

## Scissoring Through Barriers

*Move toward "either/and" planning and enlist a scissors approach for significant improvements.*

By [Robert Pater](#) Aug 01, 2010

I find there's a lot of either/or thinking in Safety Leadership. You know -- people are either "OK" or they're injured on a disability claim. Or, to boost performance, we focus either on adjusting attitudes or changing behaviors. Further, workers are either "engaged" or disconnected. Overall, it's either Safety or productivity -- choose one. Someone's a leader - or they're not (just a follower). And, of course, we change safety performance and culture by choosing to work top-down or from the grassroots up.

Sure, computers utilize a binary scheme to store information and perform specifically directed tasks. But, as powerful as the best are, no computer has close to the sophisticated processing power of the human brain. An either/or mindset can get in the way of leaders' thinking outside boxlike deductions, limiting the ability to understand shifting currents of organizational realities or to create effective solutions to complex problems.

For example, Safety leaders should consider many people actually work with pain or some degree of injury, just not enough to file a worker's comp claim; they may operate close to full capacity only in isolated moments. And there's a continuum of employee engagement/disengagement that's more like a cloud in a windy sky than a light switch that's either off or on. Further, there are at least four leadership skill levels.

We've found it's critical to employ simultaneous thinking if you want to initially generate performance breakthroughs, then build self-sustaining improvements in Safety culture and performance. That is, go past the bounds of either/or thinking to plan strategies that gobble up the problem from both ends, like building a cross-country railroad track from two coasts towards the middle.

In an environment where many are over-stretched, it's not realistic to expect any level -- managers, supervisors, or workers -- to solely bear the brunt of implementing large changes. But consistent experience has shown that serious gains can be realized when people work in synch with each other toward a common mission. If you really want to make a turnaround or bring about next-level change, think of your role as orchestrating organizational members to play the same musical score, each performing his or her individual part.

So is it better to work top-down or bottom-up to boost performance? Again, think beyond "either/or." I suggest a third strategy, focusing on a "scissors approach." Think of it this way: One way to through a piece of paper is slicing top down with a knife; another, with a blade rising up. But it's even more efficient to use two synchronized knives cutting together -- a scissors. How can you practically implement this?

*To initiate change top down:*

- **Enlist executives** to develop and transmit clear consistent messages promoting Safety values and goals. One that goes beyond just exhorting people to "work safe" and doesn't castigate those who don't fully buy in. Alaska Tanker Company is recognized as the safest and most environmentally effective oil tanker company in the world. CEO Anil

Mathur plainly states, "You must be the leader of the vision, rather than the defender of the cause."

- **Help senior managers** engage in select time-leveraged activities that visibly build positive attention toward Safety, such as attending (at least parts of) Safety conferences and monthly meetings, helping to set leading Safety performance indicators, rooting out mixed messages that would otherwise undercut credibility about the importance of Safety, setting expectations of contractor Safety excellence, and communicating that Safety is on par with productivity, quality, and engagement.
- **Encourage top-level leaders** actively to hold accountable other managers who report to them to pass along and boost the Safety current. These direct reports should go beyond emptily parroting the executive message toward adding their personal take on Safety performance -- and expecting their own direct reports to, in turn, carry on the core signal.
- **Train mid-managers and front-line supervisors** to intrinsically value and plan Safety into high-level work performance with practical tools for incorporating it into all daily activities, from problem-solving to coaching to scheduling, to introducing new procedures, to performance appraisals, to promotional reviews, to reinforcing newly acquired skills.

*To cut through barriers from bottom up:*

- **Awaken Safety committees** from a slumber of merely meeting for meetings' sake or pro forma reviewing incident reports or sleepwalking through yet another work site audit. Strengthen committee members with the right training and resource support to elicit grassroots concerns, making recommendations about Safety glasses, providing ground-level feedback on contractor Safety performance, monitor pulsings of safety perceptions -- and then make needed adjustments.
- **Prepare selected workers** as peer agents of improvement to introduce, coach, and reinforce desired skills, strategies, and actions. We've trained more than 25,000 such "Instructor-Catalysts" and have heard of dramatic improvements in Safety performance and culture. They transform Safety from "it's the right thing to do" into exciting, practical, individually apply-able methods for getting better at whatever is personally important to each person, at home and at work. There, all company members become their own Safety monitor and course corrector.

Move toward "either/and" planning and enlist a scissors approach for significant improvements. In essence, uncover, care for, and feed leadership from top to middle to bottom, so that everyone builds momentum for high-level safe living and work.

### About the Author

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