

SAFETY LEADERSHIP

THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE IN LEADING A
SAFETY CULTURE

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Safety Leadership: The Role of the Executive in Leading a Safety Culture

Constraining your People or Empowering Them?

In today's rapidly evolving world, leaders are defined not by the controls they impose but by how effectively they empower others. Bill Gates once said that in this century, true leaders are those who empower their people. Tom Peters echoed this sentiment, emphasising that leadership is about nurturing and enhancing the capabilities of others. This idea profoundly impacts how we view safety leadership. Safety leadership isn't about rigid control or micromanagement—it's about empowering individuals to act safely in their environments.

You don't manage safety, you lead people.

This distinction is vital to understand.

Peter Drucker's words ring true: much of what we call "management" actually makes it harder for people to do their jobs. When you manage safety as a checklist of rules and procedures, you may inadvertently create barriers to safe and efficient work. Instead, safety leadership is about guiding, supporting, and trusting your team to integrate safety into everything they do.

Safety management often focuses on constraint and control, telling people what not to do and when not to do it. This might seem practical, but it's based on an underlying assumption—that you, the leader, know exactly what "unsafe" behaviour looks like.

But do you? Real safety leadership means recognising that work and its associated risks are always evolving. People on the frontlines, the ones actually doing the work, are often the best at understanding these risks and managing them in real time. By empowering your team to identify hazards and make safe choices, you shift from a model of constraint to one of enablement.

The Complexity of Work: Balancing Competing Goals

When you examine the day-to-day tasks your team undertakes, you'll likely find that they are constantly balancing multiple, sometimes contradictory, goals. These could include meeting production deadlines, adhering to safety procedures, or managing limited resources—all while navigating the expectations you and your organisation have set. Over time, workers develop methods to cope with these demands. This ability to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and conflict is where true expertise lies, and it is invaluable to your organisation.

Your role as a safety leader isn't to know every detail about how work gets done.

But to appreciate and trust the people who do.

Safe organisations are those whose leaders defer to the expertise of those on the frontlines. High-reliability organisations (HROs), for instance, are often held up as models for their commitment to operational awareness and respect for the people who directly handle safety-critical processes. Leaders in these organisations understand that they don't have all the answers, but they know who does, and they engage with those people to guide decision-making.

In HROs, decision-making power often "migrates" to where the expertise resides—on the shop floor, in the field, or wherever the work is being done. This approach requires humility from leadership. Instead of exerting top-down control, HRO leaders push decision-making authority to the experts, creating a culture where the people closest to the risks have the power to manage them effectively. By doing so, they encourage and instil a sense of ownership and accountability among workers, which not only enhances safety but also strengthens overall operational resilience.

Empowering Your People: A Blueprint for Safety Leadership

True safety leadership is about creating the right conditions for your people to make safe choices, rather than dictating their every move. John Quincy Adams once said that if your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader. This philosophy is at the core of effective safety leadership. Your goal should be to enhance the capabilities of your team, enabling them to handle their work safely and with confidence.

Sidney Dekker, a renowned scholar in safety science, builds on this by encouraging leaders to adopt a more nuanced approach to leadership. His principles emphasise learning from incidents, understanding the complex nature of human work, and respecting the expertise of frontline workers. Dekker argues that leadership is about humility and learning—leaders must listen to their teams, value their input, and be open to new ways of thinking about safety. This means shifting from a blame-oriented mindset to one focused on systemic issues and continuous improvement.

Resilient organisations

Those that can adapt, learn, and recover from mistakes

One of Dekker's key insights is the idea of "resilience" in safety. Resilient organisations are not those that avoid failure altogether but those that can adapt, learn, and recover from mistakes. As a leader, your role is not to create an environment where mistakes are impossible but to build a system that can respond to challenges without collapsing. This requires empowering your people to identify and manage risks in real time and fostering a culture of open communication where safety concerns can be freely expressed.

The Importance of Humility in Leadership

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Perhaps the most important quality a safety leader can possess is humility. It is the recognition that, as a leader, you do not have all the answers. You must trust your team's expertise and remain open to learning from them. This doesn't mean abdicating responsibility for safety; it means leading in a way that values input from every level of the organisation.

Where knowledge and experience are respected

engagement in safe behaviours increases and there is a willingness to identify risks.

This idea of "deference to expertise" is critical. If leaders assume they know best and shut down input from those on the ground, they risk creating blind spots that can lead to disasters. This has been seen in several high-profile incidents, such as the BP Texas City refinery explosion and NASA's Columbia Space Shuttle disaster. In both cases, leadership failed to listen to technical experts, and the results were catastrophic.

Learning from High-Profile Failures: The Risks of Ignoring Expertise

Consider the BP Texas City refinery explosion in 2005, which claimed 15 lives and injured over 180 people. One contributing factor was BP's decision to eliminate thousands of jobs, including many experienced engineers. This outsourcing of critical technical expertise weakened the organisations ability to manage complex safety risks. BP's leadership focused heavily on cost-cutting and efficiency, but they failed to listen to the warnings of their technical experts—people who understood the operational risks better than anyone else.

A similar dynamic occurred at NASA leading up to the Columbia disaster in 2003. Years of prioritising management and budgetary concerns over technical expertise left the organisation vulnerable to safety failures. In the aftermath, investigators concluded that NASA's management failed to consult with engineers who had raised concerns about the integrity of the shuttle's thermal protection system. This "blind spot" in leadership—focusing on bureaucratic goals over technical realities—contributed to the loss of the shuttle and its crew.

These incidents serve as powerful reminders that leadership cannot be about control alone. The best safety leaders are those who defer to expertise, encourage open communication, and create a culture where safety concerns can be raised without fear of retribution.

Truly effective safety leadership

Your goal should be to enhance the capabilities of your team, enabling them to handle their work safely and with confidence.

Learning from high-profile failures like the Texas City Refinery explosion and NASA's Space Shuttle accidents demonstrates the critical importance of listening to expertise. These incidents highlight how overlooking the knowledge and insights of front-line workers and technical experts can lead to catastrophic consequences. Truly effective safety leadership is not about control or knowing all the answers—it's about empowering your team by deferring to those who understand the complexities of daily operations. By valuing and leveraging the expertise within your workforce, you enhance their ability to navigate risks, make informed decisions, and handle their work safely and confidently, ultimately building a stronger, more resilient safety culture.

Culture. What Does this Mean in Your Organisation?

All of this leads us to perhaps the most challenging aspect of safety leadership: culture. Culture is the hardest part of any organisation to change because it isn't something that can be imposed from the top down. It is created by the interactions, behaviours, and beliefs of everyone in the organisation, from the boardroom to the factory floor. Culture isn't something an organisation has—it's something an organisation does. Culture is the result of the collective actions, decisions, and attitudes of its people, and it evolves continuously.

The Toughest Part of Business to Change

But arguably the Most Valuable

Changing a safety culture is a complex, ongoing process, but it is also the most valuable investment an organisation can make. A strong safety culture isn't just about reducing accidents or complying with regulations—it's about building a resilient, adaptive organisation that can thrive in the face of challenges. And while safety is an obvious focus, the lessons learned in building a strong safety culture apply to all aspects of business. Whether it's safety, innovation, or customer service, a positive culture drives performance, fosters engagement, and creates long-term success.

In conclusion, culture may be the hardest part of your business to change, but it is also the most valuable. By encouraging a culture of humility, respect for expertise, and open communication, you create the conditions for not only a safer workplace but a more successful and resilient organisation overall. Embrace the principles of safety leadership, empower your team, and remember that in today's world, true leadership lies in empowering others to perform at their best.

If you're ready to take your safety leadership to the next level, our professional services can guide you in building a high-performing safety culture. Reach out to us today to learn how we can help.



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