



Skills-Based Leadership

The First-Line Supervisor

Part I

By Fred S. Drennan and David Richey

Leadership programs abound. Most suggest that leaders possess certain special qualities—if a person could only learn the “secrets of leadership,” s/he, too, could become a great leader. Some organizations conduct personality tests to determine who has the right stuff to be the next great leader.

However, new research shows that the traditional charismatic or “great man” leadership model is only half the equation (Haslam, 2011). What about the followers? One cannot lead without them. Companies can strive for zero harm, but only if workers support it. Leaders can only be effective if those workers perceive leaders as team players who are looking out for their common good. The leader-centric view of leadership is flawed. Put simply, leadership is a “we” thing, not an “I” thing.

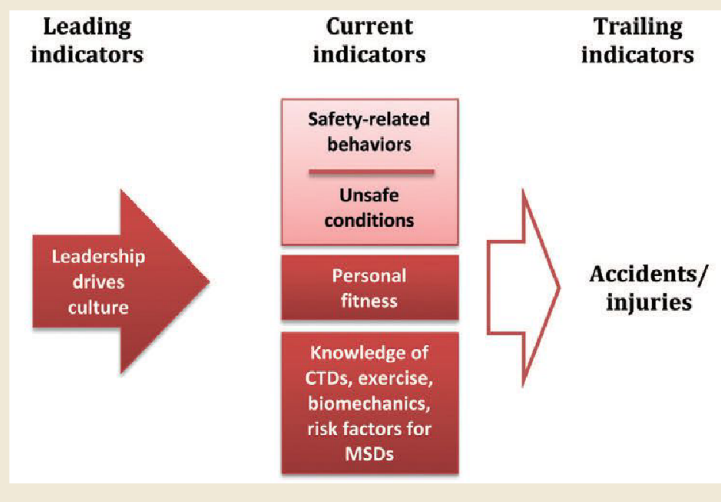
Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam (2004) offer a social identity perspective on leadership that says, “a common identity with the leader is cru-

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A new model of industrial safety addresses leadership and the lack of fitness as leading indicators for incidents/injuries.

Figure 1
A New Model of Industrial Safety



The Powerful Influence of Supervisors on Employee Attitudes

Lao-tzu said, "If you fail to honor your people, they will fail to honor you. It is said of a good leader that when the work is done, the aim fulfilled, the people will say, 'We did this ourselves.'"

Consider this example from the lead author's experience more than 25 years ago while implementing a safety program on oil platforms off the California coast. The consulting team was excited and apprehensive because this was its first large-scale project and the customer was the largest corporation in the country. Performance had to be at the highest level.

Six months in, things were not going as planned. Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs)

were the most common injuries on the platforms. A new model of accident prevention was developed (Figure 1) that included a progressive series of strength and flexibility exercises (SAFE) to be performed each day.

Wide variations occurred in participation rates and in scores on employees' flexibility measurements. This was curious because the work environment presented no real variables. It was the same processes, same company, same oil platforms, same operation, same shift, same tasks and same age groups affected. From a research standpoint, it could not get any better.

The only significant variable identified was that teams were led by different supervisors, which the consulting team came to recognize created a unique community of relationships. During audits, the consultant team observed a significant difference in supervisor leadership styles. Supervisors who were engaged in the program had the highest participation rates and their teams had the highest scores on flexibility tests. These supervisors were first to arrive in the training room, announced the safety meeting on the PA system, were front and center during the exercises, and encouraged employees to perform the exercises correctly. Most importantly, it was obvious they were having fun doing so.

Among poorly performing crews, supervisors participated sporadically; employees straggled in; the safety meeting became break time; and supervisors stood in the back of the room and rarely encouraged employee participation or proper exercise technique, and generally appeared bored and disinterested. One of these supervisors was questioned about his leadership style and his comment characterized the nature of the problem: "If the program is that great, employees will naturally participate on their own, without any support or encouragement from me. I wanted to see what would happen."

IN BRIEF

- Supervisors are critical safety leaders.
- Leadership is not a rare, charismatic or inherent talent. Rather, it can be learned, observed and measured.
- Managers and supervisors can learn and use five essential leadership skills to produce superior results.
- Such systems and tools represent an opportunity for safety professionals to increase their value to their organizations.

cial for the leader's effectiveness in mobilizing individual efforts toward collective goals." Simply stated, effective leadership is the ability to motivate a group of people toward a common goal. This article suggests that supervisors have the most common identity (therefore, influence) with workers. Using this model, leadership can be learned and applied at all levels of an organization.

Who Are the Safety Leaders?

In the largest study of its kind, Gallup surveyed 80,000 supervisors and managers and 1 million employees in 400 top-performing companies to determine what the world's greatest managers do (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999). The authors determine that the first-line manager (supervisor) is the key to attracting and retaining talented employees. No matter how generous the pay, training or status, a company that lacks great first-line managers will suffer.

In the employee's eyes, the supervisor is the company. While executive management sets the vision, the actions of first-line supervisors determine whether employees will participate in and support that vision. The supervisor is the key person responsible to perform critical safety functions.

Two studies conducted by National Safety Council in 1967 and 1992 determined that safety professionals believe the first-line supervisor has the most critical safety function, followed by top management (Petersen, 2001, p. 67). These studies and results of supervisor leadership training on various jobsites inform the authors' opinion that the leadership skills of first-line supervisors have a tremendous effect on overall safety performance.

This attitude goes against every management principal. What if this supervisor's attitude was applied to productivity, quality or customer satisfaction? Would employees naturally put their shoulders into the effort? If supervisors rule when it comes to influencing employee attitudes and behaviors, then management must ensure that supervisors have the right leadership skills and are held accountable to apply them on the job. While safety professionals must set the course for continuous safety improvement, supervisors have ultimate responsibility for implementing the plan. As this example illustrates, employees adopt their immediate supervisor's attitude toward safety—either positive or negative (Drennan, Richey & Ramsay, 2006).



Photo 1: Giving verbal praise creates a positive psychosocial climate, which improves safety and productivity.

Would You Know Good Safety Leadership If You Saw It?

One troubling challenge of the “great man” leadership model is how it is measured. Is poor safety performance due to the supervisor's or manager's lack of charisma or vision? Or, is it because that individual lacks character or imagination? Using personality traits to measure supervisor safety performance (or much else) is a practice loaded with land mines.

Instead, starting with the definition, “Leadership is the ability to motivate a group of people toward a common goal,” one can develop a framework for a successful, skills-based supervisor safety leadership program. Its component parts are:

- motivation (delivery of positive reinforcement);
- a group of people (building high-performance teams);
- common goals (team goal setting).

These skills—delivery of positive reinforcement, team-building activities and team goal setting—delivered in this order, provide a realistic, manageable starting point to build an effective supervisor safety leadership program. One could argue for a different set of skills or a different order of presentation; however, it is the authors' experience that these skills provide an excellent starting point and can create a solid framework for an expanded program.

The following discussion focuses on leadership training—specifically, training supervisors on the job. It describes easy-to-learn leadership skills based on this model. Part II of this article (to be published in March 2012) will present a case study that highlights the results achieved using these tools and systems.

Developing Supervisor Safety Leadership

Learning to lead is like learning to swim. One cannot do it by reading a book; one must get in the water. A 3-day, off-site leadership seminar may generate teamwork and camaraderie among participants and provide basic guidelines, language and inspiration. But, it cannot teach supervisors what they really need: How to apply the skills on the job.

Most safety training lends itself to the classroom,

as most subjects relate to hard skills. For example, in the classroom, trainees may learn how to use new safety software, updated procedures for confined space entry or OSHA's new rigging regulations, or how to complete incident investigation forms. Once training is over, participants must simply pass a test to demonstrate that they have learned.

Leadership skills are soft skills. They are only acquired through frequent, face-to-face practice. Skills such as motivating workers to participate in daily exercises, building strong teams and setting safety goals require a high level of supervisor/employee interaction. They cannot be learned in the classroom. Like swimming, leadership only improves with practice.

Thus, it is important to provide a regular forum for this activity. Some organizations use daily meetings for work assignments, safety huddles or similar activities. These can easily be upgraded to include focused safety activity, led by supervisors practicing their leadership skills. In addition to structured meetings, supervisors should practice these skills throughout daily activities.

The Five Core Leadership Skills

During more than 20 years of implementing supervisor leadership training, the authors have identified 15 leadership skills that improve safety performance in the workplace. The top five for motivating a group toward a common goal are:

- 1) Giving positive recognition.
- 2) Building teams.
- 3) Setting team goals.
- 4) Keeping score publicly.
- 5) Positioning supervisors as trainers.

The order in which these skill sets are deployed can make the difference between success and frustration. For example, experience suggests that attempting to set team goals does not work if employees do not feel like a team. The natural work group will not feel like a team unless a substantial number of team-building exercises have been completed. And employees will not participate in such exercises unless the supervisor offers verbal praise and recognizes their efforts. In Part I, let's take a look at the first two core skills.

able solutions, they will voluntarily support those solutions without outside pressure.

Root-cause analysis is an effective group exercise. Many organizations use the safety staff or incident investigation committee to perform this function when it could be conducted at the team level. In a strong team environment, the team takes ownership of the incident. Its members have the most at stake. The team investigates the incident and determines its root causes. After all, the team is in the best position to determine what corrective action is necessary. When the team develops the solution, it is more likely the team will voluntarily follow the solution.

Team Building & the Need for Affiliation

Another aspect of team building goes beyond motivating a group of people toward a common goal, to satisfying the human need for affiliation. People live in social groups. According to Haslam (2011):

[M]embership of groups, from football teams to book clubs and voluntary societies, gives us a sense of social identity . . . an indispensable part of who we are and what we need to be in order to lead rich and fulfilling lives. For this reason groups are central to mental functioning, health and well-being.

Creating a sense of belonging not only is healthy for the employees, it also presents benefits to the organization. Edmans (in press) studied the 100 best companies to work for in America between 1998 and 2005. To make the list, companies had to score high on employee surveys that measure trust, respect and camaraderie. Results showed these companies had more than two times the financial success of the average S&P 500 company.

The purpose of team building as a function of leadership is not so much for team building itself, but to improve organizational performance through employee satisfaction. **PS**

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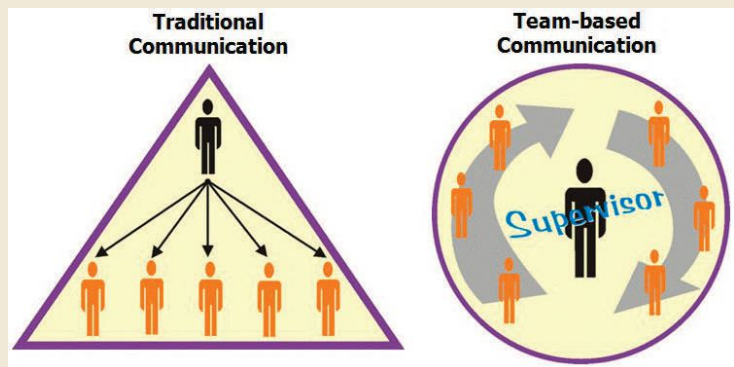
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Figure 3

Hierarchy vs. Team-Based Communication



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Traditional hierarchy creates one-way communication, while team-based communication leads to greater participation.

Part II

Part II continues in the March 2012 issue with the remaining three skills and the results from an implementation of this approach.