

Energize Safety Through Quantum Leadership

By Robert Pater

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I believe in quantum leadership. That is, I see all things (including leadership) as energy based. This is in line with renowned physicists Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, the latter who said, "Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real."

His point? The universe is optically illusive; what is seemingly solid is ultimately energy. Einstein concurred, "All matter is speed and flame." This applies from the most minute level of atomic and subatomic particles to complex relations between people and within organizations.

Leaders can apply this idea by directing energy to get things done at a high level and in a safe manner. While energizing a workforce does not replace the need for basic safety building blocks (e.g., policies, procedures, training, proper equipment), high energy is needed to achieve stellar performance. Perhaps that is why Anil Mathur, CEO of Alaska Tanker Co., reminds managers "to light up the brains of our workforce" while advising workers to "bring your energy to work." It is likely no coincidence the company is acknowledged as the safest and most environmentally responsible oil tanker company in the world.

Stellar-level safety changes the intangibles, such as skills, attitudes, awareness, decisions and actions (at work and at home). Sparks and infusions of energy (e.g., power, vigor, excitement) are critical to breaking new ground, growing and sustaining positive performance efforts.

Energy carries movement and change, whether leaders seek to elevate safety, productivity, motivation or engagement. Because a body at rest tends to remain at rest, energy is needed to dislodge companies from being stuck on a mediocre plateau.

We have all likely seen what a lack of overall energy looks like in a company. People appear listless, almost as if they have given up trying to make improvements. Or they seem uninspired, demotivated, complacent, tired or pessimistic.

I have also seen many cases of low energy specifically around safety. Managers and workers become bored by memorizing procedures they do not understand, and daydream through potentially critical safety briefings. Others may roll their eyes figuratively and literally during safety training and only give a portion of their attention to safety.

It need not be that way. Strong leaders are evidence based; they scope out what the world reveals to them. If you aspire to the highest safety performance and

culture, consider developing an organizational energy audit, recognizing the signs of energized and de-energized operations. (A look ahead: In the November *Professional Safety*, I will discuss signs of energy sliding and those of energy rising within a company.)

Energy Creates Movement

Ultimately, energy fuels action. *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines energy as "the capacity for doing work," and says that "all forms of energy are associated with motion." Different forms of energy, whether kinetic, thermal, electrical, chemical or nuclear, are transferred from one source to another body.

An emphasis on energy is essential, given that the bottom line for most organizations is positive movement, getting the right things done. As Tesla's Elon Musk says, "Focus on signal over noise. Don't waste time on stuff that doesn't actually make things better."

Because movement is the result of energy transfer, leaders should ask, Are we actually moving or just going through the motions? Is there positive movement or are we merely hunkering down and remaining static? Not surprisingly, sparking and unleashing energy are intrinsic keys to successful leadership. This is not lost on those who aspire to be luminaries (who shine, radiate energy and unleash power in others).

Three Critical Mechanisms for Energizing Performance

Step 1: Spark

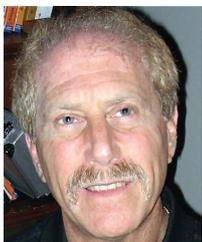
Circulating energy can inspire and spark others to do the same. This is a process of ignition. In *The Night Circus*, Erin Morganstern writes, "Because everything requires energy . . . we must put effort and energy into everything we wish to change."

I remember training a group of workers in a weeklong train-the-trainer safety system for a global company in the food industry. Senior managers warned us not to have high expectations because the spread of this system would be limited due to scarce resources. But when these same executives visited the class on the final day, they saw the reactions of the newly certified instructor catalysts. They shook their heads in wonder, and the most senior manager exhorted, "We have to find a way to bottle this energy!" The firm did a corporate-wide rollout that reduced injuries, elevated engagement and reduced costs.

The lesson? Even in the presence of preexisting logistical obstacles, energy and enthusiasm can change priorities. Plans can be remade and direction can shift. Wise leaders take advantage of this and ride the waves of energy toward their desired destination. Even wiser leaders find ways to generate this energy.

What are some proven ways to generate energy?

- Transfer desirable skills that people internally believe personally benefit them.
- Foster identification with existing interests (e.g., admired sports stars who use PPE).
- Harness the power of challenge or competition.
- Enlist curiosity and discovery.



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- Offer opportunities to make a real difference.
- Train workers as peer safety catalysts so that messaging comes from others who have the credibility of performing similar tasks.

Step 2: Transform

The first law of thermodynamics states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form to another. Of course, this change can be constructive or destructive.

For example, the vibrational energy of a troop marching in unison across a bridge can be transformed into mechanical energy that breaks down its supports. Comparatively, where an incandescent bulb changes electrical energy mostly into heat and some light, an LED bulb predominantly transforms correspondingly less electrical energy into a much higher degree of illumination.

Using this same principle, the most effective leaders transform disillusionment, anger or fear into receptivity and positive activity. For example, during the uncertainty accompanying a merger or acquisition, people often become distracted and injuries increase. Knowing this, energy-aware leaders plan to transform the energy behind fear into excitement toward safety.

Whenever attention and energy toward safety wane, leaders can act to redirect energy:

- Bring in a fresh safety approach.
- Motivate activity around and attention to safety by tapping into existing personal motivations (e.g., show people how to apply safety methods to elevate their performance in their favorite activities).
- Listen to and encourage people when they become dispirited.
- Offer variation that allows employees to participate in new methods or pilot projects.
- Change who presents safety training.
- Increase participation in safety-related activities.
- Rethink and alternately communicate “failure” so as not to beat up those who fall short.
- Deputize those who are most negative; they have the potential to become the strongest safety proponents. In fact, experience over 3 decades suggests that the most strident resisters can be converted into equally and oppositely positive proponents of safe practices and approaches.
- Unblock the stagnant energy that is dissatisfaction. For example, retire safety interventions that no longer elicit attention and interest, or reduce by-the-numbers training.

Step 3: Replenish

Friction and other forces dissipate energy over time. The most impactful messaging and training must be reinforced. Those most dedicated to safety need energy boosts at times. Even organizations with strong safety methods and culture can become complacent. This reflects the second law of thermodynamics: Everything tends toward entropy, a tendency toward disorder and randomness in any system. All things

deteriorate without energy input (such as maintenance). What has been organized eventually becomes disrupted, the smoothest laid plans break down, what previously worked no longer does. Even new parts that have been shelved unused lose effectiveness.

Likewise, leaders must infuse energy into the safety system to overcome entropy and loss of enthusiasm and attention over time. Mike Hagenbarth, vice president of safety and health for WestRock, recognizes this tendency, shared by high-performance companies. To help replenish energy, he asks, “How do we tap discretionary effort around safety? When we get entrenched in daily tasks, we all need reminders, to refocus, when we get tempted to take shortcuts or go around rules. When I think of building energy around safety, I think of two key elements: 1) people must understand the why; and 2) people must also look beyond themselves. We must help our people connect safety on a personal level. They must understand the why of what they’re doing, not just the what.”

According to Hagenbarth, one way the company achieves this is to encourage employees to think about who will be the most impacted if something is not done the safe way. “Often, people only think of possible impacts on themselves should they get injured,” he says. “But I’ve found they have more potential energy toward safety when they think of others when it comes to risk, when they see relationships to others (such the increased burden on coworkers and family).”

Hagenbarth says it helps to remind workers that they are not just taking risks for themselves but for others who have a vested interest in their well-being. “The whole point is to get them to look beyond themselves,” he explains. “I have found this reminds them of their true current connections and gives them energy.”

As part of this effort, Hagenbarth helped create “Why We Work Safe” walls at WestRock sites. Employees bring in pictures of those whom they most care about; many depict celebrations, such as newborns or weddings. According to Hagenbarth, when OSHA inspectors or customers see these walls, they remark, “This site gets it, they know what safety is about.”

These responses add energy to the company’s safety system. When people hear this kind of positive response, it strengthens their identification with safety. The company also has t-shirts featuring personal commitments to safety as well as “Safety Starts With Me” sheets that are personalized with each person’s safety “pledge” and photos of loved ones.

The bottom line? Replenishing energy around safety is critical. This cannot be taken for granted, otherwise energy and attention will dissipate. “All of this is like drinking a cup of coffee as a boost when your energy is low,” Hagenbarth concludes. To perform to the highest level, look beyond policies, procedures and programs, and focus instead on actively engendering excitement and energy for improvement. Turn potential energy into kinetic energy that propels employees and company forward.