. Leaders can encourage improving mind-set (approach, mental safety checklists, a can-do focus to overcome challenges) along with greater mindfulness (awareness of the uniqueness of today’s weather, machinery performance, others’ reactions and other ever-changing conditions, and being ready and willing to make needed safety performance adaptations).

The three “I” drivers are like intertwined cables that can lift any company’s safety performance and culture; it is a sophisticated cultural change analog to rock-paper-scissors. Involvement boosts inspiration and energy. Inspiration catalyzes greater internal control/internalization. Improving internalization boosts involvement and raises inspiration/energy. Experience shows that the highest-performing organizations enlist these three I-drivers, whether consciously or not. Again, these powerful principles for successful and speediest sustaining cultural improvement must be customized and woven into each organization’s core culture. They cannot be superficially slapped on, like trying to apply a layer of latex paint to an oil-based painted surface. Advanced leadership strategies and skills can indeed accelerate and hone positive cultural change in the real world.

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