

What's your safety story?

Influential leaders have a convincing message — and an audience ready to hear it

By Dave Johnson, Editor

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Did you ever consider how the stories you tell as a safety and health professional affect your ability to influence management and the workforce?

“Influence is our primary route for results,” says longtime safety veteran Tom Lawrence.

“We accomplish those results by learning the technical, regulatory and safety management concepts and using them to influence line managers and employees to get the actual work done. We have to persuade — influence — others.”

Indirect persuasion

Safety and health pros, then, are what Howard Gardner, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, calls indirect leaders. They influence the thinking and behavior of organizations and people through the indirect application of their technical expertise and insights.

They are domain experts, such as anthropologist Margaret Mead and physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who are profiled by Gardner in his book, “Leading Minds.”

Direct leaders, in contrast, typically lack astute knowledge of any given subject area. But they have their hands on the levers of power, such as CEOs and heads of state.

Central to Gardner’s thesis is that leaders, whether their style is direct or indirect, must have a story to relate, and an audience ready to hear it, if they are to succeed.

By “story,” Gardner means a central theme or message. But, as he says, it is no mere headline or slogan. It’s a perspective, a conviction, communicated not just in words, but actions. Leaders embody their message. As a safety and health pro, you know all about role modeling.

A leader’s ability to persuade and be effective depends on his or her message resonating with the audience, says Gardner. The same goes for safety and health pros. The story needs to make sense to audience members, in terms of where they have been and where they want to go, he writes.

Think of FDR’s “We have nothing to fear...” speech at the outset of World War II, JFK’s “Ask not what your country can do for you” message at the dawn of the idealistic 1960s, and George W. Bush’s reassurances after 9/11.

Think of your own safety “story,” and the audience you’re trying to connect to. How good is the fit in your workplace?

Selling obligations

Many safety stories promote themes of obligation, commitment, sacrifice and responsibility. That's not an easy sell, but it's not different from what political, military or religious leaders ask of their audiences.

"Each of us shares a responsibility to work safely in our daily lives," said National Safety Council President Alan McMillan, in a statement released last spring for Workers Memorial Day. "Employers and business leaders have a special obligation to ensure that the core human value of safety and health is firmly rooted in their organizations."

"What have you done for safety today?" ask shift supervisors at the start of daily production meetings at a large printing company.

Other common safety stories (the condensed versions):

"We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers."

"Safety first."

"Safety pays."

"Safety is crucial to the way we do business."

When you ask for commitment and sacrifice (wear personal protective equipment, volunteer for the safety committee, don't take shortcuts, etc.) you're no different than other leaders who attempt to sway attitudes and behaviors. But safety and health story-telling does face several disadvantages.

Does your story make sense?

First, consider your in-plant audience. Or rather, your audiences — managers, supervisors and employees. Are they poised to respond to repeated presentations of your core message?

For as Gardner writes, "Even the most eloquent story is stillborn in the absence of an audience ready to hear it."

Ah, Houston, we have a problem here, many safety and health pros would answer. Actually, there are several problems.

For one, the personal experiences of managers, supervisors, and employees do not usually jibe with the safety message. Accidents and inspections usually do happen to someone else. OSHA inspectors only hit about 36,000 out of six million workplaces every year.

Timing is everything. Safety stories resonate most powerfully when your audiences are living the story — NASA after the Columbia disaster. Then the fit, the readiness to listen and respond, is acute.

But long-term chances of success are greater if your story can take root in a non-crisis situation, through sustained, concentrated effort, writes Gardner.

Explosions and fatalities, unfortunately, lend themselves to emotional knee-jerk reactions, often leaving safety and health pros with the Hawthorne Effect — not significant and lasting change.

Competing stories

Another challenge for safety and health leaders is competition from other stories. Consider some of the stories competing for the attention and commitment of your managers and employees (as identified by risk communication expert Peter Sandman):

“We’ve got deadlines, budgets, real problems,” says the boss.

“We’ve got a good record already,” says the plant manager.

“If they paid attention they wouldn’t get hurt,” says the supervisor.

“Management doesn’t care about me,” says the employee.

Finally, consider a poll released by the Society of Human Resource Management and CNN. When asked what aspects of their daily work are least important, a random nationwide sample of employees said relationships with coworkers, training, and working to the organization’s goals.

Ouch. Tell that to a safety and health pro trying to sell “actively caring,” safety training sessions and safety performance goals.

Leverage your advantages

Still, several factors work in favor of safety story-telling:

- **Expertise and credibility.** “An individual is unlikely to achieve any credibility unless her work is seen as being of high quality,” writes Gardner. Safety and health pros are technical mavens with access to knowledge unavailable to the rest of the workforce and management. That’s an advantage.
- **Authenticity.** Safety and health pros, with few exceptions, are the real deal. They talk the talk and walk the walk, and pride themselves on nothing less. They live out and project their stories every day, wearing PPE, following procedures, pursuing audit findings until closure, etc. In some cases, your story can even be strengthened if you own up to your own unsafe thinking and actions of the past — what Gardner calls a “counter-story.”

But be careful. If a leader seems to contradict his story by the fact of his existence, if he doesn’t walk the talk, writes Gardner, the story probably won’t remain convincing over the long run.

- **Natural tendencies.** See if you can relate to some of the traits Gardner ascribes to what he calls the “exemplary leader”: Possessing a keen interest in, and understanding of, other people; general energy and resourcefulness; conviction that one’s own insights are well-motivated and likely to be effective; and concern with moral issues.

These are all common characteristics of effective safety and health pros.

- **Inclusiveness.** The most influential stories encourage individuals to think of themselves as part of a broader community, writes Gardner. Think of the appeals of FDR, JFK, Reagan, Martin Luther King, Gandhi.

Think of all that's been said in safety and health about belongingness, ownership, teamwork and building a safety culture. Safety's message is naturally inclusive. It applies to all of us, everywhere, all the time.

Take a look at your safety and health story-telling. Your themes and methods of delivering your messages. Study your audiences, and the counter-stories in your workplace that compete for attention. Leverage the advantages you have for telling safety stories that connect to your audience.