

Recasting Leadership to Change Culture

By Robert Pater

Many people are vitally interested in leadership; note the numerous articles, conference presentations and LinkedIn discussions on the topic. While discussions can germinate ideas, broaden horizons and generate energy, ultimately it matters more what you do than what you simply contemplate. I hear from many executives, managers and professionals that upgrading, then nurturing their leadership strategies is easier said than done.

One recurring concern from those striving toward global-class safety performance and culture reflects what leaders have to do differently to change their own culture. A specific query: The issue of leadership on safety is huge for our profession. We default toward spending most of our time as experts than as champions or guiding spirits. What practical steps have you seen OSH professionals use to move the leadership focus to being more of a champion?

I admire this leader's desire to move above mediocre performance. How we think about leadership forms the foundation for how we act as leaders. Recalibrating your concept of leadership is critical for upgrading from very good to global-class performance. It is essential to move away from a control model for changing others' beliefs, mind-sets and actions to one of influence. Implicit in this transition is that professionals embrace their role as high-level proponents and change-makers and stay away from being primarily academic sources, cheerleaders or safety police. If you have not already, consider positioning yourself as a conduit for change rather than simply as a reservoir of knowledge.

Changing our own leadership mind-set/approach is indeed the first step and not one to take for granted: admitting, surfacing and rooting out the professional inclination or desire to maintain control and tell others how to live and how they are missing the ideal mark.

But, it is not enough to just say the right things. For professionals concerned with practicality, what actually matters is where they put their time and budget.

This is in line with VISA International CEO Emeritus (and leadership luminary) Dee Hock's suggestion as to where to allocate time:

Here is the very heart and soul of the matter. If you look to lead, invest at least 40% of your time managing yourself—your ethics, character,

principles, purpose, motivation and conduct. Invest at least 30% managing those with authority over you and 15% managing your peers. Use the remainder to induce those you "work for" to understand and practice the theory. I use the terms "work for" advisedly, for if you don't understand that you should be working for your mislabeled "subordinates," you haven't understood anything. Lead yourself, lead your superiors, lead your peers and free your people to do the same. All else is trivia.

Applying this toward spreading leadership (and inviting personal responsibility), it can be difficult for most dedicated professionals to shrug off the desire to change and protect others, especially when workers do not seem knowledgeable or mentally inclined enough to best protect themselves from daily or potentially disastrous consequences. For others who have years of training and continuous education invested, there is an understandable status pull (and often perceived job-preservation need) to be recognized as the expert and, therefore, essential to operations. However, in each case, giving in to these pulls limits cultural step-ups. Default to trumpeting expertise typically blocks overall buy-in by executives, managers, supervisors and workers. In these cases, safety remains the province of the professional, rather than truly the shared responsibility of everyone.

Just as pride goes before a fall, too much professional pride presages a cultural fail. This same principle also works from the outside in. In addition to internally recasting their own leadership self-image, leaders should do their utmost to help other educated and committed professionals upgrade their own internal mission, from that of content experts to that of high-level agents and catalyzers of change. This is not to say OSH professionals do not have more expertise than others, but they should avoid communicating with jargon or from on high.

Here is a tangible example: Move away from catching people or externally monitoring from a professional perch and move toward teaching them skills for monitoring themselves and making better decisions. Reject criticizing them about their inability to control their own attention and instead transfer skills for their actually doing so (yes, these are skills and practices for directing attention, not just based on magical will power founded on the underlying assumption that if workers just somehow cared more about safety or about themselves they would act completely differently). This negative, judgmental professional mind-set often shows up when trying to figure out how to work with incident repeaters; experience has consistently reinforced that pressuring and berating may drive such problems underground but do not fix them. Instead, seek better, practically effective

Recalibrating your concept of leadership is critical for upgrading from very good to global-class performance.



Robert Pater, M.A., is managing director of SSA/MoveSMART (www.movesmart.com). Clients include ADT, Alcoa, Amtrak, Domtar, DuPont, Harley-Davidson, Honda, Johnson & Johnson, Marathon Oil, Mead Westvaco, Michelin/BF Goodrich, MSC Industrial Supply, Pitney Bowes, Textron, United Airlines, U.S. Steel, Xerox and more. He has presented at ASSE conferences and delivered webinars. His book, *Leading From Within*, has been published in five languages.