Recasting Advanced Cultural Leadership

Set your own and others' expectations that cultural change is a process.

By Robert Pater | Apr 01, 2016

Have you ever had a website automatically translate something into another language and then had this result retranslated back into English? The results can range from comical to incomprehensible. Even so, I'm going to attempt something similar but hoping for much better results.

I previously wrote an article in another publication that Rob Loos, Corporate Safety & Risk Manager with MAU Workforce Solutions, adapted into a blog for his company's website. In his rendition, Rob rephrased six of my tenets for achieving advanced cultural change. Here are his recastings *in italics,* followed by my further explanations.

1. *Organizational leaders should initiate and guide safety culture direction and evolution.* Change has to be embraced and actuated on all organizational levels for it to really take hold. However, initially, it's most likely driven from the top. That's because in most companies, senior managers decide where time, money, and other resources are allocated. Of course, in reality, "the top" doesn't necessarily mean it has to emanate from the CEO or COO. In fact, Safety performance and culture turnarounds are frequently spurred by someone who had a high level of control over what occurred within his/her own sphere—mid-manager, unit Director, even a first-line supervisor. For example, we've seen how a Department Manager, such as U.S. Steel's Neil Whitt, has brought in a new approach that, in effect, served as a pilot for a wide-scoping company; tantalizing results often spread virally. Of course, given corporate politics and other factors, there's no guarantee anyone else will adopt what's worked well even for a similar business unit or the one "nearby."

Still, the most efficient way to permeate a company is typically through its command center first. Internal change agents should therefore aim to cultivate relationships

with managers as high up in the organization as possible. Make this ongoing, not just when you need something from them.

2. *Real safety culture change must be unique and specifically tailored to each organization.* Sure, it's tempting to benchmark others' successes and try to duplicate these verbatim. (After all, they worked well for another!) However, a "medication"—both the specific kind and dosage—that might have miraculously cured another may not work for you or even could make you more ill! Or, at the very least, squander irreplaceable resources or credibility should the change fall flat.

Before attempting a significant Safety cultural change, carefully consider its potential simultaneous effects on productivity, management alignment, and worker engagement. What and who you bring into your company can have far-reaching effects, either yay or nay. And, rather than trying to figure all this out in advance on your own, enlist many for their input, from execs to front-line supervisors to outspoken workers.

3. *Avoid implementing tools, methods, and programs that promise too-good-to-be-true results.* Yes, snake-oil promises continue to abound. But though they might intellectually "know better," some leaders' better judgment can become overridden by the lure of instant and effortless cures—back belts, anyone? Think: "Lose weight without exercise while eating anything you want," "Become totally cured with just this little pill that has no side effects," "Make lots of money without any risk," etc. Yes, if only we could achieve significant cultural improvement without having to do anything different! But I've never seen this occur.

Disqualify from consideration any promise-them-anything interventions. While significant cultural improvements are readily possible and has transpired in numerous companies, this is never immediate or effortless. As per the First Law of Motion of inertia ("A body at rest. . . ."), it takes energy to break through any cultural status quo. And, like weird crash diets, if a change happens too quickly, it's unlikely to be sustained.

But the key here is to employ plans and actions that are self-reinforcing and lead to efficient step change in a relatively short time. Make sure to chart and publicize even bite-size pieces of positive movement toward improvements.

4. *Ensure the whole team is on the same pathway to safety culture excellence.* Alignment is critical. Abraham Lincoln proclaimed, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." This is also true for organizations, but too often, people and departments work at cross purposes, like a framework of magnetic particles where some "negative" poles neutralize others' "positive" ones. Therefore, culture change masters do what they can to bring people together toward agreed-upon common

purposes, lining up their positive sides. Getting individual buy-in is a step on the way to alignment: Start by bringing out underlying blockages to coming together. Does each really get the importance of safe performance, other than just hitting a statistical marker? Are nonbelievers promoted as a mixed company message? Are line workers' opinions and ideas about Safety solicited, valued, and acted on? Then, weaken whatever blocks you can, even if you can't fully eliminate them.

5. *Be patient and realistic about progress, as improvement may take time.* Set your own and others' expectations that cultural change is a process. While "getting there" is unlikely to occur overnight, help all see positive movement along the road. Get a wide segment involved in setting, watching, and then sharing leading indicators of improvement. Don't give in to an impatience that can kill budding engagement and momentum toward step-ups.

6. *Pursue grassroots change with participation from the bottom to the top.* If you've read my previous writings or participated in one of my conference seminars, you've already heard about our "Scissors" approach to change. That is, the most efficient strategy for cultural change is to simultaneously enlist the driving powers of senior management down, along with line workers' informal influence sideways and up, like a scissors with two blades coming together to cut through a restraint.

Applying these six strategies can help your cultural changes move forward as efficiently and stresslessly as possible.

About the Author

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