

# Superior Leverage

## Driving Both Injury Prevention & Safety Culture

By Robert Pater

Imagine this quandary: You want to embrace peak expectations of safety achievement yet your company is mired in a persistent plateau. Or this one: You have to split limited time and resources to the extent that needed projects are not adequately supported.

The good news is that when it comes to accelerating injury prevention and safety culture, you can have both by leveraging a fused strategic approach that simultaneously propagates multiple results. It is the best strategy for concurrently attaining significant returns from rubber-meets-the-road performance and less-tangible-yet-encompassing cultural improvements. The secret? Rather than attempting only to change culture to abate injuries, consider preventing injuries in ways that also fire up culture.

While this might sound logical and efficient, it is unusual. Although managers typically think of both injury prevention and cultural improvement as being important (or believe they are heading toward both), experience shows that leaders effectively treat these separately, with dissimilar mind-sets. That is, they frequently have two programmatic sets of interventions, with different timetables, budgets and designated drivers.

For example, the path to injury prevention is typically paved with specific interventions that often entail mechanical or linear methods and techniques, such as checklists of PPE, policies and procedures, audits, incident investigations and training. In comparison, cultural improvement methods tend to be more systematic and far-reaching, and often are more philosophical/intellectual or motivational in nature. They also typically employ statistical sampling, such as perception surveys and/or focus groups, and promote leadership training and a range of involvement activities.

While each avenue has strengths, experience shows that this divided approach typically results in acceptable but not outstanding results in either area. In practice, isolating these objectives into two workloads requires having the time and resources to do both well. Further, neuroscience suggests that the multitasking that arises from trying to reach multiple objectives in this manner divides efforts and resources. Leaders end up splitting their brainpower and efforts by switching between jobs,

often inefficiently and with minimal effect. As the folk expression goes, "If you chase two rabbits, you will not catch either one." Further, most leaders do not have the luxury of being able to tap everything they need to accomplish these two different objectives. This can create conflicts in allocating time, energy and other resources.

### The Culture-Prevention Connection

Keen strategists realize that the way a company approaches its most prevalent injuries reflects and perpetuates its safety culture. The messages and expectations a company sends as well as the training and tools it provides all transmit cultural messages and expectations. In turn, these naturally lead toward one of three outcomes: plummeting, plateauing or propelling performance.

### The Danger & The Opportunity

Without recognizing this chicken-and-egg dilemma, many leaders default toward mechanisms that actually anchor the current culture in place and keep it stuck in its old methods. Continuing to do the same things rarely engenders breakthrough results. As Will Rogers remonstrated, "The secret of success is simple. If you're in a hole, quit digging." Yet, when faced with an onslaught of nagging problems, some companies call for a bigger shovel. Seeing policies and procedures being ignored? Write more, with even greater detail. Workers ignoring messages to use PPE? Tell them again, only louder.

Experience also shows it is possible to achieve lasting improvements in injury reduction, but only when prevention is rooted in cultural improvements. Consider soft-tissue injuries (e.g., back, shoulder, neck, leg sprains/strains) that plague many companies and drag down overall safety performance. These problems are typically cumulative in nature, exemplified by the straw that broke the camel's back. That is, relatively small and often undetected amounts of tensions, whether stemming from repetitive motions or from over-holding static positions, concentrated in a vulnerable body part (e.g., low back), leading to wear and eventual breakdown, often following some insignificant movement that has been performed hundreds of times before (e.g., lifting a light object, bending to tie shoes). These injuries are especially prevalent in companies with an aging workforce whose members may have years of accumulated tensions.

Yet, numerous organizations that had previously tried everything have adopted the dual approach described and reportedly reduced injuries by 80% while increasing employee engagement, interest in and energy around safety.

Specifically, lower-level safety cultures tend to address soft-tissue injuries in similar ways:



When it comes to accelerating injury prevention and safety culture, you can use a fused strategic approach that simultaneously propagates multiple results.



**Robert Pater, M.A.**, is managing director of SSA/MoveSMART ([www.movesmart.com](http://www.movesmart.com)). Clients include ADT, Alcoa, Amtrak, Domtar, DuPont, Harley-Davidson, Honda, Johnson & Johnson, Marathon Oil, Mead Westvaco, Michelin/BF Goodrich, MSC Industrial Supply, Pitney Bowes, Textron, United Airlines, U.S. Steel, Xerox and more. He has presented at ASSE conferences and delivered webinars. His book, *Leading From Within*, has been published in five languages.

- Ignore the injuries to the extent possible.

- Communicate disgust, disappointment or suspicion to workers.

- Default toward experts designing out risks.

- Rely on simplistic messages (e.g., “Be careful”; “Bend your knees”; “Don’t twist”; “Lift with your legs”; “Keep your back straight”; “Pay attention”).

- Distribute quick-fixes that have been proven ineffective (e.g., back belts) or lead to more injuries.

Decades of experience reveal the only way to make significant and lasting improvements in these common injuries is to:

- 1) Elevate skills. Workers have to learn, then concretely apply, mental and physical skill sets to as many of their tasks as possible, at work and at home, to reduce cumulative trauma buildup.

- 2) Develop culture. The culture must support workers’ efforts to build and apply these skills. Rather than assum-

ing the ultimate way to reduce injuries is to raise culture through seemingly academic methods, many companies have achieved success by changing their injury prevention approach to simultaneously elevate cultural expectations and actions. Reducing long-standing problems that have depressed safety results also generates the mindset that other difficult issues can be tackled, which energizes the workforce and elevates safety culture overall.

To this end, the soft-tissue-prevention approaches of superior safety cultures value and promote energy, engagement and internalization. They encourage cumulative thinking, spreading the understanding that lower back pain is often like the straw that broke the camel’s back. The flip side of making the wrong small movements that accumulate into debilitating lower back pain is making slightly different better movements that reduce tension and increase stamina and strength.

Applying that understanding along

with the three Laws of Motion can make work easier and safer. For example, knowing that a body at rest tends to remain at rest and that a body in motion tends to remain in motion, workers recognize that when pushing a heavy cart, the most difficult aspects will be to start it moving, then to stop it. They then use easily learned methods to achieve each task safely and effectively, while assuming personal control for their thought processes and actions.

Not coincidentally, safety culture is also governed by the Laws of Motion, especially the first law regarding inertia/momentum. A culture at rest tends to remain at rest; a culture in motion tends to remain in motion. The soft cultural obstacles that companies encounter are related to inertia:

- being complacent, believing they have arrived, then slipping backwards from neglecting to focus on getting even better;

- having an ain’t-been-invented-here mentality, and consequently failing to

look for better ways that are outside previous experience;

- not accounting for design constraints (e.g., tools and machine setups for left-handed workers; remote workers' unique needs);
- failing to adjust to changing needs and limitations of a long-standing/aging workforce;
- not fully promoting off-work soft-tissue safety.

To overcome these obstacles, consider adopting a concentric approach designed to reduce specific injuries while building overall culture. Think in terms of attaining simultaneous objectives: Taking one set of actions that accomplishes multiple tasks at the same time. It is like trying to hit two bull's eyes. Most would shoot two arrows, one at each target. Instead, consider lining up the two related targets, then use a bow with enough pull to penetrate both marks with one arrow.

Regarding culture, many companies aim to elevate trust and buy-in, boost energy and creativity, and smoothly transition aging and younger workforces into a more seamless team. Experience shows that high-level organizations emphasize 1) high-grade engagement/involvement and 2) greater internalization.

For example, engagement can be fostered by inviting workers to share aspects of (soft-tissue) safety in their off-work activities, hobbies and sports. Supervisors/foremen can be trained to shift safety meetings from leader-led lectures to what one CEO terms "high-quality safety conversations," during which participants both ask question and offer ideas. Other ideas: Invite crew members to participate in executive team safety meetings. Have each worker select, then report back on, an annual personal safety objective.

Promoting internalization means providing both a climate and the skills each employee needs to assume greater personal control and become more self-reflective, more mindful and more in charge of his/her personal safety. This creates a clear shift from people thinking of themselves as victims (of the environment, the company, a regulator) to assuming greater personal control of their own decisions and actions. This fosters what I call a reverse Spider-Man culture. That is, when a person takes greater

responsibility for him/herself, s/he has much greater power in what happens in his/her life. Stress and blaming recede as personal responsibility increases.

Leaders can model internalization by first considering what they did/did not do/could have done differently when things go awry. They can share lessons learned, showing courageous and honest leadership. In no case do they expect others to act in ways they themselves will not or do not.

### **Five Strategies for Superior Safety Performance & Culture**

To take a dual approach, OSH professionals and their employers can consider these five strategies that mutually reinforce the key objectives of diminishing soft-tissue injuries and raising culture.

#### **1) Always Plan to Achieve Multilevel Results**

Think concentric, rather than additive. Shift the leadership mind-set toward a simultaneous approach that focuses on attaining significant gains in both tangible safety performance and less tangible cultural performance. Peter Drucker contended that leaders spend too much time considering the right solutions and instead should focus on posing the right questions. When leaders ask, "How can we reduce soft-tissue injuries in ways that also elevate our culture," they redirect attention toward achieving the simultaneous returns of fewer injuries and stronger culture.

#### **2) Transfer Critical Attention Control Skills & Emphasize Self-Monitoring**

To prevent cumulative-trauma-caused strains and sprains, it is important to catch them early on. Thus, self-monitoring is critical. Most people can learn to self-scan the level of tension accumulating in their back or other vulnerable area. Then, they can learn to trigger small remedies, such as repositioning to redirect where force accumulates; methods for reducing tension; using a technique to improve a longer lever arm within the body; synching breath with movement to reduce internal force buildup; and many similar techniques.

#### **3) Promote Personal Control**

Safety cultures that are moving up emphasize that everyone—executives,

managers, supervisors, workers—must assume greater personal responsibility for their own safety. Rather than merely espousing this philosophy, however, all are taught how to discover and embrace select small changes they might make in their decisions and actions to immediately and tangibly reduce physical tensions and improve work task efficacy. This process transfers critical attention and decision-making skills for preventing strains and sprains while also evoking higher-level cultural attributes of greater engagement and internalized self-control.

#### **4) Build a Better Base of Default Thinking, Mindfulness, Judgment & Practical Techniques**

Applying these learnings to at-home hobbies and daily activities can increase personal performance as well as prevent injury. Emphasize practical applications of innovative principles, such as creative use of the three Laws of Motion, highest-level movement art and science, and personal motivation.

#### **5) Deputize Select Workers**

Identify candidates to become injury-prevention agents who will train, coach and reinforce new mental and physical skills among their peers. Provide them with the right methods and techniques to engage and raise coworkers' mind-sets and actions.

These strategies are not simply theoretical. They are based on lessons learned in working with numerous successful companies worldwide. Injury prevention and cultural excellence go hand-in-hand. By simultaneously adopting the soft-tissue injury prevention strategies of high-level safety companies, leaders can both reduce incidence/severity while also rocketing up their safety culture.

Visit [www.asse.org/psextra](http://www.asse.org/psextra) to read more from Robert Pater about identifying and elevating levels of safety cultures:

- "Cultural Leadership: Raising the Level," *PS*, March 2012;
- "Cultural Leadership: Stepping Up the Four Levels," *PS*, April 2012.

