Catalyzing Safety Through Scissors Leadership

By Robert Pater

Do you want to rocket safety results and significantly reduce injuries while boosting personal buy-in, energy, communications and culture? Consider an alternate approach to leadership. The age-old slant toward organizational and safety leadership is top-down, although some companies have scratched the surface of bottom-up, grassroots safety, attempting to get workers or committees to drive safety while managers stand back.

Experience proves that a combined scissors approach that simultaneously affects safety top-down and bottom-up can generate significant results, excite workers about safety, and produce dramatic performance compared to a grassroots only or even a benevolent command-and-control approach. Think of it this way: the most efficient way to cut through a piece of thick paper is not either/or—cutting downward with a knife or from the underside up. Employing scissors—two knives simultaneously coming together—is the most efficient.

Safety catalysts bring others together then align them toward a common purpose so that a desired compound forms.

Top-Down Versus Bottom-Up

Traditional safety leadership frequently defaults toward binary thinking, akin to conceiving of light switches that toggle between on or off. As a result, managers may view workers as either able and productive or disabled; as engaged or disconnected. Thus, they attempt to institute step change either through a top-down approach (e.g., executives' mind-sets and actions trickling down) or bottom-up (e.g., grassroots change in workers, a contagious groundswell of interest and improvement).

Top-down approaches have advantages and limitations. Top leadership receptivity and support is typically important in initiating a new approach, sustaining a current one, or resuscitating an older implementation. Some believe top-down works best because upper management tends to control allocation of time and resources. However, putting almost all the safety eggs into the top-down basket is problematic because that executives' time and attention are often severely limited; many C-suite leaders still associate ongoing safety as being within the spheres of those who report to others beneath them. Even senior managers who strongly believe in safety and sincerely trumpet the right messages have little time available for the ongoing oversight of the up-and-down path of implementing safety improvements.

To compound this, large companies are positioned far away from workers most prone to at-risk exposures. The less executives see about what is really going on in day-to-day operations, the more they must rely on others to receive timely and accurate information and to also pass unfiltered messages to the rank and file.

Bottom-up approaches also have strengths and limitations. On the down side, line workers have limited power to effect change. They are not in control of their own work time and usually do not have the power to schedule rooms, allocate resources or even select what they can do. They are unlikely to command the resources needed to select and disseminate best tools, equipment and cutting-edge safety methods and techniques in the first place.

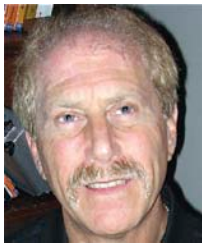
On the upside, line workers typically have greater credibility with their peers. Coworkers are more likely to listen and be influenced by their peers than by a distant executive when it comes to safety. Because they are knowledgeable in actual daily work tasks, line staff are in an ideal position to suggest modifications and adjustments that transform an otherwise theoretical safety tool or technique into one that will actually be useful and embraced by other workers.

The Power of Peers

Improvements in decision making, mindfulness and safer actions rarely come from a one-shot exposure. This is why a traditional training model is limited. Employees sit in a classroom where they are told or shown what to do differently, then they are turned loose and expected to continuously improve while being monitored to see if they have changed. Even those actions that are adapted often diminish over time.

But because safety advocates are peers working alongside other employees, they can easily reinforce improvements over time after initial training. This is vastly different than a one-and-done approach and is critical in today's fast-paced world.

Generally, grassroots safety advocates have more time to share, listen and influence than do those above them, usually even more than their frontline supervisors. Such catalysts can allow supervisors to focus on guiding overall worker actions, rather than having to continually transmit and reinforce specific behaviors. Often catalyst-peer interactions occur informally in break rooms, while working alongside one another or before meetings begin. In many cases, this is when a worker is more open to influence.



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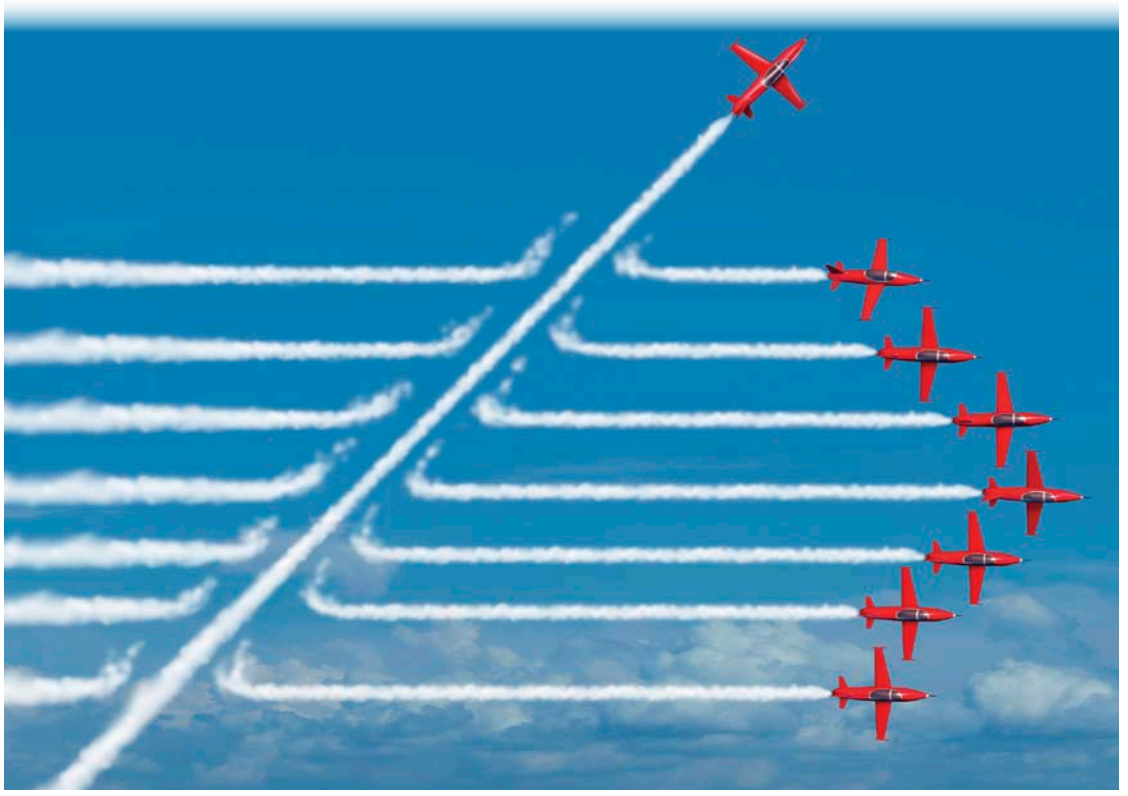

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Developing and supporting select workers as safety catalysts activates their participation and that of peers. They turn into multipliers. Ranae Adee, then EHS Director with Pfizer Consumer Healthcare, trained peer ergonomic change agents with excellent leading and trailing indicator results. "It was like we added 14 people to the safety office," Ranae explains. Lessons learned and cutting through problems honed to improve safety results maximize the pluses of each approach while minimizing the minuses.

Safety Catalysts

In chemistry, a catalyst either makes reactions occur that otherwise would not or significantly accelerates slow-moving change. In both molecular reactions and organizational leadership, catalysts are ultimately about energy and lowering the juice (activation energy) required to create substantial change. For chemical reactions to occur, two or more molecules must come together, align in the right orientation with one another for the reaction to happen and be sparked to combine. Catalysts draw molecules together in the right way so that a desired reaction can occur. This is how safety catalysts work in an organization, bringing others together then aligning them toward a common purpose so that a desired compound forms. In safety, this amps up mindfulness, heightens communications and teamwork, and improves decisions and actions.

Daily life is filled with examples of catalytic change. Are you looking to speed up a process? While avocadoes ripen on their own, what if you want to eat them sooner rather than later? You could put them in a bag with an apple, close the top and place the bag in a drawer. The ethylene gas emitted by the apple greatly speeds the ripening process. Have a splinter that is either too deep or painful to easily remove mechanically? Your body will likely expel this foreign object over time, but if you do not want to wait, you can draw out the splinter by taping a thin slice of potato to it or by applying an Epsom salt compress to coax it out.

Are you looking to make something happen that might otherwise not? A car's catalytic converter relies on the properties of platinum to reduce otherwise poisonous emissions (like hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides) by helping them speedily form less dangerous water vapor, carbon dioxide and nitrogen gas. Applying lighter fluid can enable a match to light charcoal briquettes. The human body requires a range of catalysts to aid in digestion (e.g., breaking down complex proteins into component amino acids that are more readily usable for growth and repair).

Several companies have trained employees to become subject-matter experts (SME); this is not the same as creating safety catalysts. An SME approach prepares people to transmit content to teach or train. But, simply disseminating information or even new awareness does not necessarily foster significant change. If it did, everyone would eat healthy and exercise, no one would smoke, and we all would effectively manage stress, make the best safety decisions and act accordingly. Catalysts inform, but they also motivate, coach

and support through multiple exposures, not just through classroom-type presentations.

Developing and sustaining safety catalysts can be an extremely powerful way to reduce injuries, further buy-in and activate underutilized resources, which all can boost safety culture when done correctly.

6 Keys to Catalyze Safety

Consider these six keys to maximizing success and catalyzing safety.

1) Select the Best Potential Catalysts

The best catalysts:

- represent different ethnic groups;
- are respected by their peers;
- are not apathetic or active naysayers.

2) Plan for Critical Mass

A common pitfall is not allocating enough safety catalysts. For safety fission to occur, seed enough safety catalysts throughout the company. The bigger the issues in a business unit or site (e.g., frustrating levels of injuries, uneven morale, distrust of leadership), the greater the number of safety catalysts are needed to break through these problems.

Do not think of these resources as just traditional trainers of safety techniques or information. Instead, position them in everyone's perception first as transmitters of new methods and skills, then side-by-side coaches, then process reinforcement agents.

3) Provide Meaningful Expertise

To charge up a safety catalyst system, prepare catalysts with useful methods and skills that are impactful and new, and apply to their work. This will increase their excitement and interest in becoming advocates for helping peers.

4) Apply Catalysts to the Right Spots

Be sure that safety catalysts are scheduled to cover sites and shifts that need support. Too often, graveyard or night shifts may be neglected when it comes to safety communications and reinforcement.

5) Potentiate Effectiveness

Leaders can also be catalysts by lowering the energy needed to spark and sustain improvements. They serve as accelerants and make it easier to overcome the stasis of bureaucracy, cannot do attitudes, lack of follow-through and unrealistic timelines.

Senior leaders should set high initial expectations of safety catalysts, then make it easy for them to fulfill their functions. Such support might include administrative support for scheduling people and training, overcoming bureaucratic obstacles, transmitting messages to frontline supervisors to reduce any resistance to safety catalysts' work, and allocating time to coach and reinforce.

6) Keep Catalysts Refreshed

The real world is more complex than what many high-school chemistry students or lower-level leaders believe. Perhaps you have heard that catalysts themselves do not change. But this is not true. According to Eric Mansfield, catalyst materials engineer at Cummins, "Catalysts are not unchanged after chemical reactions complete. Unfortunately, there are countless deactivation mechanisms that can affect catalysts."

One of these mechanisms, catalyst poisoning, can readily occur in safety catalysts. To avoid dropout, it is critical to reengage safety catalysts if you want them to engage peers in turn. Be careful not to assume that once trained and turned loose, safety catalysts are perpetually pleased change agents. Senior leaders must maintain ongoing contact with catalysts to identify and reduce any disconnects that might deter these safety deputies.

In July 2016, Washington State University made a breakthrough in the efficiency of catalytic converters. Yong Wang, distinguished professor of chemical engineering and bioengineering, wrote, "Precious metals are widely used in emission control, but there are always the issues of how to best utilize them and to keep them stable." It is just as critical in organizations to keep safety catalysts well prepared and supported so they are stable and active. In both chemical reactions and organizational safety, a catalyst almost magically sparks or speeds change in others when little else will work.