LEADERSHIP THEORIES: APPLICATIONS FOR ESTABLISHING AND SUSTAINING A SAFETY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that leaders and executives have an extraordinary impact on the safety culture of an organization. Furthermore, research has shown that safety culture is the primary contributor to safety outcomes. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how executives and leaders within an organization can apply leadership theories to positively influence the safety culture in their organizations so every worker can go home every day without injury.
Leadership has a significant impact on the culture of an organization and the culture has an impact on the safety of employees in the workplace. Leaders have the potential to build a safety culture in which employees know that they are valued and that their safety is of great concern to everyone within the organization. Good leaders can help achieve a balance between profits, productivity, and safety.

By looking at some of the classic leadership theories and considering them within the context of safety culture, some new insight can be gained. The goal here, then, is to shed new light on how leaders can positively influence workplace safety so every worker can go home every day without injury.

An Overview of Leadership Theories

Bower (1997) provides a simple and straightforward definition of leadership: "A leader is a person who sets attractive goals and has the ability to attract followers, or constituents, who share those goals" (p. 4). The process of leading is leadership and various leadership theories have evolved over the last several decades.

Much has been written over the last thirty years about leadership theories. Theories have evolved from trait theories to behavioral leadership to situational leadership to transformational leadership (Johns & Moser, 1989) and other new and emerging theories of leadership. Each of these theories has had supporters and those who have disagreed with them; however, lessons can be learned from each one. The more that the individuals in an
organization can learn about and appropriately apply leadership theories, the more successful that organization will be.

Trait theories of leadership date back as far 1935 when researchers listed traits of leaders. This theory was considered one-dimensional and was later challenged and led to the development of behavioral theories of leadership (Johns & Moser, 1989). Yet, traits of leaders are often cited even in current literature including enthusiasm, integrity, self-renewal, fortitude, charisma, judgment, collaboration, and high energy (Kragness, 1994).

Behavioral theories revolved around a two-axis theory that leadership has a task orientation and an interpersonal orientation. Current leadership theories also include discussions about two specific areas of focus: task and people (Johns & Moser, 1989).

Situational leadership theories emerged when behavioral theories were challenged and research showed that leadership behavior shifts with the situation and depends upon the needs of the group. Later the participative leadership theory emerged, a concept in which the needs and input of individuals are considered as an integral part of the leadership model. These theories cannot be totally discarded nor are they separate and distinct from one another. They each address the role of leadership in relationship to individuals in the organization (Johns & Moser, 1989).

Another body of thought emerged during the 1980s: the transformational leadership theories. These concepts involve change, innovation, and entrepreneurship and revolve around moving resources for greater productivity. Kotter's writings describe the challenges of transformational leadership and suggest that this style of leadership requires an understanding of traits, behaviors, situational demands, and use of resources, all of which are embodied in early theories (Kotter, 1996).
Emotional leadership and self-management are two emerging theories of leadership. Holmberg and Ridderstrale (2000) inform the theories of leadership by describing the need to shift from conventional leadership to "sensational leadership" that touches emotions and imagination. Hill's (2000) theory is that leadership should be a collective effort in these times of rapid change rather than the singular effort of traditional leadership. Leadership and the changing role of management are described as part of the culture shift toward self-management and the globalization of companies (Prahalad, 2000). Each of these emerging theories is grounded in the context of rapid societal and business change.

Today's organizational leaders can learn much from understanding how leadership has evolved over the ages by learning what history tells us about its leaders and considering what can be applied in the present situation. Some authors (Roberts, Ross, Senge, & Smith, 1999) assert that new leadership theories must be understood through continual learning for companies to compete and survive in the future. Theories are "bodies of knowledge that guide effective practice" (p. 44) and with the rapid change that is occurring in the business environment, these emerging bodies of knowledge provide information that leaders would otherwise not have. The theory of leadership known as leadership focus of attention can overlap all other theories.

Definitions of Four Focuses of Attention

A leader is known for what he or she pays attention to. Kragness (1994) suggests that four primary focuses of leadership attention exist: character, analysis, accomplishment, and interaction. The leader who focuses on character will be concerned with commitment, integrity, and the ability to learn from experience. The leader who focuses on analysis will tend to have creative ideas, a well-defined vision, reliable intuition, better judgment than
most people, and will have courage to face challenges. The leader who focuses on accomplishment is one who is known for getting things done. The leader who focuses on interaction is generally a motivator and pays attention to how people respond to leadership and to others around them. Managers demonstrate their commitment or lack thereof to safety through their actions (Earnest, 2000).

Leadership Theory, Focus of Attention, and Safety

By integrating the various leadership theories with the four focuses of attention, one can begin to evaluate the impact that leadership has on a safety culture. The four focuses of attention will be used as reference points for this analysis.

The focus of attention model (Kragness, 1994) appears to draw primarily on two leadership theories: behavioral and trait. The behavioral trait theories rely on a two-axis model that focuses on people and task. In Kragness' model shown in Figure 1, the two axes actually represent two bipolar dimensions, one social versus intellectual and the other internal versus external. Like the focus on people from behavioral theory, the social and intellectual poles relate to leadership's preoccupation with people. No clear counterpart to the focus on task exists, however. Interaction and analysis leaders are on opposite ends of the social axis. The interaction leader responds to people and their concerns and the leader's reaction is social in nature. Analytical leaders tend to respond to ideas and their reactions are typically intellectual in nature. On the other axis, the character leader and the accomplishment leader are on opposite ends; the character leader responds to his or her own internal reaction where the accomplishment leader responds to the reactions of others. The only close similarity to the behavioral model's focus on task is the focus on analysis; this focus of attention has a nonsocial emphasis (1994).
Kragness (1994) also relies on the trait theory of leadership, assigning traits or characteristics to the different focuses of attention; each of the four focus areas has three characteristics related to it, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Four Focus Areas of Attention and Related Characteristics

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Adapted from Kragness, 1994.
Kragness (1994) asserts that the focus of attention for a leader is largely situational. Leaders often shift their style with the demands of a situation, but more than likely have a tendency to emphasize one area of the four areas of attention.

**Character**

Kragness (1994) includes the dimensions of enthusiasm, integrity, and self-renewal within the focus on character. This type of leader tends to be committed to actions based on values and beliefs; the leader acts with a spiritual center and a "sense of self not motivated by greed or fear but by love of life, adventure, and camaraderie" (Kragness, 1994). A leader with a focus on character remains optimistic in the face of challenges, communicates honestly, models shared values, and works to learn from experience. This type of leader has high credibility among followers; people seek leaders who are honest, forward looking, inspiring and competent (Kouzes & Posner, 2000).

A leader who focuses on character and values safety will be an enthusiastic champion of a safety culture; the leader will tend to focus on caring for people through the safety culture and will find people to champion and support the cause of the safety culture. A leader with a focus on character will take the time to learn and reflect about safety and its impact on the organization (Roberts et al., 1999); reflective conversations about individual and shared values toward safety and a focus on developing the capability for productive safety discussions with work teams will be evident (Kaufer & Senge, 2000).

An example of a leader with character comes from the author's employment in an electric utility company. In this particular company, the executive team was very committed to providing a safe work place and instilling an awareness of safety among all the employees. There was a balanced approach between reward and discipline in the safety process. One of
the executives damaged a company car when pulling away from a gas pump with the nozzle in the tank. To communicate the commitment of leadership, this executive issued the disciplinary action of one day off without pay. This is the same disciplinary action that employees received. This executive set the example of openly discussing an incident and actions that could be taken to avoid the incident so others could learn while at the same time accepting the company's prescribed disciplinary action. In this situation, the leader's focus on character made a very strong impression upon the employees in the company. In other situations, a focus on analysis may be the most effective style.

Analysis

A leader who is focused on analysis has a well-defined vision and has creative ideas about carrying out the vision; this leader has good perception of people and issues and uses good judgment and courage to face challenges (Kragness, 1994). These leaders are capable of anticipating problems while at the same time dealing with the reality that defines the current situation. Leaders who focus on analysis are able to sort out complex information and accurately assess risks and opportunities. This analysis leader will likely recognize the importance of intellectual diversity and be able to leverage resources that need to be combined and recombined as new issues emerge (Prahalad, 2000). It is also likely that this type of leader can think systematically and will understand that people have a natural resistance to change. This leader will tend to use his or her fortitude to see the challenge through of changing a culture (Kaufer & Senge, 2000).

The leader with a focus on analysis can be extremely valuable in establishing a safety culture because of the ability to look at the big picture and determine where the issues and problems lie. This type of leader has the ability to break down complex safety issues into
more manageable and actionable tasks. The approach will include looking at systems of information and people to determine how to lead the organization to an improved safety culture (Roberts, et al., 1999).

An example of a leader with an effective focus on analysis comes from a client who had a group of employees that wanted to upgrade their service vehicles. During the year, two employees had experienced vehicle accidents that cost the company approximately $40,000 in repairs, public damage, and increased insurance costs. The manager helped the employees analyze the situation by showing them that the cost of the accidents was equal to the cost of one new service vehicle. The employees became aware of the cost of an accident and the impact that it has on the budget. The employees now have a sense of the big picture when it comes to the benefit of maintaining a safety culture. The focus on analysis was appropriate in this situation; however, a focus on accomplishment may be appropriate when an organization needs to have a boost in morale or when there needs to be a significant improvement in the culture.

Accomplishment

The leader with a focus on accomplishment is one who is known for getting things done by focusing on tangible results and marshalling the resources of the organization to accomplish a goal. The leader with this focus generally uses the dimensions of performance, boldness, and team building to accomplish goals (Kragness, 1994). This type of leader may be one who is good at managing the paradoxes within organizations and that is invigorated by stresses of ambiguity, conflict, and risk (Hill, 2000).

With respect to building and sustaining a safety culture, the leader with a focus on accomplishment will act with confidence in establishing new initiatives for the safety culture.
This leader may spend a significant amount of time building the right team to get the job done; time will be spent on locating, assessing, and attracting the right talent. When the talent is not available, time will be spent developing it (Hill, 2000). The leader with a focus on accomplishment will likely build a team of people from across different segments of the corporation who understand safety and its importance to the people, productivity, and profits of the organization. In order to accomplish the goals required to implement the vision, the leader will work to overcome resistance to change by finding new ways for members to work together rather than change the old ways of working (Kaufer & Senge, 2000).

At times too much focus on accomplishment can be a negative. One example comes from a situation where a supervisor of several crews was very focused on the results of his department. One of the crew leaders developed a mental condition that caused memory lapses and the inability to focus. A consultant who was working in the organization and that was experienced in the company's operations happened to have a conversation with the crew leader, an acquaintance of many years. The consultant realized that the crew leader was not functioning with the normal mental acuity and brought it to the attention of the supervisor. After some sensitive investigation, it was determined that the crew leader had a serious condition and was not fit for duty. In this case, a focus on accomplishment was overemphasized; the consultant used a focus on interaction that resulted in averting a potentially dangerous situation for the crew leader and fellow employees. This type of situation requires a leader to understand his or her personal ethics because it requires balancing the needs of an individual with the needs of the organization and all employees (Quigley, 2002).
Interaction

According to Kragness (1994), leaders who focus on interaction use the dimensions of collaboration, inspiration, and service to others. Chowdhury (2000) asserts that a major failing of management is over-reliance on outsiders to solve organizational problems when in reality much knowledge exists within the organization. Twenty-first century leaders will tap into hearts and minds of employees to create an emotional bond with them; this kind of collaboration is invaluable to companies. The approach to valuing and believing in employees' knowledge and talents is also inspirational. The inspirational leader will be able to dream and will act on those dreams, inspiring others to believe in their dreams, too.

Leaders who want to install a culture of service to customers will demonstrate this by serving their employees as well.

Leaders' actions influence the safety culture. Imagine a situation where a leader is able to use attention on interaction and convince a group to follow his or her belief that safety is important. When that leader can draw a beneficial linkage between safety efforts and the bottom line, he or she leader can begin what Shein calls the "process of cognitive transformation" (Shein, 1992) where safety will become a shared assumption and a basic value (Earnest, 2000). "Leadership is about humanity, getting the very best out of people to make progress. They see the extraordinary in people whom most see as only ordinary" (Hill, 2000, p. 65).

The leader with a focus on interaction is valuable in establishing a safety culture because this person can convey a vision and inspire others to follow. The interaction leader will tend to tap into the rich knowledge that workers have about issues with the current safety culture as well as surface their ideas about how to move the culture toward one that is more focused on the safety and well-being of all employees. The interaction leader is also
valuable to sustain a safety culture because of the tendency to use collaboration as a leadership style. This leader can collaborate with other managers and employees to generate enthusiasm for following the vision for a safety culture and to learn from employees what ongoing or new issues have emerged as the cultural transformation moves forward.

A focus on interaction allows a leader to keep the "pulse" on the organization and to form relationships with employees and other leaders. An example of a leader focused on interaction is a regional manager that the author worked with. This leader was very personable and interacted with employees frequently and listened to their concerns and helped them address the issues. This leader not only openly expressed care and concern for employees' well-being, but also demonstrated this with the time and attention given to their safety. The results were an improved safety record in the organization and a high level of employee morale.

Challenges Leaders Face in Building a Safety Culture

Leaders face a number of challenges in developing and sustaining a safety culture. There is not a single definition of what constitutes a safety culture; however, the literature suggests that it includes the norms, rules, and behaviors that are present with respect to safety (Flin & Mearns, 1999), as well as the character of the organization, the beliefs, and values, that are exhibited (Eckenfelder, 2000).

One challenge that is often cited is the challenge to balance a focus on profits, productivity, and safety. Other challenges include getting support from executives, unions, and employees; focusing on results rather than on the process; focusing on cost rather than on long-term benefit; trying to manage safety rather than lead a safety culture; and giving in to the natural human resistance to change.
A leader can recognize a culture where safety is a basic value through four key characteristics. First, the approach to safety is proactive; second, all levels of the organization are held accountable for results and how they are achieved; third, safety has the same weight as productivity and profitability when economic decisions are made; and fourth, safety policy is treated as important as other company policies (Earnest, 2000).

Eckenfelder (2000) argues that "an organization can either work downstream on behaviors or upstream on beliefs and values" (p. 43) and asserts that the best way to impact a culture is to understand the relationship between beliefs and values and outcomes. This can be done by teaching beliefs and values that focus on zero-accident work places. Schneider and Gunnarson (1996) suggest that a safety culture is both people-oriented and production-oriented; the culture is evidenced by values and assumptions including anticipation of problems before they occur, giving priority to employee's well-being, and continually stressing safe behavior over risk-taking behavior. The values expressed by management can be very subtle; there is a difference in establishing a culture based on the credo "we care about people" and "we do not want to get sued" (Flin & Mearns, 1999).

A leader is known by what he or she pays attention to; the leader of a safety culture is one who focuses on safety through character, analysis, accomplishment, or interaction. Certain situation may require any or all of these characteristics are required to assess, develop, or sustain a culture of safety.

Improving the Safety Culture through Leadership

Leaders who want to increase their effectiveness should work to understand their leadership approach and its impact on the organization. The Dimensions of Leadership

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The Dimensions of Leadership Profile © is a tool that can potentially help leaders determine what focus they tend to use so they can either take personal adaptive measures or enlist other leaders with different focus so that appropriate attention is given to the different aspects of the adaptive change process.

Dimensions of Leadership© - An Application in the Safety Culture

The Dimensions of Leadership profile is a personal assessment based on Kragness' work on leadership. The tool is used to describe the leadership characteristics of an individual or to describe the leadership needs of a situation. From the individual perspective, the tool can be used to describe one's self as a leader or another person as a leader.

Kragness developed the research-based profile using twelve sets of five descriptive phrases that are force ranked by the responder. Each phrase is associated with one of twelve dimensions; the twelve dimensions are related to the four focuses of attention as shown in Table 1 above. A tally box scoring method is used to accumulate the responder's scores in each of the twelve dimensions. These scores are then plotted on a graph, similar to Figure 1 above. The graph allows the responder to visualize where the highest and lowest emphases are placed with regard to the four areas of attention.

This profile has an application in determining the leadership in a safety culture. The profile can be administered to individuals within a workgroup with a focus on the type of leader the individuals prefer to work for. By compiling the results and conducting a reflective discussion, the leaders of the organization can learn about the kind of leaders the
group will respond to. To move the discussion to one that is beyond general leadership preferences, questions can be designed to facilitate discussion about leadership with respect to a safety culture. Questions for reflective learning could include the following:

1. What type of leadership will you respond to when you think about improving safety in our work environment?
2. What focus of attention is best used with your current safety culture?
3. Which characteristics or dimensions of leadership should be emphasized less or more?

The profile can also be used in leadership training for leaders who are responsible for safety in the workplace. The profile has applications for individual coaching and for group leadership training. Individual responders can fill out the profile with a focus on self as a leader. For individual coaching, a manager or coach can use the results of the profile to have a one-on-one dialog with the responder. The profile contains information for results interpretation; the responder can look at areas of high emphasis and learn about why people follow, who will typically follow, when to lead, and what to watch out for in specific areas of high emphasis. This kind of interpretation allows the user of the profile to take advantage of the research that went into the creation of the profile and to open non-threatening discussion with a coach, manager, or work group about the impact of leadership style on the safety culture.

Conclusions

Instilling safety as a value in an organization "requires consistent, demonstrable, safety leadership whereby the entire management structure proactively and visibly shows its leadership of --and commitment to -- safety on a daily basis" (Cooper, 2001).
One reason that safety culture efforts fail is that leaders too often focus on traditional transactional measurements to determine management and employee safety performance. These measurements include after-the-fact measures such as frequency of lost time injuries, severity rate, number of recordable accidents, and days without a lost-workday injury (Earnest, 2000). The focus on analysis often causes people to avoid reporting accidents or near-misses, thus building in a lack of trust in the numbers. These numbers also cause the focus to be on short-term results rather than on longer term activities and initiatives that truly impact the culture of safety. Leaders can help transform the culture by focusing more on before-the-fact elements including setting clear expectations, remaining involved in the safety culture, and recognizing positive efforts that fit the desired expectations. To accomplish this, it is important to understand the impact of focus of attention and to apply the right focus for the situation. An understanding of what transformational leadership is and how it impacts the safety culture in an organization is an essential element for any company that is concerned about worker and workplace safety.

To the extent that transformational leadership is understood by a leader or leaders in an organization, it can be applied to effect change through transformation rather than through transactions. The qualities of transformational leadership are identified as inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, management by exception, and contingent reward (Connelly, Marks, Mumford, & Zaccaro, 2000). Transformational leadership is centered on "the capacity to move resources for greater productivity" (Jones & Moses, 1999) and requires adaptability and flexibility (Bower, 1997). The transformational leader is able to cast a vision, persuade people to change, and is sensitive to the people and the situation in which the change is occurring, according to Bower. To extent that the leader can focus on transformation while keeping a simultaneous
focus on safety, the more effective the change will be for the organization. An essential part of the successful transformation is learning.

Senge et al (Roberts et al., 1999) discuss the need to develop learning capabilities within corporations; companies need to learn how to identify and test their global aspirations. They must learn how to have reflective conversations about what they are learning and the impact of the knowledge. These organizations must also begin to deal with greater complexity than ever before. The complexity can be overwhelming, or it can be reduced to having conversations about “What are we seeing? What can we learn from it? And how do we apply what we are learning to our corporation?” By having these kinds of reflective conversations, leaders will begin to learn about the different focuses of attention and which ones are required to meet the current situation and to achieve the safety goals and objectives of the organization.

Areas of new knowledge that leaders in such environments need include the requirements of customers, employees, and stockholders; how to diffuse information; the view of work by various generations in the workplace; and the changing role of power and division of labor in the workforce (Bouchikhi & Kimberly, 2000). Skills include leading across distance, working in more autonomous environments with less structure, and the ability to gather and assess data from many different sources (Kotter, 1996). Abilities required to lead nontraditional work environments includes the capacity to share information across the organization and to share leadership with others. The ability to help others find and develop their own leadership capabilities will also be highly valued in the workplace of the future (2000). All of these complexities must be dealt with while maintaining an appropriate balance on productivity, profits, and safety.

Summary

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It is important to focus on leadership rather than on management when it comes to establishing and sustaining a safety culture. Leaders can assess the culture by determining how well the organization:

1. carries out safety policy, strategy, goals, and plans;
2. develops and retains health and safety expertise;
3. involves management in visible safety activities such as meetings and inspections;
4. motivates employees through a focus on positive attitudes, employee well-being, job satisfaction;
5. identifies and corrects hazards and unnecessary risk-taking;
6. reports and investigates near-misses and accidents; and
7. communicates results of safety programs (Flin & Mears, 1999).

By learning about different leadership styles, the four focuses of attention, and when to use them to develop or sustain a safety culture, the organizations' leaders will be have a high likelihood of success.
References


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