

HEALING LEADERSHIP

Four Principles for Both Personal Safety & Health

By Robert Pater

Anil Mathur is one of the most passionate and proven-capable safety thought leaders I know. We coauthored the article, "Safety Leadership During Uncertain Times," (PSJ May 2019, pp. 20-23). But it's time to reposition our perspective because everything has dramatically changed since.

Forget the euphemisms; these are no longer uncertain or merely challenging times. The swirling on-again-off-again winds that blew regularly in the recent past are now a tornado, offering seemingly little clue as to where it will touch down or what devastation it will cause. In fact, it's certain now that most of what we counted on not long ago or what we considered normal no longer is and will definitely change, likely in unforeseeable ways.

Talk about tumultuous change! It's natural that whenever potential threats are waiting to crash down, interest in personal protection and safety dramatically rises. Floods of people are fearful of the potentially devastating consequences of attack from unseeable hazards. Notably, hidden threats have always existed, and it's a prime role of safety leaders to awaken others to these risks, from exposure to odorless yet dangerous gases, to life-altering radiation leaks, the "silent killer" of hypertension, life-altering threats from rampant sleep disorders or metabolic syndromes (e.g., diabetes), and much more. But, because of this pandemic, more people have become starkly conscious of the lethal potential of unseen threats. One telling indicator: for the first time in my ken, seemingly almost everyone now knows the meaning of the term *PPE* and recognizes its importance.

True leaders are change masters, weathering unexpected tempests (even harnessing howling winds toward greater energy and creativity). Actually, leaders make their biggest impact during crisis or extreme times. When the seas are relatively calm, it's not as pressing a concern to mobilize the crew to pull together or safely steer on course. But, as my colleague Ron Bowles says, in the midst of the chaos of a cyclone, people need or are even desperate for calm, flexible and credible leadership.

In these unprecedented times, leaders will likely have to help heal their organizations. This means helping all organizational members recover as quickly and well from repercussions from previous lingering damages (mental, physical, emotional) and redirecting attention to elevate safety, health and performance. This also means simultaneously reassuring and enriching trust in leadership's concern, honesty and abilities to do their utmost during any future upheaval (e.g., should there be future rounds of infection). Leaders must find ways to support people through any financial fears, rebuild energy while minimizing stress, and encourage engagement, sense of well-being and connection of teamness (that we're all in this together). Leaders should perhaps begin even now by soliciting, collecting and dispersing individual stories of creative ways organizational members have developed to cope with social isolation and

other challenges and safety obstacles unearthed and (hopefully) overcome, and more.

Clearly, now is when strong effective leadership is most needed. But what to do during unprecedented times, when starkly unique problems exist? Best leaders rely on internal principles for guidance.

Principles Rule

Principles are operationalized values, foundations that readily apply to a wide range of events and challenges, from daily living and work to emergencies and pandemics. While a building's foundation is typically not directly apparent, it supports the entire structure, although its integrity is indirectly visible in how well the edifice holds, especially during cataclysms of hurricanes, tornados or earthquakes. This is true just as thoroughly detailed planning might happen behind the scenes whereas its results are revealed under severe pressures.

I've consistently noticed that highest level leaders are guided by internal principles, especially necessary during times of upheaval. Having worked with Alaska Tanker Co. prior to Mathur's taking the helm, I've seen how he "healed" a company that had industry-subpar safety to become world class within a few years. Mathur's has consistently referred to the importance of leaders turning to their "North Star for navigation." Founded on the underlying assumption that when you understand where you aim to go, what you're trying to do, then see its initial effects, you can and should make best adjustments to suit or fit different, new or modified tasks.

Similarly, although on a different field, Pete Carroll, the highly accomplished Super Bowl-winning coach of the Seattle Seahawks, paralleled Mathur's thoughts in his own language. In conversation with Steve Kerr, himself an eight-time National Basketball Association champion (five as a player, three as coach), Carroll advises:

It's not about X's and O's. It's about knowing who you are. What are you all about? Where are you coming from? What's important to you? What are your uncompromising principles? What are you going to stand by? What do you stand for? Every time you deal with any situation, you're making a statement about who you are, what you are. And then they're going to watch it and do you really believe in something or are you just dealing with things randomly?" (Seattle Seahawks, 2020).

Principle: As leaders, what we do during times of heightened stress reveals who we are and what we deeply believe. And it is a mixed opportunity to either, on one side, strengthen others and the orga-

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nization or, on the other, dismantle trust, credibility and commitment in potentially unrecoverable ways. I've found that people tend to long remember what someone said and did when the fertilizer was flying.

This is the high art of leadership, starting by selecting which in my preferred set of principles best applies to a situation. For example, both being bold ("He who hesitates is lost") and being cautious ("Look before you leap") apply to different situations. Which should I follow at a given crossroads? Or should I craft a strategy applying a mixture?

A second aspect to exemplary leadership art is knowing when and how to apply selected principles. Sometimes a simple tool can help remind us and others. With that in mind, both because these are demonstrably unusual times and to illustrate how principles can cross-apply to a variety of circumstances, I offer our four-step plan for personal control that is intrinsic to the MoveSMART system. While we have specifically applied this plan toward significantly preventing soft-tissue injuries and slips/trips/falls, solid principles can more broadly service infection prevention and recovery. As such, the plan can achieve several simultaneous purposes (another of my leadership principles is lining up and attaining several objectives at the same time).

Our Four-Step Plan for Taking Personal Control of Safety

The most dedicated and tireless safety leaders can only do so much; personal safety ultimately relies on individuals understanding, believing, noticing and acting. While we can provide excellent PPE, people ultimately must decide whether to use it, know when and how to use it, and maintain its effectiveness. This plan:

- is designed to simply and powerfully communicate and persuade people what and how to best reduce incidence and severity of injuries and, in this case, also promote health;
- is easy to remember;
- can help reduce stress, typically rampant during such times;
- encourages an overall safety mindset that internalizes safety, reminds everyone of overall safety principles, of taking personal responsibility (we prefer the term *control* as it is less loaded and triggers more positive motivation with less pushback). In so doing, it promotes a high level of organizational safety and health that can carry over to post-pandemic periods;
- reminds people to also practice best safety methods at home and wherever they face new or changing risks, tasks or workloads.

Principle: Go beyond an all-or-none approach. Of course, it's always prevention-first, so best to focus on steps one and two to not suffer an incident or infection in the first place. But sometimes things happen that we'd prefer didn't. Best leadership entails still doing our best to maximize safety and health, even when situations are not initially ideal. Without negativity, stigma or throwing shade.

Step 1: Shield Yourself

Being mindful to keep it out and don't let potential harm in, the first step is to prevent potentially harmful

forces, substances or organisms from entering our bodies. Regarding pernicious infection concerns, this might entail avoiding or reducing exposures to potentially infected people (could be anyone) or materials (e.g., packages, containers). This step entails a security mindset, assuming that anyone and almost anything within reason can be infected. It's critical to stay up to date on what expert health professionals and infectious disease specialists indicate might potentially transmit virus, and this will likely change as data develops. It also means getting, knowing how to appropriately use and actually wearing PPE to serve as a barrier to infection.

During this time, it is even more important that we be aware of our surroundings at all times and make appropriate adjustments as others could potentially enter our surrounding space. We cannot effectively control others. Even when those around are not taking precautions, we can still take control of our personal safety and shield ourselves.

Consider asking others what equipment and methods they have for reducing potential exposure as they do tasks at different distances from others, wherever they are. In the same room? At 6 ft, 3 ft or side-by-side? What about away from work? How and when they shop? In their homes? Which, if any, materials do they contact that they're concerned might harbor virus?

Step 2: Apply Best Techniques

The second step is to select and use the best methods for getting things done as safely as possible, especially when potentially exposed. A slew of considerably effective (and regrettably little-known) methods exist for preventing soft-tissue injuries and slips/trips/falls. This principle step also applies to self-protection from potential disease exposure.

- Rework out how to move when near others. Select paths that simultaneously create sufficient space from others while safely navigating. Don't trade off slip/trip prevention for avoiding contamination.

- Wipe down materials brought into the home from outside.

- Consider medically recommended methods for supporting the immune system (e.g., I've read doctors' suggestions ranging from elevating sleep health to stress control methods to supplements but check with your own physician, of course).

- Use preferred and medically approved hand-washing substances and methods.

- Stress control. Unmanaged, potentially damaging stress can be rampant during times of crisis, and this is especially concerning during a pandemic as the body responds to stress by shutting down the immune system (to shunt physiological resources to more immediate fight/flight needs). I define stress as the feeling of being out of control. Most who take personal control of their own safety may help alleviate some of the stress of feeling out of control. Many medical experts have reported that uncontrolled stress can hamper immune system response, as well as take a toll on our bodies and our reserves.

According to studies, one way to reduce these negative effects is to enlist social support at work. This can greatly counter employee stress and its health-eroding impacts:

Overall, it appears that positive social support of high quality can enhance resilience to stress, help protect against developing trauma-related psychopathology, decrease the functional consequences of trauma-induced disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and reduce medical morbidity and mortality. (Ozbay, Johnson, Dimoulas et al., 2007)

Recent trends of thinning and dispersing workforces have also contributed to increasing employee isolation. The separation and distancing accompanying antiviral precautions can further compound this. To balance this, wise leaders can help reconnect workers with supervisors and fellow coworkers, even if only virtually through video or audio gatherings, problem-solving sessions, safety hero recognitions, sharing preferred practices for stress control or infection prevention, and more.

- Employ techniques to prevent infection such as methods for self-training to avoid touching hands to face. One study indicates people touch their own faces 23 times per hour, so frequent to be below conscious threshold (Kwok, Gralton & McLaws, 2015). Wearing a mask of any type will serve as a barrier to face touching.

Principle: Don't fight human nature. What I've found that doesn't work are negative reminders of the "don't touch your face" variety. In this case, it rarely

works well to try to get people to stop doing what they've been doing by default. Rather, when attempting to change ingrained actions, offer replacement actions that redirect, instead of trying to just stop reflex actions. For example, redirecting a hand movement that starts to the face toward touching the opposite shoulder. These can be practiced and become a safer reflexive action through repetitive training and self-monitoring.

Step 3: Discharge

This third step of the plan involves minimizing harm when potentially exposed. Applied to injury prevention, this step focuses on unloading excess tension before it builds up into cumulative trauma. Like tension buildup, viral contact is also invisible. This principle also applies to physically cleansing exposed areas (both in the body and on objects that might have been in contact with possible viral spread) and letting go of excess mental tensions wherever possible (e.g., watching or reading uplifting material, video visiting with family or friends, self-reminders).

Self-isolation is important after potential exposure, but it's critical to still have contact with others (at least virtually) as well as engage in self-fulfilling activities (I've been playing lots of guitar and exercising). And it's essential to find and practice anything that provides inspiration and is energizing such as reading, taking time to reflect, learning something new, or clearing up nagging issues.



Akin to safety, real improvement is heightened when healing methods are internalized

Principle: No matter how many external guards and rules and procedures, what matters is what people internally understand, embrace and do. Akin to safety, real improvement is heightened when healing methods are internalized. A major pathway whereby COVID-19 devastates (and can kill) is by suffocating affected people from within, depriving first the lungs, then organs and cells of oxygen (Oh & Klivans, 2020). Even in an oxygen-rich environment, what matters is how your body can actually access and then distribute this critical, invisible element.

Further, when used strategically, discharging methods can reenergize people, help break the cycle of fatigue and reduce potential damage to our bodies. A plethora of such methods exist but one that's relatively easy and highly accessible to most people is breathing methods that may simultaneously help alleviate stress, calm the mind for making better decisions and reducing panic reactions, and physiologically improve oxygenation. Physician Andrew Weil recommends one such technique: 4-7-8 breathing, about which Weil (2020) writes, "this exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it." I've personally practiced this with positive results over many years.

Also, remember that medical experts recommend that getting sufficient amounts of quality restorative sleep is important to reenergize body and mind, alleviate stress and boost immune response. In fact, pulmonologist and sleep specialist Roger Seheult (2020), explains the medical research on the specific tie-in between sleep and immune system in a video. See your physician for more information.

Step 4: Save Yourself

Step four involves actively promoting healing. This step focuses on minimizing injuries should there be an unavoidable incident. With regard to health, emphasize as-quick-and-full-recovery as feasible. Remember, recognizing early warning signs and getting help as soon as possible are important steps in both boosting health outcomes and controlling personal safety.

Even in "worst" cases of health, there are strategies that can be used in addition to medical treatments. For example, Carl Simonton, advocated for cancer patients to use visualization and meditation techniques in addition to regular cancer treatment, emphasizing the connection between the mind and body (Simonton, Creighton & Simonton, 2009).

To help direct attention to recovery, leaders might ask, "What are some practical things you can do to try to save yourself? For example, should you begin to notice any symptoms that concern you?"

Some responses might include:

- Do your best to remain calm and not panic, reminding yourself that even if you do test positive for infection, current reports seem to indicate that the vast percentage of people who test positive recover within a reasonable time.
- Get medically screened or tested.
- Increase personal defense (e.g., shield yourself, limit exposures, wear the right PPE).
- Eat a healthy diet.

- Rest. Boost your immune system by getting the rest and recovery time you need.

- Physical activity. Maintain your strength and energy levels by staying active, even in isolation.
- Sleep effectively, both deeply and enough hours.
- Breathe. Some physicians such as Sarfaraz Munshi of London's Queen's Hospital have indicated they've successfully applied certain breathing methods with afflicted COVID-19 patients. Infected author J.K. Rowling and journalist Chris Cuomo both indicated this method considerably helped them (Andrei, 2020).

Where Do Leaders Go From Here?

Reposition: Safety and health are inseparable. Many professionals already have health in their job titles: I urge all of us to strongly lead personal healthy living, hand-in-hand with incident prevention or environmental well-being.

Stoke the embers of hope. In a song, Neil Young counsels, "Don't let it bring you down. Find someone who's turning and you will come around." Seek and engender support for yourself and between others. Commit to the objective that, as Napoleon Bonaparte said, "A leader is a dealer in hope" (Forbes, 2015).

Maintain perspective: Remember that strategies that may have worked in more stable periods may likely be inadequate in topsy-turvy times. My personal mission during periods of turmoil: I strive to high grade personal safety and health so these are infectious, not deadly pathogens; to help people live and work with energy and enthusiasm where fears of horrific consequences are heeded but do not dominate and overshadow all aspects of their work and life; to strengthen a culture where self-protection elevates but seemingly innocuous actions don't endanger healthy, high-level daily functioning and lives.

Commit. Strive to be ever more congruent, with my utmost endeavoring to practice what I teach. Talk is easy, changing actions is more challenging. So easy to write or talk, so much more difficult to do in an atmosphere of fear, resistance or seemingly cemented-in habits. But I know and have seen that positive substantial change is indeed possible, even in seemingly dire circumstances.

Remember your mission and who you are. While stresses and fears may be different, you've likely overcome many other waves of previously unique problems. Trust yourself to do your best to adjust, modify and create new solutions to new challenges.

High level, honest and concerned leaders are especially needed before, during and after turmoil. And when situations drastically change, leaders must upgrade their approach. I encourage all of us to reflect on our leadership principles and methods and to take even small steps up to help people live safer, with greater personal control and effectiveness, even, and especially, in the face of uncontrollable forces. **PSJ**

Resources

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