

## Leadership and safety culture

The importance of leadership in the creation and maintenance of a positive safety culture is widely accepted. Leaders create and form the culture, and remain the most influential individuals in cultural change. Given the central role of leadership, it is surprising that many senior leaders are frustrated in their attempts to create lasting cultural change. This frustration may be because leaders mainly influence the culture indirectly, which can result in distortion.

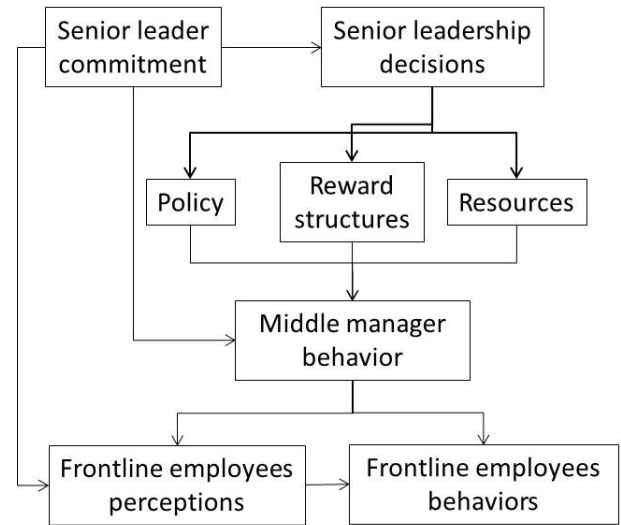
Senior leaders shape the culture by setting policy, determining reward structures, tracking performance and ensuring that adequate resources are available. These systems and processes influence manager and employee perceptions and behaviour. Senior leaders can directly impact manager and employee perceptions by articulating key organizational values and priorities, demonstrating commitment (e.g. by taking action to resolve safety issues) and convincing employees that safety is a personal value.

Senior leaders can directly influence the safety culture by demonstrating commitment to safety, through effective safety leadership. Safety leadership has been a major topic of research for many years, resulting in numerous publications and research reviews<sup>i</sup>.

Effective safety leadership involves:

- Demonstrating commitment to safety by:
  - Visiting the worksite to show interest in safety (walk, look, listen and fix).
  - Taking action to address safety weakness and concerns.
  - Ensuring that safety is given a high profile in business plans.
  - Creating a shared vision for safety.
  - Maintaining high personal safety standards.
- Adopting a transformational leadership style.
- Communicating the importance of safety.
  - Providing a rationale for important safety decisions.
  - Listening to employee concerns.

### How leaders influence safety culture



Senior leaders influence the safety culture indirectly through their decisions. These decisions influence management behavior, which in-turn influences employee perceptions and behaviour. There is evidence<sup>ii</sup> that the following management systems are associated with a positive safety culture:

- Ensuring safety policy promotes:
  - Involving employees in safety decisions that affect them.
  - Encouraging a questioning attitude.
  - Responding quickly to employee safety concerns.
- Reward structures that promote safety:
  - Including safety as a part of performance assessment.
  - Adopting a long term perspective in assessing performance.
  - Not relying solely on safety failures to measure performance.
- Ensuring adequate resources are available for safety.
- Adopting a systematic approach to training.

Many senior leaders dedicate significant effort promoting a positive safety culture, through both the direct and indirect channels outlined above; yet they believe that their message is not reaching frontline staff. It can be difficult for senior leaders to convince

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front-line employees that they are truly committed to safety. There are limited opportunities for senior leaders to speak directly to front-line staff. Even when leaders address employees directly they may not be believed, because what manager is going to say that safety is not important. In addition, the message sent by senior leaders can be distorted by others. The challenge for senior leaders is to convince employees of the authenticity of their commitment. Signal theory<sup>iii</sup> from economics provides guidance on how to show that commitment is genuine. Signalling theory argues that perceivers (employees) can have confidence in the authenticity of a message if it difficult/ expensive for someone to make the claim falsely. If we apply this to safety, leaders should ensure that their statements about the priority they place on safety would be difficult or expensive to make if they are not genuine. In practice this is likely to involve backing up such statements with actions and warranties that employees can call them on.

It is also important for senior leaders to convince their direct reports that safety is truly important to them. In the day-to-day business environment it can be easy for safety to drop down the agenda. Often other business objectives can appear more pressing and if safety is not continually emphasised there is a risk that it will be compromised in order to achieve other more immediate goals. Sadly when a leader compromises safety to achieve a production goal it can cause employees to lose faith in all leaders' commitment to safety. This one lapse can undo many of the positive actions that leaders have taken.

It is therefore necessary for senior leaders to create systems and processes that demonstrate commitment on an ongoing basis. These systems should include ways to motivate middle managers and supervisors to demonstrate commitment to safety.

A positive safety culture requires all managers to consistently demonstrate commitment to safety. Organizations need to adopt a systematic approach to ensure leaders adopt the desired behaviors. To do this,

organizations must specify systems to promote these leader activities, monitor the implementation of the systems, and assess the effectiveness of the systems.

Systems to promote effective safety leadership include:

- Providing managers with ongoing safety leadership skills training.
- Assessing managers' safety leadership skills.
- Specifying the requirement to include safety in business plans.
- Requiring managers to visit worksites to discuss safety with frontline employees.
- Creating processes to facilitate two-way communication between managers and frontline workers.

Systems to monitor implementation include:

- Inclusion of leadership assessment in regular safety audits.
- Safety culture system audit that assess the existence and implementation of processes to promote a positive safety culture.

The effectiveness of these systems can be assessed by:

- Surveying employees on their perceptions of leaders' commitment to safety.
- Conducting a safety culture assessment.

**Key points:**

- Leaders shape the safety culture directly and indirectly.
- Leaders should send clear signals to convince employees of their commitment to safety.
- Consistency within and across managers is essential.
- A systematic approach to promoting effective safety leadership is essential.

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<sup>i</sup> Lekka, Chrysanthi and Healey, Nicola. (2012) *A review of the literature on effective leadership behaviours for safety*. London : Health and Safety Executive Books,.

<sup>ii</sup> Fleming, M. and Scott (2013) *Safety culture and leadership: Implications for regulators*. Report published for the IRF.

<sup>iii</sup> Spence, M. (2002). Signaling in retrospect and the informational structure of markets. *American Economic Review*, 92(3), 434-459.