

Overcoming Executive Resistance to Active Safety Leadership

These tips can help you anticipate and address common objections to taking steps to improve your safety process.

by Robert Pater

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Someone once said, "With great power comes great responsibility." I'd hope this would be true, but I do know that, in the corporate world, with increasing power comes greater attempts to reach and persuade.

We live in a world where attention is king. Executives are attention targets; other managers, customers, shareholders, vendors and professionals vie for the eye and head nod of senior leaders. In this competitive persuasion universe, how can you become more effective in influencing executives to actively support and fund safety? It's not enough to only do the same things you've been doing if you want to capture the interest of leaders who are under the gun to produce next-quarter results.

First, consider employing some of the strategies in my other recent articles on this topic. (See ["Activating Executive Safety Leadership"](#) and ["Secrets of Presenting to Executives."](#)) Now let's go beyond these.

We all know that safety is "the right thing to do," that "it's good business" and "saves money on the bottom line." But many professionals report that repeating this approach is not enough to wake up slumbering executives to walk the safety talk.

Enlist the Power of "Negative Thinking"

That is, if you can identify what gets in the way of executive safety leadership inertia, you can take actions to anticipate and reduce these blockages in advance, a la Kurt Lewin's Force-Field Analysis (Lewin demonstrated on a range of real-life change challenges that stable improvements are more likely to come from identifying and then reducing those forces that got in the way of high-level performance).

Here is a sampling of five executive safety objections I've heard, followed by a tip for addressing each:

1. "Safety doesn't seem cost-effective to me." Tip – Move away from only (or mostly) tracking trailing indicators such as incidence rate. Chart leading indicators that are approved in advance by the executives you wish to reach (e.g., improved morale, more positive perception of organizational leadership or retention of key employees).

2. "Injuries are a cost of doing business. Trying to prevent them is throwing good money after bad." Tip – While admitting there are no guarantees of always getting large returns, show them several instances, especially those of competitors or in similar operations, in which companies realized significant returns from a safety intervention similar to the one you are proposing.

3. "Won't addressing this just open a can of worms? Why open Pandora's Box?" Tip – Acknowledge, in advance, that a focus on preventing an injury source (i.e. carpal tunnel syndrome) is likely to result in more early reports; but that this can help save the company money, dealing with injuries at a lower/more manageable/cost-effective level than waiting for more costly treatments for more fully blown injuries. Remind executives that, with an abundance of information from the Internet, workers' comp attorneys and other sources, workers may likely find out about these injuries in another manner. Wouldn't it be better to educate them in a balanced way?

4. "Haven't we dealt with this before? Spent funds on this? Why are you coming back to me trying to solve the same old problems?" Tip – Thank them, in advance, for their support that has led to reducing injuries from past heights. Then focus on a new approach (not previously used) that you believe can take the company to the next level of performance.

5. "You've been telling us how much better our performance has become. We now have relatively few injuries. So why are you asking for more programmatic money?" Tip – Focus on unrealized gains still available beyond workers' comp cost reductions – the benefits of being seen as a global-class safety leader, improved flow of production or the reduction in health care costs related to off-work injuries.

I could list several other objections that executives think or speak about regarding furthering safety efforts. It is critical to determine the specific concerns held by those managers you most want to reach.

There's an art to positively influencing high-level, control-oriented leaders. Persuading or turning around executives toward embracing the safety light can't be done just by following a formula.

But by tapping the power of negative thinking, seeing objections in advance, you can create a realistic strategy to more effectively influence previously resistant executives to actively lead organizational safety. I've seen it happen. Many times, all over the world.

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