

## Exempting or Exemplifying Leadership?

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By [Robert Pater](#) | Oct 01, 2014

What is your baseline view of being a leader? Experience shows this is split on at least one dimension: *Exemplifying* or *Exempting*. (I'm referring here to something other than the HR meaning of "exempt from overtime" = salaried.) These leadership mindsets apply to all corporate leadership roles, from Executive to Front Line Supervisory, as well as to peer leaders on a Safety Committee.

*Exempting* leaders: These believe they've accrued privileges from attaining a leadership position; they've earned their rank and are now entitled to special permissions. They think of themselves as exceptional, special, and more important; after all, don't they work harder and have more responsibility for results than do others "below" them? More calls on their time? Don't they deserve some perks that signify they're above the crowd? So doesn't it make sense, isn't it only fair, that the rules for workers shouldn't strictly apply to them? And so, for example, shouldn't they be able to just sidestep certain policies and procedures, such as having to use otherwise required PPE when just "briefly" walking through a plant?

This *Exempting* leaders' mindset reminds me of George Orwell's classic "Animal Farm," where the ruling motto was, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." However, this approach backfires in many ways because *Exempting* leaders don't see how the Third Law of Motion applies to them: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." In the physical realm, such force reactions are instantaneous; when it comes to the parallel Law of *Emotion*, responses may form over time. Especially where there are expectations of some democratic process, people will react when they see leaders treating themselves differently. This pushback may take different forms: disengagement, lowered trust/heightedened resistance, longing for (and "helping") a manager crash and burn,

sabotage, work-to-rule (doing nothing more than following the written minimal letter of the rules), slowdown, not reporting problems, not watching out for others, and more. Recent Gallup and other polls corroborate these kinds of actions are increasing.

*Exempting* leaders may talk the talk, even sincerely express nice phrases. ("Safety is important for everyone" or "Safety is number one.") But their actions are at odds with these words--even though some of them would be surprised to hear of this incongruity (after all, they're saying good things). But others register and are affected by this disparity. Sending mixed messages *always* weakens leaders' personal credibility and undercuts overall Safety messaging and culture.

*Exemplifying* leaders: These leaders believe in leading from the front. This is much more than the outmoded approach of "modeling," which implies doing something with the express purpose of making a show for others to follow; sort of like acting and then quickly looking back to see whether others are watching, following, and mimicking. "Modeling" is done for effect; it seems self-conscious rather than authentic. In contrast, leading by example means operating from a core set of principles/values that guide the leader to practice, live, and work what she/he talks about (which certainly doesn't mean being 100 percent consistent)--whether others are watching or not. *Exemplifying* leaders don't expend energy overdwelling on the past, blaming, or rationalizing. Rather, they harness their resources toward moving forward, problem-solving, and what next needs to be done to become better.

I recall a took-himself-too-seriously *Exempting* HSE manager of an oilfield services company with far-reaching offshore work. Yet in more than 25 years in his business, he'd *never* actually been in the field! All the while, he holed up in his nicely appointed office, busy writing manuals, policies, and procedures on how workers should operate on offshore platforms.

Take a contrasting *Exemplifying* leader in a highly similar industry. Self-described "Quality Punk and Improvement Ninja" Paul Naysmith is an HSEQ Manager with Expro Americas, a provider of products and services to oil industry companies. Paul knows and, more importantly, lives the value of combining character with strategy. Among other actions, this entails doing due diligence to be sure that equipment and training programs brought into Expro are fully aligned with the company's firm values of simultaneously strengthening health and Safety skills and engagement. It also entails incorporating his training and expertise in Quality into all Safety planning and implementations, including in his frequent forays into the field with operations people. Guess which leader showed significantly better Safety results!

Experience with leaders on all levels in numerous companies worldwide has

consistently shown that "Do as I say, not as I do"-type messages backfire, whether these are overtly or behaviorally communicated. Actions always broadcast a more penetrating and believable message than do words.

Sure, none of us is perfect or totally consistent. But the more we can reduce self-erected obstacles, the more effective a leader each of us can become. So I invite you to ask yourself, do you feel *Exempt* from following rules, policies, and procedures to which you expect others to adhere? And how much do you *Exemplify* what you wish to see in others--even when no one else is watching?

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