

## The Leader's Code

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*High-level leaders emphasize working and living with energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness.*

By [Robert Pater](#) • Oct 01, 2010

There's no question strong leadership is key to positive change and continuous improvement. I've had the opportunity to work with highly effective leaders who have directed significant upgrades in performance. Though each works in different industries with unique challenges, each has been a force for getting things done and has strong positive relationships up and down the company.

But -- likely not a coincidence -- each exemplary leader shows similar characteristics, what might be called a Leader's Code. Here are the nine points I see in these and other highly effective leaders:

**1. Are committed to change with high expectations.** This is exemplified by both John "JJ" DeGiovanni, managing director of Ground Safety with United Airlines, and by Anil Mathur, CEO of Alaska Tanker Company (whom I've written about in several previous articles).

Even in industries that have suffered chronic profitability illnesses (airlines) or feast-famine cycles (metals), each strong leader is committed to self-improvement first. They walk the walk and expect others to continue to learn, become increasingly clear-sighted, and engage in safer actions.

**2. Focus beyond, on the true Power of Safety.** Each high-level leader, such as Steve Messenger, VP of Risk Management at General Cable, understands that safety is much more than just preventing accidents (that others don't think will ever happen to them, or, if it does, was merely bad luck). They emphasize working and living with energy, enthusiasm, and effectiveness, with incident avoidance one significant part of a high-level Safety mind- and lifestyle.

**3. Boost personal control.** Kenyon Brenish, regional EHS manager with Avon, and other such powerful leaders emphasize the power each person has -- from executives to line staff -- to take personal control of their own lives and safety. Such leaders sidestep falling into the potholes of blaming and punishing, instead embracing learning from the past to prevent future errors.

**4. Emphasize significant, lasting and immediate change.** Leaders such as Greg King, VP of Risk Management and treasurer with Rock-Tenn, subscribe to the "give a person a fish now so they're not hungry, then teach them how to fish" approach. Such strong leaders know the importance of showing relatively quick results to make an impact (for continued funding and support, and because experiencing success is likely the best convincer for changing actions). But they also work in concentric circles -- simultaneously planning turning short-term successes toward growing momentum for future gains.

**5. Help develop safe habits at work & home.** Like Neil Whitt, group manager at U.S. Steel, best leaders understand that elevated actions at work come only when you can upgrade each person's automatic pilot programming, which carries into off-work activities. So to do this, as Neil does, strong leaders emphasize applying safety principles both at work and at home to a high degree.

**6. Personalize communications and methods.** Best leaders such as Matt Clarke, safety manager at Honda Canada, practice "ergonomic communications," i.e., adapted to those they listen to and wish to influence. They motivate through knowing and offering specifically what others desire, rather than what they "should" or "ought to" want. They tailor specific positive returns of safety performance and culture toward the interests and needs of executives (emphasizing how safety propels broadest company objectives), supervisors (how safety smooths flows of production), workers (personal individual benefits of more energy and peace of mind), etc.

**7. Invite rather than try to force change.** Leaders like Vince Adorno, VP with Alcoa, understand they want buy-in (even when no one is watching), not pushback. They treat others with respect, rather than as petulant or impulsive children who have to be led by the nose to "do the right things."

**8. Enlist & activate leadership from all directions.** They build sincere executive leadership, mid-manager movement, and supervisory support and develop workers as peer catalysts/safety change agents. Strong leaders swear in (rather than at) as many deputies as possible, providing them with the expectations and training they need to succeed.

Ranae Adee, former safety manager with Johnson & Johnson, had great success in boosting safety activity through her selecting, training, and reinforcing associates as peer safety catalysts, in addition to providing resources and development opportunities for management.

**9. Offer hope and possibilities of improvement.** Premier leaders such as Peter Hall, senior director with Amtrak, send and reinforce the message that real change can readily occur, even with those with previously entrenched habits. They ask questions ("How are things going? Do you think this can make a real difference?") that support positive change and really listen for the thawing crackle of resistance. They inquire about and show an interest in a range of methods for measuring success. They meet with leaders on all levels, asking how they can support their efforts.

Are you guided by a personal Leadership Code? I encourage you to write down your own leadership key points. Ask yourself, as well as others you most trust, to what degree you are consistent with your own Code. Then, where are your next leadership steps?

Focusing on expressing and highgrading your own Code of actions will cascade into others' improving their communications, values, and actions.

## **A**bout the Author

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