

INTERNALIZING SAFETY

By Robert Pater

Paul Thurber, safety director at Nucor Steel Tuscaloosa and chair of ASSP's Tuscaloosa/West Alabama Section, strongly believes that safety should become more internalized. With this in mind, in one of his daily broadcasts to 25,000 fellow professionals, Thurber (2018) asked, "Wouldn't it be nice if everyone demonstrated the 'want to' be safe instead of the 'have to'?"

Robert Pater

Robert Pater, M.A., is managing director and founder of MoveSMART (www.movesmart.com). Clients include Amtrak, ArcelorMittal, BHP Billiton, BMW, Borgwarner, BP, Cummins, Dometar, Honda, Marathon Oil, Nissan, ONE Gas, Rio Tinto, United Airlines, U.S. Steel and WestRock. Pater has presented at ASSP conferences and delivered 32 ASSP webinars. His book, *Leading From Within*, has been published in five languages. Pater is a professional member of ASSP's Columbia-Willemette Chapter.

I fully agree. The question is, how can we encourage internalizing safety—the interest, fire, commitment and desire—to emanate from within people. No pipe dream, this. More than 3 decades of experience shows this is not only possible, it can also lead to eye-popping results in both leading actions, that are then reflected in statistical improvements. But doing so requires perceptive and focused leadership.

The Ins & Outs of Safety

Readers likely know what externalized safety looks like. It has been the basic default for most companies for quite some time. Thurber, who is dedicated to upgrading safety in companies and society, said, “We all spend a lot of time governed by rules and regulations, living up to others’ expectations.”

A mainly outside-in safety mind-set focuses on directly controlling the environment to reduce risks and, secondarily, influencing and even forcing people to act in less risky ways. That is, first leaders emphasize best design, purchasing and layout often in an attempt to people-proof (also fool-proof or idiot-proof) work tasks. Leaders should be wary of the language they use, even in their own thoughts. As the corporate safety director of a global oil industry company explained, “If you think of people as donkeys, you’ll treat them that way and then all they will do is bray.”

The external ideal is to bypass the human element by setting up a work site so that it becomes virtually impossible for people to get hurt. While this might be a nice hope, it’s only possible to achieve in theory. Practically, people who don’t understand why they should use a scissor lift, don’t know how or think it’s too cumbersome or time-consuming to retrieve and set up, just don’t.

Additionally, in real life it’s rarely cost effective or even possible to environmentally control or engineer out all hazards in every work site, not to mention areas that are exposed to the elements or those owned by another entity. This is also true for tasks done at home where cumulative trauma can still mount and default habits form.

After “proofing” the workplace, externally focused leaders then typically prescribe rules on how to act “safe,” quickly followed with broadcasting reminders to think and remember to accomplish tasks these “right” ways. Some then externally encourage this in various aspects, ranging from auditors monitoring worker actions and carrot-like awards for positive performance. Further, if or when workers seem to disregard or give short shrift to or take shortcuts with requirements, a typical externalized leadership response is to redouble efforts to continue to do more of the same. Or stick-like, dishing out sanctions or punishments.

Sometimes the external reminders are catchall slogans: the not so helpful ones such as “Think before you act” or “Pay attention” or the more useful and specific ones, such as “Get close to the load before lifting.” But in each case, their common denominator is creating a reliance on safety procedures that are predominantly generated from the company or from an expert that workers will hopefully embrace, remember and faithfully follow (often without thinking too much).

Safety that’s predominantly external (coming from someone or someplace else) is at least partly based on command and control and has repeatedly shown to have limited effectiveness in dramatically raising performance and culture long term. This approach is inherently at odds with high-level safety; the irony is that telling people to think or pay attention, even when well-meaning, is counter to the process of workers thinking through a situation and consciously and appropriately redirecting their own attention. Even benevolently externalized safety is done for others, akin to a parent who overdoes for his/her children, patterning them to be reliant on and thereby hampered by being taken care of, passive instead of active in taking charge of themselves and their personal safety. They are less able to work through situations that come up that are not exactly by the book where they cannot be protected, reminded or rescued in advance.

Sometimes an external-only approach reflects a management assumption that people somehow don’t care about their own safety. Thurber disagrees, “People don’t intentionally get hurt.” They may not currently have the right skills to safely redirect their attention, or know how to reduce potentially harmful forces from entering their body or may lack needed tools. As Thurber says, “Something might be going on inside them, cognitively, emotionally or physically.” They might not recognize risks or hazards as such (e.g., because they are hidden or overshadowed by larger potential risks, workers not being well trained). Except perhaps for a miniscule number of outliers, the desire for personal safety is a universally natural reflex built into us all.

Supervision has limitations even when an efficient external system of policies, reminders and rewards is in place. First, I’ve never seen a company filled with wholly compliant workers. More often, people are likely to forget, ignore or push back on a slew of safety requirements, especially when they are very busy, distracted or emotional or when morale is “uneven.” In my experience, the more people are expected to remember and follow, the more likely they’ll forget or resist.

Second, safety that’s predominantly externalized is geographically limited. Repetition is critical for learn-



ing and change. Without ongoing messaging, it's easy for people to forget, not develop default safe actions, become complacent or simply neglect to use best judgment and practices. Safety that's internalized best enlists people as their own, go-everywhere, all-the-time safety advocates. In contrast, think about what happens when workers don't have a supervisor, manager or safety professional to watch or remind them to follow policies and procedures when they're out of continuous sight such as when transitioning between work and home, in an environment they can't control, in the field/working remotely, at home, doing personal activities, in a plant where supervision is limited from their company having leaned down, or working in sites distant from a centralized-safety-directing headquarters. What could happen to these workers, especially in situations where off-work actions add to cumulative safety issues (specifically soft-tissue/sprains/strains and hand injuries)?

Cultural implications are also a concern. Eduardo Blanco-Munoz, thought leader and global environmental, health and safety director at France-based Lisi Aerospace, differentiates between the safety system and culture, where "safety becomes a department and is eventually perceived as another collection of binders. Procedures, tools and indicators become more and more generic, often to the point of being ill-adapted or outright meaningless and inapplicable. Paradoxically, at this stage in most organizations, safety management becomes compliance oriented" (Blanco-Munoz, 2018b). He further cogently contends this can result in a "disconnection where the system doesn't support the desired culture and, conversely, the system is culturally seen as a burden."

But Blanco-Munoz knows it doesn't have to be that way. In contrast, internalized safety is portable, always accompanying a person, relying on outside input, and is repetitively self motivating. Internalized safety is done by people for themselves. It can bridge potential gaps between a positive culture and safety system, tangibly and effectively placing workers in greater control of their tasks and safety.

Moving Inward

Of course, it's critical for safety professionals and others with specific and detailed expertise to help craft necessary policies, processes and procedures. Safety professionals work to add guidance in initial design, selection and purchasing of best tools, stations, equipment, jobs and workflow that are both safe and efficient, as well as giving input to mid- and longer-term strategy. This is efficient, enlisting both specific expertise and experience, and applies the principle of batching; after all, it wouldn't work for every worker to try to think through and develop his/her own set of safety rules or decide what they do or don't do.

Best safety balances external with internal elements. For safety performance and culture to rise to their highest levels, safety has to also become internalized, because, in reality, people ultimately make their own safety decisions both at work and at home. They decide how they lift, push, pull, use tools, drive,

climb, work, approach their tasks, use PPE or not, safeguard use of potentially hazardous materials and take steps to ensure equipment safety.

Here's the most important takeaway: The best leaders can guide people toward greater internalization. For example, when he took over as CEO and president of Alaska Tanker Co., Anil Mathur (current ASSP Public Director), dedicated himself to transforming his business' safety performance and culture from one that was mediocre to world class. Over the course of a few years, he stepped up job hazard analysis (JHA) in four levels toward a more internalized approach. He accomplished this in many ways:

1) When he assumed leadership, JHAs were required to be performed by the safety personnel, ship captains and chiefs (i.e., their managers) were held accountable for creating and monitoring these, and all workers were required to sign that they knew about and would adhere to these.

2) The next step was to move this function closer to the job site, with senior officers (middle managers) being held accountable for JHAs for localized tasks (rather than directives coming from headquarters), with this process led by an on-site supervisor.

3) Progressing further, JHAs were still required of all jobs but they were now written with input from workers actually performing these tasks. Workers were obligated (not just encouraged or allowed) to stop jobs if conditions changed or if any methods failed.

4) As they moved toward a predominantly internally driven safety culture, the responsibility for initially writing and changing all JHAs was totally under workers doing those tasks (with review by experts). The prevailing, accepted mind-set was that workers benefitted the most from creating the JHAs. They knew from hands-on experience what was actually needed and that they were most likely to follow these when they themselves did the creating.

This worked. By consciously, steadfastly and consistently moving toward internalizing safety in JHAs and everywhere else, Alaska Tanker Co. committed to safety, health and environmental excellence.

10 Keys Toward Internalizing Safety

1) Exemplify Internal Safety

Internal organizational safety starts with internalizing leadership. Leaders have to sincerely practice what they wish to see in others. As Thurber puts it, "To effectively lead, you have to be willing to be effectively led." That is, the best leaders are confident (and results oriented) enough to actively solicit and willingly accept feedback about how to improve safety leadership, communications, processes and culture. This doesn't mean they have to agree with everything being said, just that they're listening and seriously considering others' viewpoints.

Another way leaders can exemplify internalization is to relate personal stories of how they became more committed to safety in their own lives. Blanco-Munoz writes, "You need engineers, you need managers, and you need leaders to drive these and the whole workforce into building a culture of safety. A culture where

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engineers design for safety, managers decide for safety, and all team members behave safely because it feels like the natural thing to do” (Blanco-Munoz, 2018a). You could also include procurement does purchasing for safety and contracting/legal having veto power over what is brought in to the organization.

2) Change Beliefs Through Consistent Training & Reminders

Beliefs drive actions. Or as Henry Ford contended, “If you think you can or if you think you can’t, you’re probably right.” On the upside, internally motivated people take extra effort, looking for ways to make things happen, often seemingly undeterred when there are bumps in their path. Internalized people believe that things never go exactly according to plan and that it’s within their capability to make adjustments to succeed.

The reverse is also true. If someone doesn’t think something is important, or that it’s not readily doable, they are unlikely to put forward best safety efforts, whether to take the time to retrieve and employ the best PPE, apply methods trained, accrue the skills or report unexpected mishaps or close-calls. Those with an internal can’t do mind-set tend to seek out excuses or rationale why improvements couldn’t/wouldn’t/shouldn’t come about.

Social psychologists divide people into two broad groups based on where they see control of their own lives: those with an internal or external locus of control. People with an external locus of control believe that what happens to them predominantly comes from outside influences (e.g., others, government, bad luck, the environment). When off-kilter, these people become stressed (e.g., the feeling of being out of control) or sadly fatalistic that their future is pre-written and typically not in a good way, or become angry victims, whose theme song seems to be “The world would be so much better if only everyone else would change, follow policies and procedures, do what they’re expected and told.”

Consistently, those with an extreme external locus of control also believe that their personal safety is determined outside of them. So it often follows that if they do get hurt, their reactions default toward, “It’s management’s fault”, “due to who I am/how I was born,” “I knew this was bound to happen” or “that’s just part of getting older.” They are less likely to believe they can learn, change and improve their personal safety. You might recognize some of these people from what they say and what they do.

It’s critical to change their belief structure. However, in my experience, talking doesn’t work. Their own internal voices have already been talking to them their entire lives and, due to confirmation bias, it’s likely that a multitude of their life events have just reinforced their belief structure. But what does begin to work is to offer an alternative.

You’ve likely heard the expression “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I’ll go further from our experience working with tens of thousands of people all over the world in a multitude of different companies, “An experience/feeling is worth a million words.”

Carl Buehner explained, “They may forget what you said—but they will never forget how you made them feel” (Evans, 1971, p. 244). This is both an overall wise leadership lesson and a specific pointer to helping others move their locus of control more inward.

Help them feel that they have the ability to change the course of their future. They are not destined to have lower back pain or become incapacitated as they age. They can be actively safe through the small decisions and actions they take. Tiny small changes can and do make large impacts for elevating comfort, reducing pain, and increasing range and power of motion, at any age.

Experience and feeling are the best change agents here. Assist them to try out ways they can be instantly more balanced, stronger, less tense and more energized. I’ve seen this make turnarounds with tens of thousands, even those who seemingly held black belts in external locus of control.

3) Boost Personal Motivation

Focus on people’s motivations rather than attempting to dictate what should be important to them. Move away from external motivations of pumping up, guilt, shame or fear (e.g., “It’s the right thing to do,” “So don’t get injured,” “Don’t make us look bad” or “You’ll get in trouble/Will be punished if . . .” “safety is number one,” “so you’ll be able to see your children”). A hallmark of external motivation is a reactions such as, “I practice safety to cover myself or stay out of trouble,” “safety is for the company to save money or for managers to look good” or “I’ll follow the rules when they’re watching.”

In contrast, internally oriented safety readily applies to a wide range of personal hobbies and interests, and to family and friends. I’ve found that the most effective motivation ties in to where people are already motivated in their lives. For example, the MoveSMART systems emphasize skills for becoming better at a favorite sport or activity. This approach elicits strong positive attention and energizes people.

Sample indicators of internal safety motivation are comments/reactions such as, “I do safety for myself,” “What changes can I make to be more effective?” “If studies show that a high percentage of people lose faculties as they age, what do I have to do to be in the healthiest and safest smaller percentage?” “How do I become safer and help others I care about to do the same at work and at home?”

4) Harness Discovery

Here’s a principle only the best leaders seemingly grasp: Leaders don’t change people. People change themselves while the best leaders help this occur in the easiest and most positive ways. If facts and logic alone spurred real change, it’s likely no one would smoke or be overweight or out of shape. While everyone knows the value of these, clearly, external persuasion isn’t enough.

Leaders can inspire to aspire but can’t force significant and lasting improvements. This is one of the reasons that discovery is so important in internalizing safety. Set up situations where people can discover for themselves (e.g., the most efficient way to use a tool or select best PPE or safely cross slippery terrain), make their own de-



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isions, light up an internal “aha!” moment where their belief structure and personal commitment might shift or change. I’ve found, time and again, that discovery is an almost-magical method toward changing beliefs.

5) Upgrade Balance

Balance is a strongly internal skill. External approaches such as discussion/lecture, visual aids or persuasive motivation aren’t enough to boost balance. Think of learning to ride a bicycle, how you have to internally figure out, hone in on and learn how to adjust balance. You have to understand that being alertly relaxed actually propels better than overtensing and that tiny adjustments can make a considerable difference in staying upright. For example, lean too little into a turn and you may not make it; lean too much and you could fall over.

Helping people learn to improve their balance automatically shifts their attention inward. Implicit here are the internal skill sets of sensing cues, note slight shifts in balance that accompany every movement, then make needed adjustments. I’ve found that balance training, both literally and figuratively “turns people inward.” Of course, these skills have definite and demonstrable applications for significantly preventing slips/trips/falls, soft-tissue injuries/strains/sprains and hand injuries.

6) Encourage Self Monitoring

Move to internal monitoring (e.g., balance, breath, bearing, focus) so that people can learn to make critical modifications to head off the buildup of cumulative trauma before this leads to injury, balance before losing this, or attention before mentally drifting results in mishap, all with a range of tasks in a wide variety of changing environments. Improving self monitoring is perhaps the crux of developing personal, internal control for one’s own safety.

7) Listen & Engage to Break Through Worker Passivity

Challenge workers to think and come up with better methods to make their own work more effective, easier and safer.

8) Expand Policies & Procedures

Change it from just the external policies and procedures to memorize and scrupulously follow to also include the internal principles and practices of understanding safety whys and hows, including ways to incorporate safety in a wide array of tasks and activities both at work and at home.

9) Incorporate a Grassroots Approach to Organizationally Internalize Safety

The best way I’ve found to structure this is to select and then effectively train workers to become peer safety leaders, first training, then coaching and reinforcing safer practices. I’ve seen how this process can create highly committed, safety-awakened internal organizational improvement agents.

10) Move Toward Internal Reinforcement

It’s a matter of shifting public relations from exhorting workers to be personally responsible to avoid

becoming a company’s safety statistic toward helping them individually best their own personal records in safer decisions and actions. I’ve used the phrase *take personal control* for decades with great success with the same meaning as personal responsibility but instead emphasizing internalizing safety.

Consider rewarding leading indicators rather than only trailing ones (e.g., not reporting an injury for a year). Internalized leading indicators might include what people notice (to reinforce fine-tuning risk perception), what they’re specifically doing to progress toward their personally chosen yearly safety objectives or increasing participation in safety meetings.

The Inner Peace of Safety

Strategic leaders understand the limitations of a mostly external approach to safety and seek to balance this by developing every organizational member into greater, more interested and energized internalized safety advocates. Leaders understand that this change can start with just a critical mass of people and, when nurtured, ripple out to affect the mindset and actions of others. Such high-level changemasters first spark embers, then fan and feed the flames of internal safety toward significantly stepping up performance and moving up toward the highest of the four rungs of safety culture. **PSJ**

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