

PARTNER-CENTERED LEADERSHIP Co-Creating the Next Step Up

By Richard N. Knowles

Managing safety provides a solid basis for organizations to achieve compliance, but a strong emphasis on leadership is required for organizations to achieve significantly higher levels of safety and business performance.

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This article shares an approach to leading safety developed and proven over the past 30 years. It clearly defines the activities of leadership and managership.

A major shift in how we engage each other, and our thinking and actions must occur for total safety and business performance to significantly reduce the number of fatalities, injuries and incidents in workplaces, to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of businesses, and to develop higher levels of energy, creativity and commitment of people. Building trust, sharing, learning, solving problems together and courageously acting on what we learn will move us beyond just managing safety to leading the breakthrough to much better performance. Partner-centered leadership provides a path forward we can all use.

During each of the past 5 years, more than 5,000 people have died at work despite efforts to reduce these numbers. Organizations provide training and resources to support safety professionals to increase their knowledge and skills. Plenty of safety tools and equipment are available and new ones are being constantly developed. The work to collect, analyze and use data to look for trends and other uses is impressive. Yet the number of fatalities is not dropping.

Our safety work is primarily focused on managing the systems and processes of doing safety. If only everyone would do things the way we train them, use the safety procedures we drill into them and follow our instructions, things would get a lot better. While the safety basics are vital, the managing approach is not enough for us to break through.

As a line manager of large chemical plants and now as a consultant, the author has found that how we choose to engage with each other on a personal basis is critical. Everything happens through people, so this makes all the difference. Working with people, sharing information about all we do, listening to and learning from each other, being respectful and helping to develop meaning in our work opens everyone's energy and creativity, resulting in much better performance in all aspects of our businesses. This is called partner-centered leadership (Wirtenberg, Kelley, Lipsky, et al., 2019, p. 37). The author learned many of the ideas presented in this article as plant manager of DuPont's Belle, WV, plant.

When safety professionals develop a clearer understanding of the different roles of managers and leaders, and become more effective in using our managership and leadership skills, we can play an

important role in enabling this shift in total performance. We can be role models for others at all levels of the organization. What managers and leaders do makes the critical difference.

Manager & Leader Definitions, Focus, Values & Activities

Managers and leaders are people; managership and leadership are activities in which managers and leaders engage. Let's compare the activities performed in these two roles.

Managers

Managers focus on systems, processes and maintaining the status quo. This is important to maintaining strong, reliable systems and processes that are vital for the success of the basic operations of an organization, and for building resilience.

Managers see organizations as machines. Everything moves in a stepwise fashion and, if every step is performed correctly, everything will be fine. People are moved around like interchangeable parts. Managers often see themselves as outside of their part of the organization and acting upon it. This is demonstrated by a manager who says "If those people over there would just do as I want. . . ." This is an example of someone who perceives themselves as outside of the organization, not a part of it. Even the word *employee* conveys this idea: "They are my employees and I am their manager."

Managers value reliability, stability, predictability and control. These values are needed to manage systems and processes such as running payroll and manufacturing processes, conducting shipping operations, implementing human resources policies and procedures, running safety programs and training, and maintaining fire protection systems.

But these values create problems when managers apply them to managing people. People are not machines. Managers usually must apply constant pressure to get employees to do what the manager wants. Each new program is just another linear, mechanical, step-by-step struggle. The employees are expected to do what they are told to do. In this environment, change is imposed and people often resist it.

While strong systems and processes are vital for the basic functions of the organization to work well, they are not sufficient for the total success of the teams and individuals in the organization. Treating people as if they are parts of a machine prohibits them from becoming their best. People

want to be treated with respect and be heard, yet this rarely happens in this top-down managership approach. The values of respect, caring, helping, listening and learning are crushed. The open flow of information is shut down.

Leaders

Leaders focus on people, change and moving into the future. Leaders see organizations as complex, adapting, self-organizing networks of people.

Leaders value open, flowing information, building respect and trust, and enabling people to see why their work is important for the success of the organization. These activities build meaning into the work; they are the pillars of leadership. Leaders also value feedback.

Leaders invest themselves in the organization with courage, concern, care and commitment, spending time every day with people, listening to, talking with and learning together. In doing this with honesty and respect, they help to build trust and interdependence. Leaders can do this regardless of their level in the organization by enabling the people around them and facilitating engagement with the people in their areas of responsibility. This can happen throughout the organization.

Leaders realize that they need to create the space where the people can safely talk openly together, listen to each other, share ideas, think about new possibilities and coalesce as new opportunities emerge. People do not resist change when they have created it. The open flow of information is vital to the success of the organization. Any rules that limit to whom a person can talk, or tolerance of bad behaviors such as bullying, harassment or heavy-handed management decrees block the flow of information, weaken the organization and shut off the development of new potential.

Leaders need a clear vision, purpose and focus. As plant manager, the author developed a set of unique tools. The Process Enneagram enables leaders to achieve clarity and develop their living strategic plan (Knowles, 2002). In engaging in this planning process, the Bowl emerges: a container for the organization that provides order and stability (Knowles, 2002). Within the Bowl people share, learn, grow and co-create their safer, more effective and efficient future. They use the sustainability ratios to evaluate potential decisions to build a more sustainable future (Knowles, 2002). These sustainability ratios are qualitative leading indicators for building more sustainable, stronger, safer, more resilient and productive organizations. In using these ratios, the author helped the Belle Plant cut injury rates by 98%, lower emissions by 88%, improve productivity by 45% while seeing earnings rise by 300%.

Leaders take a stand to clearly show everyone what their values and beliefs are about, improving safety and reducing workplace injuries. Everyone is asked to help the leader live up to this stand and has permission to hold him/her accountable to live up to it. For example, the author's stand is that it is not

OK to make a living where it is OK for people to get hurt. That stand will not be bargained away because someone complains that working safely is inconvenient or takes too much time.

Purposeful, focused, daily conversations were crucial for helping plant personnel create a safer workplace. Through these conversations, the author encouraged people to think for themselves, develop the discipline to think things through each day, addressing the two or three greatest risks they will face and deciding what they would do to deal with them. Employees reflected on this at the end of the day to see how successful they were so they could do things even better. These down-to-earth conversations helped people develop the strength and skills to create a safer, more robust workplace culture.

Both Managership & Leadership Are Needed

People working at lower levels in the organization or in technical positions have a large component of managership in their work, while those working at higher levels in organizations have a large component of leadership in their work. However, everyone who works with people has both managership and leadership responsibilities in their work, continuously balancing these activities as conditions and demands change. This "leadership dance" requires developing a sharp sense of self and situational awareness.

Organizations change one conversation at a time, through freely flowing information, the constant interplay among all roles and people at all levels talking, listening, learning and growing together as they feed off each other's energy, thoughts and ideas. Each purposeful conversation builds the potential energy for the future. The conversations begin to come together with new insights and possibilities about how to improve. Most changes are small, but they build on each other. Everyone learns how to live in this new future. The Bowl that they have created using the Process Enneagram enables them to clearly see the boundaries of their work creating the container that holds the dynamic organization together.

MANAGERSHIP & LEADERSHIP

Managership	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Focus on systems, processes and status quo. •Organizations seen as machines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Focus on people, change and the future. •Organizations seen as living systems: complex, adapting, self-organizing networks of people.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Value reliability, stability, predictability and control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Value the open flow of information, building trust and a sense of belonging (meaning).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Needed for linear, step-by-step processes (e.g., payroll, production schedules, human resources procedures) to keep things running. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Require courage, care, concern and commitment.



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Share your stand on the importance of safety. Talk about these concerns together and seek a safer, better way to do things.

While most of the changes are small, some larger ones emerge and occasionally a big change occurs. It is impossible to predict when the changes will occur or the size of the changes, so it is critical that these processes of engagement are relentless. The changes build on each other, providing learning opportunities and growth.

Supervisors, managers, superintendents and directors need to go into their organizations for about 2 hours every day engaging with people to build this way of working, learning and growing together. At first, it may be difficult to find the time to do this. However, in the author's experience, the process helps teams solve problems more quickly and effectively; the gap between the work-as-imagined and the work-as-done shrinks with each purposeful conversation and the words turn into action. The process helps the team find and solve problems at a much earlier stage making the solutions easier to implement. It is important to be open, honest and authentic in this work so that trust can be built and the space open for safe, authentic conversations.

- Formal positions such as supervisor, superintendent, manager and director have and exercise power, allocate resources, set performance goals, and set and enforce standards of performance.

- All formal positions have both managership and leadership components.

- Lower-level positions have more managership activities and higher-level positions have more leadership activities.

- Most people are promoted because they have shown good managership skills.

- The leadership dance dynamically blends managership and leadership activities as appropriate for the situation to achieve resilience, sustainability, energy and creativity.

- Resilient organizations can absorb an external shock and adjust balance to restore the status quo.

- Sustainable organizations can absorb an external shock, adjust to restore the dynamic balance and use the opportunity to move into the future.

- Change occurs one conversation at a time.

The Contribution Safety Professionals Can Make

Most safety professionals are good managers, knowing the systems and processes necessary for building safety compliance. Where we can make the next big contribution is in leading the safety work to much higher levels of performance.

Each of us can step out and take the lead, modeling this leadership behavior. Share your stand on the importance of safety. Talk about these concerns together and seek a safer, better way to do things. As you talk together, ask about the work and explore ways to do the work more safely and efficiently; new ideas often emerge. Find out what people need and how you can help them. Listen to each other and learn together. Each person has knowledge and insights that need to be shared. Encourage everyone to share ideas and thoughts. We all have things to learn. Then we act on these to build our future together.

As you are talking together, model respectful behavior. Listen, ask questions for understanding, seek ways to help the people do their jobs better and more safely. Create the safe space where people can talk openly about their ideas and learn together. If you discover harassment or bullying problems, dig into them and help to stop these dysfunctional behaviors. These behaviors shut down conversations, inhibiting people from learning and growing. The culture they create, if their behavior goes unchecked, is destructive and unproductive.

Be honest. When you do not know the answer to a question, admit it, find the answer and get back to the person with what you have learned. If you make a mistake, own it, apologize and tell the person you will try to do better. Admitting you do not know something and apologizing for mistakes helps to build credibility and trust with everyone.

Conclusion

Anyone at any level can exercise leadership behavior and activities. Leadership is about developing a clear vision and mission, sharing it with people, and looking for new and better ways to do things and to build a brighter future. As safety professionals build on our managership skills and develop our leadership skills, our contributions to our organizations expand. It is a matter of will. We can do this if we want to help to build a safer, brighter future for everyone. **PSJ**

References

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