



Stepping Up Your Safety Culture

By [Robert Pater](#) Jan 01, 2009

Become an obstacle remover. Look around; ask others; think through what snags, however minor; encourage safer actions and performance.

So you want to improve your safety culture? Boost employee engagement, activate visible management leadership, heighten attention to safety, see all embrace personal safe behavior? Set a high-level baseline of awareness, judgment, and actions? Even when others know they're not being closely observed?

Here are some proven leadership ways to make this happen, from A to J. All proven, all practical; all necessitate continuous application:

A. Begin by identifying your current level of culture. In a [previous Breakthrough Strategies column](#), I outlined four levels of safety cultures. As a first step, dispassionately determine which culture is currently yours. Then, focus on moving to the next level. You can accomplish this by “dressing for the job you want, not the one you have.” In other words, adopt one or more characteristics of the just-higher culture, even to a small degree. Arguably, attitude is a significant component to culture; you can best change attitude by engaging in successful actions. And in the back of your mind, know where the center of the bull's-eye lies—where each organizational member sees safety as personal, with high-level autopilot.

B. Scope out obstacles to stepping up. Organizational changemaster Kurt Lewin found leaders were more likely to develop sustaining improvements by reducing forces that blocked higher performance, rather than pushing for more improvements. Become an obstacle remover. Look around; ask others; think through what snags, however minor; encourage safer actions and performance.

C. Develop a professional relationship with as high up the Executive chain as possible. A manager who believes in Safety—and these are becoming more plentiful—is someone you can learn from and work with in tandem for planning strategic change. Someone who'll sponsor and spearhead new initiatives—or find a colleague to further enlist.

D. Employ scissors change. While significant cultural change requires top-down approval and resource allocation, it's critical to simultaneously elevate employee leadership. (See my article, [“Developing Next-Level Leadership Power.”](#))

E. Enlist the principle of cognitive dissonance. Get naysayers and resisters involved early in new initiatives, even if only to critique ideas, participate in shared fact-finding, or in setting leading indicators. This gives you early information you can use in planning and fresh eyes. It reduces resistance and boosts buy-in.

F. Introduce breakthrough interventions. Those that bring new perspective and excitement can be readily applied to work and home applications and are strongly participative.

Retire tired programs. Decide carefully whom you bring in from outside to have impact on your Executives and line staff.

If you want higher-level cultural performance, you have to incorporate the right different interventions. Energy is high-test fuel for cultural takeoffs. Go beyond merely proscribing safety policies; instead, encourage the approach, “safety helps me live with more energy, effectiveness, getting things done that are important to me.”

G. Look for—and step through—Areas of Opportunity. Distinguish between different kinds of strategic piloting. For example, if you’ve arrived at an intervention you assess might drive your culture higher, don’t do the “typical” pilot in the areas or business unit that needs it most. (There is a place for this in determining whether worst-case sites can be elevated.) But to move up in culture, get local/internal data and positive response by piloting this initiative in the most receptive area that already has strong support in place for reinforcement.

H. Nurture promising interventions and help them succeed. Don’t let fate or distracted leadership allow promising-but-newly planted initiatives to wither from inadequate care. Do what you can to make new growth successfully root and flourish through the above methods and more.

I. Look for and acknowledge heroes on all levels. Seek and provide recognition for managers, supervisors, and line staff who exemplify those qualities and actions of higher-level safety culture on which you are focused. For example, if you’re focused on building engagement, internally publicize the worker who voluntarily leads a monthly meeting on home safety; likewise, the Executive who took time to attend, even briefly, that same meeting.

J. Develop no more than three cultural safety objectives and make sure everyone knows these. Don’t overspread. Select the most significant activities you wish to see happen (all should be aspects of next-level culture); review these, and continuously remind others about your progress. When it’s acknowledged you’ve made good progress toward one goal, you can move a different one into the high priority “Safety three.”

Sports teams with a mediocre or even losing history can become winners through a watchful and strategic building process. Safety Culture change is even easier to accomplish and is happening all the time, worldwide, right now as you read this. With a simple and systematic approach, you can help step your Safety Culture up to significantly higher levels.

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