

## Leading Our Way to Zero Harm

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A key theme of SPE's 11th International Conference on Health, Safety, and the Environment in Oil and Gas Exploration and Production was how to achieve an incident-free workplace. Leadership is one of the critical elements of reaching this goal. This column explores components of effective leadership as it pertains to safety and its effect on employees.

Safety is about managing risk. Although the people who manage risk within an organization generally have "manager" titles, these are usually not the people who are injured. Consequently, to attain excellent safety levels, it is essential that all employees who are at risk of injuries be included in organizational risk-management activities.

Employees currently address risks in many ways, including performing audits of workplace conditions and writing work orders to ensure follow-up on key workplace conditions that require continuous improvement. Employee responsibilities also include collecting and using key information about near misses before an injury actually occurs. Perhaps most importantly, employees in many organizations are also asked to create a more interdependent workplace in which they watch out for one another and always act in service of one another in "moments of choice" to ensure that, when coworkers perform a behavior that puts themselves or others at risk, an intervention takes place before an injury occurs.

This growing requirement of interdependent behavior within organizations requires that employees personally develop the courage to care. It also requires them to develop the humility to care enough to receive feedback, which includes dropping defensiveness and listening to peer coaches in the interest of always working more safely. This is hard work that requires personal transformation. The achievement of this degree of personal transformation requires an increased level of leadership effectiveness of those in the management positions.

So how do managers exercise increased leadership in moving toward an employee-empowerment model essential for ownership of everyone's safety at the appropriate levels across the entity?

### Empowering Employees for Safety Excellence

World-class safety, in which all employees assume the responsibility of their own safety and the safety of those around them, arises only out of discretionary behavior. Discretionary behavior is simply a choice made by each employee every day; employees cannot be mandated to comply. It is what they do all day, every day, when no one is watching.

Because discretionary behavior is the response of employees to their experience in the workplace, managers have a great deal of influence on its occurrence. Management affects employees' workplace experience; the more positive the experience the more discretionary behavior that the employees provide. The more negative the experience, however, the more employees will just mechanically perform their work to obtain credit for success or to avoid the consequences of failure.

To facilitate employees' acts of choice and discretionary behaviors that lead to safety excellence, managers should develop an understanding of employee

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experience in the workplace. This experience is based on the needs or expectations that all employees have when at work. Employees share the following eight basic needs in the workplace:

- To be heard
- To make a contribution
- To belong (enjoy relationships at work, beginning with their direct manager)
- To learn and grow
- To be recognized (external support in addition to internal drive and natural personal reinforcers)
- To have empowerment (personal control, choice)
- To own competence (to know how to make a difference)
- To serve and to contribute to the development of others' self-esteem

### Good Relations

Given these needs, the role of an excellent manager in cocreating a workplace in which employees have an extremely positive experience and contribute more to the business each day is actually quite simple. Excellent managers interact with their employees in such a way that these eight factors are experienced. The relationship of managers with their employees is directly related to the performance the employees will provide for the organization.

Every interaction between people always ends as either a positive experience or negative experience. There is no “not affected” or neutral experience of a conversation between people. Therefore, every interaction between managers and their employees determines the extent to which these eight needs are met. The degree to which these needs are met and evolve over time is the degree to which employees will take initiative and take care of one another to prevent injuries. As leaders, the overarching goal of excellent managers is to be concerned with how work is performed, in addition to defining with their employees what must be done. The character of each manager and of every experience builds the character or culture of that organization. The outcome can be increased employee contributions toward making a difference for safety and all else that is important over time.

To become the best leaders, managers must question whether they are actively helping employees meet these eight basic needs. The best of the leaders have the humility to ask those who know best—their own employees—in a manner that has authenticity, rather than a question that can be answered with a simple “Yes” or “Sure, boss.” This conversation may actually be the most critical conversation of organization performance in an entity.

To obtain the best outcome, managers also should consider how and where these conversations with employees occur. Although the evolution of increased electronic personal productivity tools, such as email, is very useful in some applications, the communication about the human

experience of the eight factors is typically not addressed as an email or through a slide presentation. For best results, this conversation should be approached as a communication experience. Communication is enhanced when three core components are experienced: words, body language, and tone; consequently, effective managers must include more in-person communication time with their employees.

Many management teams have found greater effectiveness and organizational performance when the managers have distinct, in-person conversations with their employees. These managers use questions, recognition, and other methods that generate an increase toward meeting the employees' eight needs. Some managers use “Coffee Talks” or community gatherings of their employees. Other managers walk through their site once or twice a week and stop to talk *with* employees, rather than *to* employees. Conversations with employees must be inclusive (two-way), rather than only informative (one-way). Some organizations have designed weekly personal interactions with employees in which managers simply ask their employees, “How do you manage risk here so that no one on this team is injured?” The use of these three approaches at Halliburton, as well as inclusive communication strategies that use questions rather than statements, has begun to pay large safety-performance improvement dividends.

### The Right Culture

Managers have the capacity to build powerful relationships with their employees that result in greater rates of discretionary behavior and in improved safety and quality. The culture of the organization is built by these interactions and reinforced by the belief we can work without injuries. This must be followed up by concrete action, however. When an employee identifies a hazard that can be controlled with a reasonable engineered solution, there are two possible outcomes. Either the management responds quickly with the solution to reinforce the ownership of safety, or it does not respond quickly and the situation drags on or is dropped entirely, which may indicate a lack of commitment. Either instance sends a powerful signal to the organization.

It is essential that we continually improve our safety systems and the supporting management processes for the improved management of risk. Increased ownership in managing risk requires all employees to be actively involved. At a fundamental level, a management role of future leadership must incorporate improvements in addressing the eight factors for their employees to gain an enhanced commitment and contribution to the organization. To be the best leaders, managers must talk with their employees and be involved with them to continuously improve the outcome of employee experience and related results. This type of leadership will result in continually advancing the overall system to achieve a zero-injury future. **JPT**

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