



# Best Practice: H&S Leadership

## SEVEN PRACTICES THAT DISTINGUISH THE GOOD FROM THE GREAT

**I**t is hard to attend a safety conference these days without coming across a session on leadership in safety. After many years of focus on worker engagement, interest in leadership is certainly a welcome addition to the discussion of safety performance.

Workers are critical to safety but are limited in the scope of their impact within the broader organisation.

Leaders on the other hand, while limited in their ability to enact the particulars of day-to-day work, make decisions about resources and organisational direction - and impact the culture and

climate in which safety activities must occur.

The link of leaders to safety may seem obvious, but for many organisations the specifics of safety leadership are anything but. For them, the question is not so much why leaders matter to safety, but rather, *what does great safety leadership actually look like?* As with other performance questions, the best place to start is with a picture of great safety leadership in concrete, behavioural terms.

### **What Great Safety Leaders Do**

Many of us have known great

safety leaders whose commitment to safety, combined with excellence in leadership, have had an enormous positive impact on their organisations. The hard part is pinning down exactly what it is they do that distinguishes them from other leaders. Our experience is that these people tend to use certain practices that define how they interact with others in the organisation and how they go about their day-to-day work. Not surprisingly, these behaviours have been shown to correlate positively with culture and climate attributes that support good safety outcomes:

**Vision:** The effective leader

is able to “see” what safety excellence would look like and conveys that vision in a compelling way throughout the organisation. This leader acts in a way that communicates high personal standards in safety, helps others question and rethink their assumptions about safety, and describes a compelling picture of what the future can be.

**Credibility:** The effective leader fosters a high level of trust in his or her peers and reports. This leader is willing to admit mistakes with others, advocate for direct reports and the interests of the group, and giving honest information about safety

even if it is not well received.

**Collaboration:** The effective leader works well with other people, promotes cooperation and collaboration in safety, actively seeks input from people on issues that affect them, and encourages others to implement their decisions and solutions for improving safety.

**Communication:** The effective leader is a great communicator. He or she encourages people to give honest and complete information about safety even if the information is unfavorable. This leader keeps people informed about the big picture in safety, and communicates frequently and effectively up, down, and across the organisation

**Action-Orientation:** The effective leader is proactive rather than reactive in addressing safety issues. This leader gives timely, considered responses for safety concerns, demonstrates a sense of personal urgency and energy to achieve safety results, and demonstrates a performance-driven focus by delivering results with speed and excellence.

**Feedback & Recognition:** The effective leader is good at providing feedback and recognizing people for their accomplishments. This person publicly recognizes the contributions of others, uses praise more often than criticism, gives positive feedback and recognition for good performance, and finds ways to celebrate accomplishments in safety.

**Accountability:** Finally, the effective leader practices accountability. He or she gives people a fair appraisal of the efforts and results in safety, clearly communicates

people's roles in the safety effort, and fosters the sense that every person is responsible for the level of safety in their organisational unit. It is important to note that this practice is placed last; accountability, absent the context of the other practices, can be counterproductive. Employees will know they will be held accountable, but not necessarily given the resources, information, leadership, support, and encouragement they need to accomplish the task. When used as part of the other six practices, however, accountability complements the work begun.

### **Becoming a Great Safety Leader**

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The secret of great safety leadership is that it is no different from great leadership generally; it requires great leaders who are motivated to improve safety. Regardless of where a leader is, safety leadership behaviours can be learned and developed. Like all new behaviours, these take practice, self knowledge, and an attention to the qualities and abilities of the individual leader.

Done well, leadership development supports a comprehensive approach to safety improvement, and positions leaders at any level to make a difference in the lives and livelihoods of their coworkers.

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