

Three Essentials for Elevating Safety Culture

Have a disconnected or relatively disengaged workforce? Aim to get everyone involved in some way, no matter how small at first.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Jun 01, 2015

You've likely heard the expression, "There's no 'I' in Team"? Similarly, there are three "I"s in "Global-Class Safety Culture and Performance." Don't see them? They're essential but below the surface, driving significant and lasting injury reduction while winning mindset and active engagement. That's what I've seen in almost three decades of working worldwide with a range of companies. Those that best progress from Level 1 to Level 4 Safety cultures increasingly foster greater Inspiration, Involvement, and Internalization. And they stimulate all three at the same time.

This progression is the opposite of trying to hit three targets with separate initiatives or interventions; with such a dispersed approach, different budget lines—or even staff—typically focus on their sole arena of responsibility, frequently leading to wasted energy, lack of coordination, or turf pulls. Rather, the most effective strategy aims to concurrently gain three positive results from one movement. It's like planting a fruit tree that simultaneously provides food, shade, and mental harmony. But there's one big difference: Planting a fruit tree typically has delayed returns, whereas stimulating Involvement, Inspiration, and Internalization gets desired results relatively quickly, building momentum toward plummeting injury incidence and severity while seriously propelling Safety mindset and other cultural improvements.

1. Inspiration ("breathing in," in medical-ese) means raising both energy and hope. In this vein, Safety luminary Anil Mathur tells his people, "Bring your energy to work." And for Anil, highest-level Safe performance is inseparable from all work. His specific advice to leaders? "Light up the brains of your workforce." In contrast, many seem to suck the oxygen out of the workplace.

Significant and beyond-previously-hoped-for changes are possible when people become excited and enthused. Energy is the carrier wave of change in an organization. I've seen numerous instances where peaked interest and a surge of real energy served as the flame that melted away all kinds of seeming obstacles to improving Safety, such as "We don't have the time," "We can't arrange for the resources," "It's always been done that way here," and more.

The main generators of energy are: 1) Discovery—exploring new and different personal methods (most people especially enjoy discovering positive attributes about themselves), as well as finding out what has worked for others. 2) Curiosity. 3) Imagination. 4) Opportunities to learn. 5) Being part of a team or organization that is successfully moving up. 6) The chance to rise above self-set limits and be able to accomplish much more than previously imagined possible.

The squelchers of energy are: 1) Maintaining old routines/half-heartedly repeating same-old things. 2) Pro forma/uninteresting/uninspiring messaging, procedures, training, and incident investigations. 3) Settling to minimally meet low expectations. 4) Taking things and people for granted. 5) Lack of leaders' enthusiasm. 6) Command-and-control or blame-oriented leadership. 7) Planning and talking without actual action. And more.

2. Involvement, (or "Engagement") means that workers and managers *actively* participate in Safety. There's all kinds of research showing that when people get to have their say and do something—even if initially negative—they're more likely to viscerally buy in to a change's importance and later support its forward momentum. These three "I"s clearly interact and overlap. I've seen numerous cases of Involvement serving as a highly potent generator of workforce energy.

Have a disconnected or relatively disengaged workforce? Aim to get everyone involved in some way, no matter how small at first. Do this through energized but ongoing, non-pressuring/non-guilty invitations. This can be as little as answering just a few questions about how they see company Safety progressing and what they'd personally like to see more or less of. Invite workers to share how they apply any Safety equipment or procedures in their favorite off-work activities. And much more. For more ideas on involvement Do's and Don'ts, see my article, "The Art of Disengagement," <http://www.ohsonline.com/articles/57092/>.

3. Internalization directly refers to "I." Rather than disconnected, self-centered thinking, it entails each person—worker, supervisor, manager, executive—taking greater personal control and responsibility for him/herself. Moving away from blaming others, the company, or circumstances for an accident or injury. Stepping toward looking at themselves first when something happens. Rather than using the

word "responsibility"—which has all kinds of connotations that often imply punishment or that "You workers are responsible for organizational Safety, we managers/leaders are not"—we've found it best to speak of "personal control." Of course, a company definitely has the responsibility to do what it can to make the workplace as safe as possible through design, training, supervision, PPE, policies, and other means. However, even with all this, accidents can still occur. It's impossible to externally control everything: Weather happens, machinery unexpectedly breaks down, others' actions can change. But Internalizing people begin to realize that their personal safety is ultimately most strongly in their minds and hands; in the same way, even an effective police force or justice system cannot protect any person all the time. (Heard any stories about the actual impractical value of "restraining orders"?)

When it comes to personal safety, individual decision-making and self-defense are ultimately keys. The best ways to heighten Internalization is with leaders leading, exemplifying this, talking about lessons learned, admitting when not "perfect," demonstrating personal responsibility for their own Executive Safety (when traveling, at home, and more). Then, showing methods everyone can readily apply that help them take better mental and physical self-control of their own Safety when performing a wide array of tasks, both at work and at home. Emphasizing greater Mindfulness--early awareness of small changes in internal and external conditions. And, very important, helping people daily practice better self-monitoring their own states of mental readiness/alertness, physical balance, and condition.

You can best move toward highest-level performance and culture by simultaneously promoting these three "I"s. And all kinds of positive outcomes can blossom quicker than you might imagine.

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