

Overcoming Seven Ergonomic Leadership Mistakes

By Robert Pater

To avoid ergonomics potholes, a leader needs ideas, an open mind, understanding and excitement.

Many leaders strive for results, yet some seem to continually fall short. Even the best intentions of wanting to reduce injuries and boost safety performance are not enough to foster significant and sustaining change. Case in point: Ergonomic leaders who erode credibility with approaches to soft-tissue and other cumulative trauma disorders that achieve few tangible, lasting gains.

Such mission failures often spring from making one (or more) of seven leadership mistakes. Thus, to energize ergonomic effectiveness, leaders must recognize, then sidestep these leadership potholes.

The Straining Seven & How to Overcome Them

Let's look at seven approaches that can sabotage potentially meaningful ergonomic efforts, and examine some ways to overcome them.

Mistake 1: Turning a Blind Eye

The most pernicious of these seven approaches is ignoring or making excuses for problems. This can lead to not even attempting fixes or only trying strategies halfheartedly. The following statements are reflective of this approach:

- "Injuries are a cost of doing business when you have people performing physical work."
- "These injuries are fake. People are just looking for a way to bail out of work and get paid for doing nothing."
- "There's nothing we can do. We have [fill in the blank]" (e.g., an aging

workforce prone to breakdown or set in their ways, younger workers who don't listen).

- "We would if we could but we don't have the resources to upgrade/redesign our facilities now."
- "It has always worked this way, so there's no reason to change anything now."
- "We're not having any problems because no one seems to be getting hurt."

How can a leader address this? The first step is to overcome ergonomic denial and develop ways to better discern ergonomic issues. Be watchful of workers making their own ergonomic fixes (e.g., extra padding on surfaces, bringing in their own

mats). While a leader should recognize employees for devising solutions, it is important to see these fixes as signals of problems that may also affect other workers. Also, note wear points on work clothing and negative nicknames for specific tasks. My colleague Ron Bowles tells of one company workstation that employees call "soul breaker."

A leader must also overcome mental inertia. Even when it is not immediately clear what might generate improvement, a leader must try some solutions that might make even a small difference. Taking some action will preserve leadership credibility, improve worker morale, increase operational efficiency and create positive momentum. It also helps the leader redirect everyone's mind-set and expectations about the organizational benefits of well-crafted ergonomic interventions.

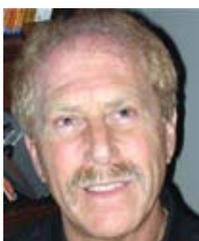
Mistake 2: Limiting Your Mind-Set

José Banaag is an ergonomics engineer and program manager at Honda North America. He has a proven history of crafting and implementing sustainable ergonomic leadership solutions, and he is highly perceptive about ergonomic struggles. "There's no magic bullet that will fix everything," he explains. "There has to be a multipronged approach to solving problems. You can't just latch onto one approach."

Many factors contribute to even a basic cumulative trauma disorder, including age, gender, genetics, preexisting condition, work pace and tools. But even smart and experienced leaders can be lured by hopes of simple solutions. I recall starting a 3-day seminar, "If I told you I could offer you 'the' low-cost, minimal time, low-effort ergonomic fix, would you believe me?" No one raised a hand. Then I asked, "Yet, how many of you came to this seminar hoping to get just that?" Sheepishly, many raised their hands. OSH professionals are busy and beset with complicated problems. But because ergonomics must account for complex or subtle worker-task-tool-environment interactions, OSH professionals must offer multifactor improvement strategies.

Limited thinking narrows implementation options in advance. It is like approaching a problem wearing preset blinders. Leaders often have a design only mind-set about ergonomics. While important, design is just one component in improving fit between people and their tasks. Banaag suggests "getting away from the tyranny of thinking 'average'; even a tall person may not have long arms" as one way to overcome preset thinking.

Furthermore, not all leaders think in terms of interactive systems, and instead maintain a tunnel-vision view of soft-tissue and other injuries. Perhaps most ironically, some view ergonomic-related problems with an acute rather than cumulative lens.



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To overcome this limiting approach, ergonomic leaders can practice better thinking. Unlike acute injuries, where one risk or incident can directly lead to an injury, ergonomics injuries usually involve exposures that accumulate, often under the radar. When these issues are approached with a preset ergonomic solutions checklist (e.g., suspend weights, move objects closer to workers, use scissor lift), a company will pick off the low-hanging fruit but will be no closer to understanding contributing forces and customizing strategies that might better fit those specific workers. Banaag urges leaders to think in terms of gradation of degrees rather than having fixed-and-moving-on thinking.

That said, a design approach can be taken too far in some cases. For example, in one plant, workers were palletizing, moving product from a conveyer belt to pallets behind them. Soft-tissue injuries were prevalent. Basic ergonomics suggested moving the pallets closer to the belt to reduce the distance employees would have to carry over. Doing so only compounded the problem, however, producing a greater frequency of strains and sprains.

After analysis, leaders noted that the pallets were so close to the belt that it was easier for workers to twist in place, a poor ergonomic practice. Telling employees, "Don't twist" did not work and the situation was not their fault. Ultimately, what proved effective was moving the pallets a small distance away so that even the largest worker had to take one small step to reach them. Then, the workers learned how to pivot to minimize exertive motions.

To avoid getting caught in this trap, Banaag says leaders should:

[Avoid] knee-jerk reactions, looking at a problem and then leaping to a conclusion without analyzing, fully reviewing whether there are tooling issues, process design limitations, training issues or more. You have to maintain a bird's-eye view, sometimes seeing beyond what appears to be the root issues. For example, even when it's clear a tool failed, rather than leaping to the conclusion that we have to better maintain those tools, ask these questions, Is this even the appropriate tool for that task? Are we using the tool correctly? Are there better ways? and more.

Mistake 3: Blaming Workers

It is all too common to find managers who, out of frustration, blame workers. This can range from labeling workers as "careless" or "lackadaisical" for not employing or adjusting PPE or taking shortcuts to not immediately applying quick-and-out training or even inaccurately claiming soft-tissue injuries. Not only does blaming create resentment, it can also distract people from working to make the environment safer and better.

Often, leaders believe they have designed out an ergonomic risk exposure, yet they have not accounted for individual mental reactions. This mind-set of viewing employees as programmable robots may reflect defensiveness or frustration, the inability to see the range of forces that contribute to cumulative trauma, or lack of knowing alternative approaches. Blaming often triggers worker pushback or disengagement, but it rarely results in better injury rates. For example, while isolating employees from each other may limit certain physical risks, doing so may also encourage dissatisfaction or careless actions.

Instead of criticizing workers who take shortcuts, strive for a deeper understanding of their motivation to accomplish tasks efficiently when under time pressure, then help them to work easy, with minimum physical and mental stress. Ultimately, highest-level ergonomics relies on identifying, then working within, human physical and mental dynamics. While it may be tempting to blame workers, consider whether workstations or tools might be difficult to adjust or whether lifting aids are cumbersome, unwieldy or time consuming (especially in context of work faster messages from supervisors).

For example, riveters at one global company that manufactures extremely large equipment were experiencing alarming numbers of vibration-related upper limb injuries. The quick ergonomic fix was to purchase recoilless rivet guns and distribute them. Problem solved, right? Actually, the arm injuries increased.

One ergonomic leader decided to observe and question, rather than just leap to blame. He discovered that high-level riveting is not a mindless, repetitive task; riveters were kinesthetically looking for the set of the rivet—a sense that changed drastically with the new tools. To compensate, riveters were working

extra hard to compress the spring in the recoilless gun to find the feeling of the set. Extra tension plus working in new positions produced more injuries.

The leader suggested creating a lab where riveters could experiment using scrap material and under less time pressure, and recalibrate their kinesthetic feel on the new guns. In a relatively short time, all riveters were able to experiment and learn, and injuries decreased.

Mistake 4: Approaching Ergonomics as Expert-Driven

On this topic, José Banaag contends, "You've got to involve all stakeholders as early as possible. Actually, the real experts are those persons who do that job," he says. "You have to work with these people who perform these jobs, as well as those who have set up these jobs and those who have the responsibilities to make sure that these jobs get done properly and efficiently."

Most organizations value the importance of engaging their workers. Think of successful ergonomic efforts as opportunities to boost a culture of involvement. It is about approaching safety with workers rather than just doing things to or for them. It is a valuable opportunity to enlist associates while simultaneously developing their understanding/knowledge of working safely and with less fatigue, both at work and in personal tasks.

Because the range of ergonomics-related issues potentially affects anyone who moves, lifts, pushes, pulls, climbs, reaches, lowers, steps over or under, or is getting older, ergonomics can be a valuable nexus opportunity to bring together all organizational members (executives through line staff).

To enlist workers' involvement while simultaneously developing their understanding/knowledge:

- Develop workers' understanding of how small forces can either dramatically increase safety (or, if ignored, can build up into debilitating injury).

- Sincerely invite them to participate in redesign efforts early in the process, giving them time to evaluate options and develop comfort with changes before expecting them to perform at their standard pace.

- Help workers better adjust tools and workstations to best fit their own bodies, with the understanding that what

might be comfortable today might need to be modified tomorrow.

- Coach them on principles of movement that enable them to reroute force away from vulnerable joints and muscle groups.

- Increase balance, control and available strength.

- Create opportunities for workers to cultivate their own awareness and understanding of how force travels through their bodies, and of where they tend to pinpoint that force by the way they move and by their posture.

Mistake 5: Creating No Excitement About Ergonomics

Just as electricity is critical to kick in a starter motor, energy keys workers' willingness and interest in assessing shifting risks, making best decisions and taking best actions (e.g., to enlist ergonomic aids and tools in the best ways). To overcome this, Banaag suggests, "You have to have people champion ergonomics as doing something good for them, going beyond just trying to solve an immediate problem. You can generate excitement by heightening the sense of ownership of their own ergonomic safety."

Get management excited and on board about ergonomics. Show executives how ergonomics can be a springboard for greater engagement, efficiency and productivity as well as safety. Help them see the potential to reap ongoing and growing returns in many ways through ergonomics.

Mistake 6: Not Providing Necessary Resources

In the real world, ergonomic problems are never permanently fixed, and a short-term approach to cumulative trauma rarely sustains improvements. Often, this stems from not setting accurate expectations for managers and workers, or from defaulting to "we have to be able to afford an expensive fix" mind-set.

Banaag has some valuable guidance here as well. "You have to get beyond ergonomics as the flavor of the month. Even new products, tools and equipment that are positive can create other problems that may not have been anticipated," he says. "You have to constantly check whether the solution is effective and is truly providing the

desired results. You've got to think of sustainability in ergonomics."

Effective ergonomics leaders expect changes because they know that people age, workers leave (and their replacements will have different needs and capabilities), job demands shift, workflow increases, staffing allocations become adjusted and more. It is important to build ergonomics into all plans for change, from purchasing decisions to retooling initiatives. It is best to go beyond minimalist thinking; rather than wondering what the minimum is to fix a problem, scope out similar issues, and generate more global and ongoing strategies for eliminating risks where possible.

Mistake 7: Focusing on Work Only

Workers can readily accumulate injury exposures at home as well as at work. In fact, many employees have at-home activities that may be more stressful and demanding than their work tasks. Not addressing these exposures makes it likely that ergonomic problems (e.g., soft-tissue strains and sprains) will keep building, even when employees are not on the job. Furthermore, because most people develop default habits, help employees engage in best ergonomic judgment, decision making and actions that will positively spill over to outside-of-work activities as well.

So, what can leaders do to extend their attention beyond the workplace? While leaders cannot redesign employees' homes or provide better tools for off-work tasks, they can help workers think more cumulatively and can also provide methods for applying ergonomics to personal activities. This will reinforce a default ergonomic mind-set and habit patterns. Leaders can advocate tangible ways that ergonomic principles and applications can help workers make better personal purchasing decisions and be more effective in their favorite activities.

Conclusion

By recognizing, then overcoming these seven straining approaches that can sabotage ergonomic efforts, leaders can practically and dramatically improve ergonomic culture and reduce related injuries.