

Executive Safety Leadership

By Robert Pater

Most SH&E professionals believe that active support from their company's executive leadership is critical for achieving a strong safety culture and safety program performance. Yet, many professionals are also frustrated in their efforts to activate their executives toward a higher level of safety leadership.

From my experience, the positive news is that it is possible to more successfully reach the executives in your organization, raise executive awareness of the value of safety's broader organizational role, support safety efforts and influence senior managers to become more successful safety leaders.

I've had the opportunity to work with and present to executives in one-on-one consultations and at numerous conferences in a wide range of companies in several countries (although most of my experience is in the private sector with larger companies). Clearly, there are always exceptions to any "rule." But the principles discussed here have proven effective with numerous executives.

What Executives Say about Safety

In the last decade, I've seen an executive alchemical shift from perceiving safety as a time or resource-waster to be delegated out—something the company was forced to implement—into a critical resource for organizational performance improvement. For that perspective, following are some comments I've heard senior executives—mostly CEOs, presidents and vice presidents—make about the importance of safety.

•“To achieve operational excellence, we need to have SHE excellence and everyone has to be involved.”

•“Customers aren't willing to pay for a company's SH&E mistakes—they'll go elsewhere.”

•“SH&E should be the first subject of every operational review.”

•“We want to run our company independently—accidents and environmental

incidents get government regulators involved and they'll tell us how to run our business.”

•“The first thing we look for in a potential acquisition is SH&E record; this indicates how well a company is managed.”

•“In plants where leaders make a real commitment to safety, employees make extraordinary breakthroughs.”

•“Any manager who can't manage SH&E just can't manage.”

•“I don't treat safety as a separate entity; to me, it's part of all work we do.”

•“You'll see safety deteriorate long before other operations do. On the other side, if you can improve safety, you can realize significant improvements in operations.”

•“Safety doesn't improve unless people are focused. At the end of the day, safety is about what people do this minute, hour and day on this particular task. If for five minutes I believe I don't have to focus on what I'm doing, I am set up to have an accident.”

•“We would rather see workers' comp claims than off-work medical claims.”

•“Ninety percent of things to improve safety are positive. To get another one percent improvement now is about us, our people and our culture.”

Many executives are under significant pressure to keep their companies competitive and profitable by cutting costs. In publicly traded companies, there is often great pressure to show continuously rising quarter-to-quarter improvements, all the while with an aging and thinned-down workforce (many of whom are working much harder than they were decades earlier). This can lead to a “make-it-so” approach, often borne out of a combination of management desperation and of not understanding safety change dynamics. Have you heard executives say things like, “I don't want to see any more injuries?” Not conducive to the near-hit and catch-it-early reporting valued by many SH&E professionals.

On top of this, many executives are uncomfortable with safety. I've seen top

managers who were confident and smooth presenters—until it came time to talk about safety. Many then stiffly reverted to either an empty “you can do it” talk or a dry discussion of incidence rates, neither the best thing to focus on with line staff.

Someone said that it is critical to communicate about workers' personal safety, not about their safety record. Statistical discussions about safety are most appropriate for managers and SH&E professionals, not line staff. I've frequently heard workers say, “If our injury rate goes down, will you pay me more?” Much better to focus on the personal benefits safety brings.

Regarding influencing executives, Dee Hock, CEO Emeritus of VISA International, wrote that strong leaders should spend 40 percent of their time on managing themselves and 30 percent of their time on managing up.

Becoming more influential with senior managers can not only heighten safety exposure in a company, it may also have positive effects on your own credibility and career. Safety is a nexus point, the one aspect of organizational life everyone agrees—at least verbally—is important. Focusing on boosting safety also helps encourage employee receptivity to change, helps attract and retain desired workers, affects smoother flow of operations, boosts involvement, heightens trust (at a time where this is highly needed) and can give the company a market edge in other ways as well.

At a seminar for senior executives of a Fortune 500 manufacturing company, an operational vice president asked, “We need some do's and don'ts for leading safety.” So I provided 10 do's and don'ts for senior managers to more effectively lead safety. In a similar vein, following are several suggested do's and don'ts for SH&E professionals to help senior managers more actively and effectively lead safety within their company.

Seven Key Safety Person Do's

1) Know when to be invisible. Lao Tsu wrote, “The worst leader, the people fear and hate. The next best leader, the people love and respect. The best leader, when

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the job is done, the people will say, ‘We did this ourselves.’”

Focus on giving credit to executives and thanking them for the support they provided that resulted in any safety gains. This could include providing funds for interventions, allowing release of workers for safety training, being willing to have pilot approaches tried in select areas. By thanking and crediting executives—sincerely—you help foster identification with safety successes and lead the way to buy-in for future endeavors.

Also, know when to bring someone else in to work with executives. This can be another person in your company, a fellow professional or an outsider. Sometimes, you gain credibility by having another voice of reason support your points. Be sure to screen in advance whoever you bring in to represent you.

2) Develop a strategic recognition system. In addition to thanking executives, develop a system for recognizing the positive impacts brought to safety by middle managers, supervisors, bargaining unit leadership, other departments and line staff.

Know the key issues and values of senior executives, both personally and organizationally. For example, some managers take pride in their company being recognized as a “best employer.” Others think of themselves as leaders in their field. Some want to know they are outpacing their competitors. Show how safety leadership can further the most cherished objectives of top managers.

3) Systematically chart and publicize successes. This does not mean blowing your own horn or causing shoulder damage from patting yourself on the back. In fact, my experience with executives is that calm confidence results in more credence than brash talk.

Provide coming attractions of new interventions. Refer to past processes you’ve instituted that have resulted in different levels of success. Show tie-ins between past safety efforts and current states. Go beyond statistical results to focus on improvements in morale, reports of personal use of methods, improvements in communications, changes in actions, etc. Be sure to highlight system consistency and trends of continued progress.

4) Nurture (at least one) executive

relationship. Make sure to foster a positive relationship with a leader as high up in the organization as possible. This person can help promote your efforts and requests to the senior command, while you can offer vital but confidential feedback from line staff that can make the difference in how the executive’s decisions will be accepted and carried out. Many senior managers are disconnected from what’s really going on in the company, know it and will relish “vital intelligence” (remember, you will serve as their feedback mechanism, not as a spy).

Motivational psychologist Frederick Herzberg wrote that many executives suffer from “productivity burnout.” That is, they spend so much time in meetings, planning, focusing ahead and outward that they are often disconnected from their company and employees.

Help reconnect them. Offer to alert your “bonds” if one of their proposed actions might unintentionally backfire. Bring them early employee overall reactions. Ask their help in influencing their peers indirectly toward safety leadership.

It might be a good idea to develop two such relationships among “noncompeting” executives. One never knows when a manager might leave the company.

5) Develop a detection and report system. Safety implementations typically generate at least some mixed messages. Ferret these out. Don’t avoid them or wait for veiled or angry reports to come to you.

Invite resisters and others—which should include several in the management ranks—to seek out and report any mixed messages in the safety realm. Be sure you receive these reports with a positive demeanor (no matter the tone in which they may be delivered) and report back to people as to what actions were taken.

Whether you invite mixed-message sightings or not, people will notice these. You don’t really lose anything by soliciting reports, as long as you preface your request with a statement that you will do what you can, but don’t have the power to change everything. Also be sure to get back to people in a timely manner. Done well, this process can serve as a vehicle for boosting involvement in safety, help turn around resisters and generate higher-quality information from the point of view of those you are trying to influence.

By soliciting managers’ concerns in advance (at an appropriate time), you can redirect weakness into strength. This can also provide positive public relations for safety and your efforts. Preface all requests for information with a statement to this effect, “We value being as consistently effective as possible. I welcome your help in letting us know about any inconsistencies you see or find regarding safety. We’ll do whatever’s feasible to reduce blockages to high-level safe performance.”

If you listen carefully, you will also get a bead on specific executives’ motivations, objections and concerns about safety. This information can help in later persuasion efforts.

6) Be action-oriented and foster “doable” interventions. Avoid unrealistic interventions that might request executives or anyone else to “drop everything for safety.”

Steer clear of communications or policies that are likely to backfire, such as telling managers who are rarely separated from their briefcases to “never carry on stairs.” Such communications only create conflict or further mixed messages—and might lead to your being seen as a safety “geek,” out of touch with organizational realities.

Think “execution.” Be sure to set clear, realistic timetables for actions and communicate expectations of levels of returns from interventions you set in motion.

Change with change. Don’t stick unyieldingly to preset plans. Will Rogers said, “Planning gets you into things. Hard work gets you out of them.” Watch how external and internal forces affect your interventions and plans. Think regular observation, recalibrating and readjusting, rather than waiting for the bad news that a pet project has failed.

7) Make it easy for executives to lead. Provide them with knowledgeable exposure to safety plans and interventions as compactly as possible.

Invite select top managers to sponsor each intervention. Solicit their help in setting leading indicators for measurement and quality control.

Offer to ghostwrite executive interviews, monthly safety letters, safety talks, presentations, script introductions, etc. If

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persuasive writing is not a strong skill, recruit someone else to handle this. In the meantime, continue to develop your writing abilities (critical for influential e-mails, reports and other communications).

Encourage executives to send safety recognition or thank you notes home to workers and their families. Offer to arrange for any needed logistics.

Keep senior managers in the loop. Provide them with coming attractions of new interventions. Be sure to make these brief and exciting, replete with visuals and demonstrations.

You might create a one-page (or shorter) set of action keys from which they can select. For example, for our strain/sprain, slip/trip/fall, hand injury interventions, we first focus on creating executive enthusiasm. Then, invite them to take action, such as providing input in selecting the best peer instructor-catalysts; considering becoming a leadership sponsor or supporting whoever else is the leadership sponsor; setting high expectations with chosen peer instructor-catalysts and meeting with them briefly prior to their initial training; dropping in for a few minutes during the initial training; participating in planning for the process rollout to all workers; debriefing newly-trained peer instructor-catalysts soon after initial training week; supporting and encouraging others to support releasing peer instructor-catalysts and workers for training; coaching and reinforcement follow-up; and more.

If many executives are more seriously aboard the safety train, why do SH&E professionals still have some difficulty getting their attention, and securing requested support and resources?

Clearly some obstacles exist, such as disconnects between executive safety philosophy and actual practice. To effectively persuade executives, it is important to understand what, for them, might get in the way of their actively embracing safety. In my experience, these include:

- Concerns about cost-effectiveness. “Sure safety’s important, but is there a real return on the resources you’re requesting? Yes, I’ve heard all the statistics on payback, but these are general or from other companies. How do we know we’ll also realize these returns?”

- Suspicion. “I think carpal tunnel syndrome is a contagious disease. And I seri-

ously wonder about these back injuries and falls as well.”

- Motivation issue. “Maybe they just need to be held more accountable for not getting hurt?”

- Can of worms. “If we bring this up, it will just open the gates.”

- Previously expended resources. “We’ve already spent money on equipment and back belts. Is this just another example of throwing good money after bad?”

- Not thinking cumulatively. “We put in a back injury prevention program last month and still had several reports this month.”

- High expectations (without providing adequate support). “I expect you to cut injuries by 50 percent in the next year; by the way, because of these being tight times, we’re cutting your staff and budget by 40 percent.”

- Unrealistic perceptions based on hot trends. “I’ve read about this new incentive program that says it will reduce all injuries. That’s what we need to focus on.”

- Instant/short-term results. “I expect we will achieve significant reductions in injury costs within six months.”

While there is not enough room in this article to address all these issues, it is important to not exacerbate these. Bear in mind the following list of don’ts.

Key Safety Person Don’ts

1) Don’t position safety only as avoidance. Steer clear of others only associating safety with negatives (getting blamed, embarrassed, etc). Focus instead on positive outcomes and actions to be taken, rather than just those to be avoided.

Enlist positive motivation whenever possible. To prepare these, ask yourself what will executives get from actively supporting safety beyond less injuries or lowered costs? These might include: greater credibility, higher morale and dedication, peace of mind (knowing you’ve done what you can to prevent injuries, lawsuits, public relations fiascos, etc), recognition as strongly community minded and more. All “benefits” should be customized to specific executives’ warm spots.

Don’t do anything—and suggest this to executives as well—that encourages hiding accidents, hazards, near-hits (such as the statement I heard from a trans-

portation company’s vice president that “all accidents are stupid”).

Don’t only track trailing indicators. Help executives develop and monitor road signs that point toward the performance improvements they most prize.

2) Don’t make everything a Waterloo, a we-better-do-this-or-someone-will-die decision. Contrarily, don’t convey lack of urgency about everything.

3) Don’t get defensive, make excuses, or have a “can’t do” attitude. I have seen some professionals who appear cynical and defeated in advance. “I’ve tried everything possible and nothing works.” Others are angry—they’ve given their all and people still resist.

Remind yourself there are many approaches you haven’t yet tried, that timing and receptivity can always change (they might consider now what they weren’t interested in before), that you might arrange for someone other than yourself to spearhead the change.

If you should regularly think about being defeated in advance, you might consider taking a sabbatical, getting away from that position or talking with someone who can offer a different perspective. Otherwise your attitude may diminish executives’ and others’ perceptions of you as a leader.

Few things turn off executives like others’ being defensive or making excuses. Ideally, preparation, early monitoring and adjusting will greatly reduce the need for getting called on the carpet. And if you have a strong relationship with at least one senior manager, you will be forewarned, forearmed and supported should something negative occur.

Should you see another professional, in safety or elsewhere, who appears to be slipping down the slope of self-defeat, consider intervening by offering supportive, honest feedback. Again, easy to say and extremely helpful, yet it may be uncomfortable to do.

4) Don’t expect executives to think and talk like you. Arguably, many SH&E professionals tend to be more risk-aware and risk-averse than the general population.

But the opposite might be said of many executives. Effective persuasion is founded on reaching people from their perspective, rather than expecting them to immediately embrace yours.

To start, listen to the words repeatedly used by those executives you wish to influence. Read what they read. Scope out what is in their office—golf club? picture of them in a sports car? Use this information to make effective metaphors in your persuasion process. This is much the same way sales staff of an international organization that provides services to major oil companies are trained to read and employ information gleaned from the office decor of target executive clients.

Don't get too attached or overzealous about safety. Many executives likely see this as part of their overall picture of organizational performance, not as the main show. Reduce "safety talk" to executives. Unless you are dealing with engineering-oriented executives, opt away from too-technical discussions. Instead, reflect on and refer to their organizational and leadership themes and objectives in lieu of discussion of lost-time injury/illness rates and other safety jargon.

5) Don't continue to bring up the same old things. Most executives have already heard the standard reasons they should support safety (e.g., avoid injuries, costs). It is easy to ignore or disregard what you think you already know. Consider different and new approaches to get managers' attention.

Don't let yourself be seen as too wedded to the past—whether it is in your communications, attitude or interventions. Continue to try new approaches and processes. Make sure you do something unique in each safety briefing you make to executives.

Certainly, avoid being seen as a safety curmudgeon. Read the crest of changes in your company and industry and stay ahead of the wave.

6) Don't fail to employ leverage. Rather than trying to be the lone ranger for safety, find others you can bring in to present safety to executives. I've seen significant results in many levels of safety performance from instituting a system of workers becoming activated as safety catalysts for change. These catalysts have often done exceptional jobs of reaching senior management (who often had not expected sophisticated communications and presentations from hourly workers).

Think mission first. Don't let yourself become too attached to a set way of

doing things or of expecting to be "the one" who turns around executives.

7) Don't fail to fully prepare to communicate with executives. I have heard SH&E professionals question the efficacy of spending numerous hours to prepare for a 10-minute executive briefing. But it is not just 10 minutes. A short presentation to senior managers is a highly leveraged event. In that 10 minutes, it is possible to simultaneously reach many leaders who, in turn, can affect the actions of a large number of people companywide, over a significant time period.

One of the best ways to communicate with executives is through making powerful presentations and briefings. You can use your presentations to create a sense of value and urgency for safety improvements. Be sure to continue to work on improving your skills in this area. Following are some proven keys for presenting to executives.

Executive Presentation Keys

- Show respect for their time. If you are given 10 minutes, make sure you can end within that time period. Of course, it is a good sign if they ask further questions or ask you continue. Be prepared for that eventuality—over-prepare for the time slot, anticipating requests for more information.

- Communicate as a leader, not as a technician. Employ leadership talk, not safety jargon.

- Let executives know that your purpose is to support their leadership efforts.

- Initially provide them with a big picture view with few details.

- Reconnect them with line employees. You can serve a vital role by helping them better understand what line staff are thinking (always maintaining confidentiality) so they can be more effective as leaders.

- Provide a balanced view. Don't come across one-sided, which only invites executive wariness. Always offer potential downsides of any proposed intervention. Of course, from your perspective, you might comment that the benefits to a proposed intervention seem to significantly outweigh the costs.

- Acknowledge that they will make final choices. Remember that many executives are used to taking control and usually do not want to be told what to do. Consider

offering two alternative actions—either of which would be acceptable to you—and invite them to direct the route to take.

- Invite their input and support, making it easy for them to do so with as little time commitment on their part as possible (see "Key Safety Person Do's" number 7).

- Request their support at the right time. I suggest waiting until you can see a reasonable amount of nonverbal receptivity before asking for their go-ahead. Even so, consider phrasing this in a way where you acknowledge that they have choices ("Should you see value in this intervention, there are some actions you can take that would require minimal time and could result in a major impact," etc.).

- Remember to enlist the four steps in a successful persuasion process.

- 1) Get their attention. This can be done in many ways—citing a recent issue in the news, what competitors are doing, a window of significant opportunity, etc.

- 2) Elicit their interest. Offer benefits to them as both leaders and for the organization.

- 3) Build their trust by fully preparing, showing your commitment to support their leadership, providing straight talk, giving them choices and respecting their time.

- 4) Invite their commitment, the small actions they can take that can make a real difference. Carefully and respectfully remind them of their critical role as models, trendsetters and leaders.

These strategies and methods are only the tip of the iceberg. Many other actions can be taken to activate stronger executive safety leadership. Much of this is as much art as science—reading others, timing, developing contact and more.

Be sure to customize anything that might be of interest in this article to your company's unique concerns and culture. Significant results in performance and culture are generated when executives demonstrate sincere and strong safety leadership. By honing our abilities to persuade senior managers, we can greatly boost our mission and company safety effectiveness. ■

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