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 mindset/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 should do the same. All else is trivia.

Just as pride goes before a fall, too much professional pride presages a cultural fall. 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 catalysts 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 their actually doing so (yes, these are skills and practices for directing attention, better decisions. Reject criticizing them about their inability to control their own attention and instead teaching them skills for monitoring themselves and making better choices. 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).

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.

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Robert Pater, M.A., is managing director of SSA/Move-SMART (www.movesmart.com). Clients include ADT, Alcoa, Amtrak, Domtar, DuPont, Harley-Davidson, Honda, Johnson & Johnson, Marathon Oil, Mead Westvaco, Micelín/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.
ways, rather than berating others for not trying hard enough or disdainfully talking down to them. This is of course a completely upgraded, fuller mind-set to approach safety and health, and one that is necessary for step-up performance.

For example, my colleague John Glenn told me that when he first began practice as a physician’s assistant, he believed his role was to diagnose illnesses/disorders, then prescribe the protocols/medications that would alleviate these problems. However, he was perplexed to discover on follow-up that too many of his patients were not getting better. Why? Some had not even filled their prescriptions, while others bought the meds but had not actually taken them. He realized that diagnosing correctly and prescribing treatment were not actually enough for some people to improve their health; his healing role had to also include motivating them, then making it likely that patients would act in their best interest. The same is true for safety. The real mission of high-level safety leaders is to find ways to turn others into effective advocates for and leaders of their own safety. For a large part, even with the most able assistance of expert professionals and organizational policies and purchases, safety is really done onto people by themselves, through the perceptions they glean, the decisions they make and the actions they take.

Safety professionals who really want to create change can most effectively start with themselves. Each of us is our own potential proving ground for testing what we really can improve or next learn to do. These might begin with any personal habits or professional blockages that get in the way of performing at a higher level. Being more patient, for example, is something I continuously look to improve. All attributes have potential upsides and downsides.

I was discussing this at a recent lunch with Anil Mathur, acclaimed global-class safety proponent and CEO of Alaska Tanker Co. He made the perceptive comment that everyone at least verbally agrees that leadership authenticity is critical. But he posed this question: When professionals re-envision their role from expert to supporting others to become their own champion, to which role (i.e., expert or encourager) do they expect themselves to be authentic and congruent? The process of change is one of having one step in
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the past and another in the future. It is challenging, but critical, for any one of us to change.

For example, I have been told I am strong on the “he who hesitates is lost,” so I am able to make things happen, often through persistence and positive impatience. However, I am not always as effective at the “look before you leap” part, and have to watch with the help of trusted colleagues not to allow impatience with what I see as a dysfunctional status quo from curdling the path toward long-term sustaining change. Like most self-proclaimed change agents, I definitely lean toward the propel and progress side of leadership, rather than the preserve and protect status quo aspects.

Self-change is not easy, but I am told I have been getting better. It requires continual self-monitoring. What biases do I deeply hold that are affecting my initial reactions to this proposed change? What does this likely result in my missing or glossing over? Do I feel fully supported by those above and, if not, what am I doing about this to make it better? Do I know where my self-limiting qualities appear? What aspects of me are getting in my own way? From where do my self-inflicted wounds stem? How can I go about learning to change this, replace even a small dysfunctional pattern with an even slightly more effective one?

As suggested earlier, the most effective OSH professionals do not aspire to be champions themselves, they turn others into their own champions. This is where the second strategy for developing a more grassroots culture might seem counterintuitive. As suggested by Hock, this entails influencing up. Spend time developing relationships with higher-positional decision makers to help them better and more actively lead safety. I have worked with executives, and here are the critical keys:

1) Foster an ongoing relationship with someone as high up in the company as possible. This is a mid- to longer-term strategy. Since most people can detect insincerity, select someone who you like and respect (who might not be the most powerful presence in the building). Make this a two-way win. Where this person mentors you on how to become more effective as a per-suader and may provide support and credibility with his/her peers, you can help this leader become more powerful by providing honest feedback and grassroots intelligence (not, of course, by ratting out others or revealing confidential sources).

Executives need information to recalibrate their performance plans; by the nature of their positions, they tend to be disconnected from what organizationally distant are thinking or reacting to. Smart professionals can provide this kind of information and also serve as a valued, honest source of response and feedback. The keys are to expect relatively little time commitment from the executives and to be as prepared as possible for meetings. For example, offer to help prepare them to present at safety meetings, take a first pass at their safety statements, and help them become recognized for and credible in safety.

2) Enhance your own executive communication/persuasion/presentation skills. Learn to speak their language rather than expecting executives to speak safety talk. Think and talk in terms of leadership, how what you have seen and can offer can strengthen the company overall, not just reduce injuries. Find and appeal to motivations that already exist within executives (e.g., stand out from competitors, engage workers, create receptivity to change). Communicate as concisely as possible by offering options, rather than instructing how they should be leading differently. Present yourself as a resource, rather than as the final authority on safety. Again, serve as a resource and support rather than as the expert.

3) As suggested by Hock, spend time on better influencing peers, often professionals in other departments who have their own agendas. As my colleague Ron Bowles points out, informal organizational structures are often more powerful than those mapped on the prescribed pyramidal organizational chart, more likely determining what really goes on in a company’s culture. Often, different departments plan and operate in isolation, their actions collide with those of others or each wastes away precious energy. In too many instances, offices next to each other might as well be in different continents.

Wisely professionals seek and establish common ground, move relationships from threat to collaborative so they know what others are working on and, even better, hook into and support others’ change initiatives for overall organizational good. This is high-level win-win leadership at work (and, regrettably, it is too rare).

Global-class safety cultures consistently spread leadership. Accordingly, Hock recommends best effectiveness comes from a) self-management first; b) influencing up second; c) parallel supports third; and d) guiding down to employees with whatever time remains.

Rather than trying to hoist a “Follow me, I know” banner or even becoming charismatic champions, best leaders help others on every level become safety and overall champions for their own lives.