[¶36-203] Authentic leadership and the impact on health and safety outcomes

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Liz is an experienced executive and non-executive director with strong governance, leadership, safety and organisational culture expertise. For the past 21 years, Liz has been a Director of SafetyWorks Group, a leading Australian Safety and Wellbeing consultancy and specialist in Safety Governance, Due Diligence and Leadership Culture Change. Liz also co-founded the Executive Safety Exchange, bringing together senior executives and Board Directors from leading Australian companies to build excellence in Due Diligence and Safety Governance.

Liz is a non-executive Director on the Board of Uniting NSW/ACT and is a member of the Hunter Region Committee of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. She has held previous Board and Chair roles with a range of For-profit and Not-for-profit organisations. She is a Fellow of both the Governance Institute of Australia and the Australian Institute of Company Directors. She has lectured (sessional) in the bachelor and post-graduate degrees in Health and Safety at the University of Newcastle.

Liz was a speaker at the Australian Institute of Health and Safety Conference *Power & Politics* held in June 2020. The Journal was a media invitee. She spoke on the subject of *Leadership: Authentic Leadership — The Power of Relationships*.

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Some leaders fail

Question: Is it true 50%–60% of leaders fail in business?

Response: That is an interesting question, and very relevant when you are considering the impact of leadership on safety and wellbeing outcomes. There is actually considerable research by prolific leadership researchers, such as Professor Henry Mitzberg, Joyce Hogan, Robert Hogan, and many others on the subject of leadership and in particular leadership failure. Significantly these leadership studies have shown, that even where people are technically very capable, where leaders exhibit traits that typically lead to poor relationships with others, they had a significant chance of failing as a leader.

Hogan et al.[1],[2], suggest that it is actually as high as 50%–75% of leaders who are failing in leadership. These leaders are often bright, hardworking, ambitious and technically competent and are failing (or are in danger of failing) because they are perceived as: arrogant, vindictive, over-controlling, insensitive, untrustworthy, abrasive, selfish, aloof, unable to delegate, etc. These are the characteristics that we would typically associate with poor relationships with others and ultimately, as the evidence suggests poor leadership.

Poor leadership effects on OHS

Question: What is the impact of poor leadership on OHS?

Response: My experience has certainly been that when you see poor leadership, you see associated poor health, safety and wellbeing outcomes. Some interesting studies in the airline and health industries have shown that there is a significant correlation between error rates and those personality traits which are associated with poor leadership.

For example, Thomas Chidester[3] and colleagues studied the personality traits of airline captains in the 1990s and found that the number and severity of errors made by captains is significantly correlated with the personality of the captain. The research found that captains who were perceived as warm, friendly, self-

confident, and agreeable and had a positive relationship with the crew had the fewest errors. In contrast, those who had most errors — were captains who were perceived as arrogant, hostile, boastful, egotistical and dictatorial, and having a poor relationship with those around them.

Similar studies have been undertaken of surgeons, including a study[4] reported in June 2019 linking increased patient complications in patients where surgeons behaved unprofessionally around their colleagues. A range of characteristics of unprofessional behaviour were identified and found to include aspects, such as unclear and disrespectful communication, lack of integrity and failure to follow through on professional responsibilities.

The airline and health industry studies provide us some insights as to the impact of poor leadership on safety outcomes. Delving into the studies and examples provided, what comes up over and over again is the reluctance of people to speak up when they notice or are concerned about an error or mistake. This is a significant issue for leaders.

Typically in those instances where leaders have a poor relationship with others, people are much less likely to speak up, share concerns about hazards or risks; make suggestions for improvement; or engage in the activities and strategies being developed. Poor leadership and poor relationships are often typified by people who do not like or respect their leaders. When this is the case, the likelihood of them applying discretionary effort, or taking on board feedback, either positive or negative, is usually limited or non-existent.

Key leadership assets

Question: Is it hard technical input that people are looking for in a leader or something more?

Response: Good relationships are key. Essentially, a leader's capacity to influence and make a positive change on others where there is a poor relationship, at best will be limited and at worst, non-existent.

In the 30+ years I have been working in health and safety, what has been absolutely consistent from my perspective in making the biggest impact on worker safety and wellbeing is authentic leadership together with genuine employee involvement and engagement. Clearly, these two things are strongly interconnected. It is impossible to effectively engage and involve workers without genuine, authentic leadership.

"Authentic" leadership

Question: What identifies an authentic and successful leader who gives positive influence?

Response: I think this quote by Lance Secretan[5] captures the idea of authenticity very well: "Authenticity is the alignment of head, mouth, heart, and feet — thinking, saying, feeling, and doing the same thing — consistently. This builds trust, and followers love leaders they can trust".

In essence, trust is believing that the person who is trusted will do what is expected. It is the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something. When people trust and have that positive relationship with someone, their willingness to step up and go above and beyond for them is significantly increased.

Aubrey C. Daniels[6], a world-leading behavioural leadership specialist, defines the measure of a leader as being evidenced in the behaviour of the followers. He suggests that the marks of successful leaders can be seen where people (followers) deliver discretionary behaviour directed towards the leader's goals, make sacrifices for the leader's cause, reinforce or correct others towards the leader's goals, and set their own behaviours based on their perceived estimate of what the leader would approve or disapprove. So, to answer your question, what identifies an authentic and successful leader who gives positive influence, specifically around health, safety and wellbeing? It is one where you see evidence of people engaging in safe and healthy workplace practices, consistently. Not because they have to, but because they want to. Even when no one is watching. Those leaders will inspire people to have conversations with each other, which encourages people when they are engaging in positive safety and wellbeing practices, and have the skills and confidence to stop and effectively correct people who are exposed to risk.

We know that the most successful safety practices are those where the enormous knowledge and expertise of workers is tapped into in a genuine and meaningful way. Given this, it is reasonable for us to conclude that this is most likely to occur where people have a positive relationship and trust their leaders.

The question is, how do leaders achieve this? What are the behaviours of an authentic and successful leader? I suggest people look around them to those leaders that they are most inspired by and think about the leadership behaviours they see in them. The typical leadership behaviours[7] that are known to help create an authentic and successful leader include:

- significant time in self-reflection, seeking feedback and personal development
- clearly articulating vision
- showing genuine care for others
- creating an environment of trust
- demonstrating transparency, honesty and integrity
- standing up for others
- giving both positive and constructive feedback
- encouraging people to speak up and share ideas
- consistency between what they say and do.

As with the research studies I referred to earlier, people rarely talk about their technical capabilities, their qualifications or their work history. What tends to be important is the way these people make us feel, how genuine they are and their authenticity.

Communicating bad news as a leader

Question: How should leaders effectively give bad feedback?

Response: Rather than "bad" feedback I would suggest that leaders, from time to time, need to give constructive feedback or feedback focused on shaping behaviour. There are some key and important components to being able to do this effectively. First and foremost, leaders who are most effective at giving constructive feedback are those that have already established a positive relationship with those that they are trying to influence. Where they have been able to demonstrate consistently over time that they care about the safety and wellbeing of others in a genuine and authentic way; where they have established a trust relationship.

The optimal approach to giving constructive or shaping feedback is taking an inquiry or coaching style. Utilising this style, conversations are focused on engaging the person in the solution as much as possible. It is not about telling, but rather trying to understand why it is happening, and finding solutions for improvement. It is about asking questions to understand. In most instances, it is true to say that people's behaviour makes sense to them. By engaging the person in the conversation, you are more likely to fully understand their reasons and ultimately gain better and more sustainable outcomes.

Giving constructive or shaping feedback should always focus on the behaviours; that is, what is being done or said that requires changing. The more objective and specific the feedback, the more readily it is likely to be accepted by the feedback receiver. When we tell people to "act more safely" or "take more care" — it really does not help people understand what specifically they are doing that is putting them in harm's way or what they need to do more of, less of, or differently. Using some way to test that what you are talking about is fact based rather than your subjective opinion is helpful with this. Some of the things you can do to check whether you are being clear and objective is to ask yourself whether what you are describing is observable, specific and reliable (would other people agree it has or has not happened)?

The critical piece of effective constructive feedback is to look for and recognise when the behaviour has improved or changed. It is a step that is often forgotten and often has a negative impact on people changing consistently over time. Encouraging positive behaviours is an important trait of impactful leaders. Leaders who are highly effective in giving constructive or shaping feedback, typically find that the person they are giving the feedback to appreciate the feedback, will typically change the behaviour consistently over time, and often seek out the leader for feedback in the future.

A leader authentically relating to OHS

Question: What should a leader work on in terms of their own relationship to OHS to facilitate trust from workers? How can a leader evaluate their own relationship with safety?

Response: That is a great question, and one, from my experience many overlook. A key relationship that has a significant impact on our capacity to influence others is our own relationship with safety and wellbeing. As we talked about earlier, people are influenced most effectively when they believe leaders are genuine, when they trust them and they see them as authentic. If a leader is inconsistent between their words and actions, people quickly see this, and their capacity to be influenced by that leader is significantly impacted.

A leader who has a positive relationship with safety and wellbeing will be consistent in their safety and wellbeing words and actions, they will incorporate safe and wellbeing practices into their every day. It is not that they necessarily talk about it a lot, although likely they do — but that it can be seen, they genuinely believe that it is the right thing to do, and their actions support this. They are typically highly visible, and incorporate safety and wellbeing into all that they do, both at work and at home.

Leaders can evaluate their own safety and wellbeing practices by reflecting on their daily practices. They could consider how often they do things such as: being distracted by their phone, for example texting while walking or touching their phone while driving; walk past behaviours that are exposing people to risk without stopping and having a conversation; work excessive hours; drive while fatigued; fail to respond to an issue being raised or fail to take the time to encourage people who are working safely; incorporate safety and wellbeing discussions in a genuine way during meetings. The challenge for leaders is to genuinely reflect on how they are "showing up" in relation to safety leadership behaviours and to reflect on how others may see this.

One aspect that significantly affects our personal relationship with safety is being clear about what we stand for. In doing that — understanding our "why" is important. In our business and for me personally, our why is valuing people to create freedom of choice. Freedom of choice comes when we can go home safe and well every day to the things we love; it gives us the ability to choose how we spend our time; and who we spend it with. This purpose drives everything I do and our team does. And underpinning our why, are our values — for us it is authenticity, caring for others and curiosity — these help us make decisions about leading safe and healthy lives.

If you are clear on your "why" and your values — you can be clear on what you stand for. When we are clear on what you stand for — this will have a strong influence on the way you are being. This level of authenticity is critical in effective relationships and ultimately in having a positive influence on those around us.

Compliance vs commitment

Question: How can a leader switch an environment in the workplace from compliance to commitment? What is the difference? Does one lead to the other?

Response: When we see organisations or leaders taking a compliance approach, what we typically see is an environment focused on following the rules, often without much consideration on the impact on people, or the effectiveness or appropriateness of those rules. In this environment people often do things to avoid punishment, breaking rules if they think they can get away with it, and safety typically only being a priority when other things are not. In this environment, people typically comply because they "have to".

In a compliance only environment, when we rely on compliance for compliance sake, we often see rebound behaviours occurring. Things such as:

- bare minimum performance
- avoidance
- game playing (technically, setting up getting even behaviours, etc)
- aggression; both passive and overt.

These are the behaviours which are not consistent with positive influence, nor with positive safety and wellbeing outcomes.

In contrast, in a commitment environment, we see people thinking about and managing risk exposure; working safely because they look for and recognise exposure and are committed to improvement. In this environment, people typically work safely even when no one is watching because it is a core value. In essence, they comply because they "want to".

We know that compliance and commitment are both necessary. But compliance needs to come from commitment, not avoidance of negative consequences.

It is very difficult to influence others to be committed if the relationship you have with them is poor, or the approach you take is focused on compliance.

Not surprisingly, in order to change from compliance focused leadership towards commitment focused leadership there is a need for authentic and committed leadership. As we have described, leaders need to be clear about their "why", what they stand for; be consistent between what they say and what they do; back it up and follow through with consistent positive interactions with others; and have a significant focus on recognising and providing reinforcement for positive safe and wellbeing behaviours.

The level of relationship we have with others, and how we are being, affects what we can accomplish with them. If we have a strong relationship with others (working in sync with each other) then this will optimise what we accomplish together, and can create a commitment environment.

Impactful visible leadership

Question: What does impactful visible safety leadership look like?

Response: Great question. In essence, influence starts within us all. It is only once we have built a positive relationship that we can begin to effectively influence and have an impact on others. I would suggest some common impactful visible safety leadership behaviours include:

> • having a clear and well-articulated personal commitment to safety and wellbeing
> • being consistent between words and actions at all times
> • getting personally involved, often
> • always focusing on the safety and wellbeing of your people first, demonstrating you care
> • constantly engaging with your people and encouraging participation in safety and wellbeing. Recognising your people are usually the experts in what you do, and usually have the solutions
> • integrating safety and wellbeing into all parts of your business
> • constantly looking out for and managing risk exposure; helping to remove barriers to safety and wellbeing
> • looking for and frequently recognising positive safety and wellbeing behaviours and contributions
> • creating a learning environment where it is normal and encouraged to monitor how you are going, challenge the "green" and embrace the "red"; and focusing on how you learn for improvement.

Impactful visible safety leadership requires action. And it typically requires time. But that time will come back many times over through the discretionary effort that comes from people when they are working with effective, visible leaders.

Putting OHS into the risk conversation

Question: What practices contribute to a high-quality conversation? How can you incorporate OHS into discussion with other managers or bring attention to risk without being too directive?

Response: There are some important practices that contribute to high-quality conversation, many I am sure your readers are familiar. My top tips for high-quality conversations include:

> • Using "I" statements tends to reduce the probability of people getting defensive. They also allow you to demonstrate concern and avoid apportioning blame. Avoid statements such as "you must" or "you should".
> • Use fact-based, objective descriptions. Do not try to guess intent and avoid generalising such as "you are really at risk". Describe what safe or at-risk behaviours you saw. For example, "I was watching you load that pallet and you were twisting at the waist instead of pivoting with your feet". The more specific it is, the less it feels like a personal attack. Feedback should never label a person as safe or at risk, but rather should focus on particular behaviours.
> • Any statement you want to make can be turned into a question. The more you engage the person in the conversation, the greater likelihood of an effective outcome and co-ownership of the issue or concern.

• Your tone of voice and body language should always demonstrate concern and be consistent with your message. Avoid sarcasm. Avoid sounding accusatory. It is important to remember the goal is to help create improvement.
• It is important to ask if there were any barriers (eg "Was there anything preventing you from pivoting with your feet?") and what you could do to help remove those barriers.
• Unless it is obvious, discuss the impact of the behaviour (eg I am worried that twisting like that repeatedly can really do harm to your back).
• Attend to the verbal and nonverbal cues of your listeners. Look for signs that they do not understand your message and clarify your message as necessary.
• Keep corrective conversations positive and about the future.
• If you have noticed improvement, it is important to let people know. Recognise and reward positive behaviours often.

There are literally opportunities everywhere to incorporate OHS into discussions. An important conversation opportunity is from a more senior leader to personnel who directly report to them (those who typically also have direct reports). Some quality questions in this context may include:

• What has been working well with safety and wellbeing in your team?
• What is it that you are doing well to influence these things to happen?
• What is the impact you are having?
• How do you feel about that?
• What do you need to do more of or differently?

These questions are focused on inquiry mode — they are not about finding fault or blame — they are questions which engage the person in the conversation and encourage others to contribute. The stronger the underpinning relationship you have with others, the more effective the discussion is likely to be.

A place where people often slip into a more directive approach rather than an inquiry approach is where there is something of concern to be discussed. Focusing on an inquiry approach may include questions such as:

• How do you check in with others to see if they are okay?
• What are the critical risk controls in your area? What is your sense of their effectiveness?
• How would you minimise exposure to …hazard?
• What could you do to eliminate…risk?
• How would you do XYZ job safely?
• What information might you need to further reduce the risk?
• What challenges are you experiencing?
• What do we need to do about it?
• Who else needs to be in the loop?
• Who needs to do what to reduce the risk?
• When shall we check in?
• What do we need to do differently?
• What has shown up on your most recent audit?

Asking about processes and systems

Question: What kind of questions can be asked by senior leaders in the field in relation to processes and systems?

Response: This is a question I am often asked. Senior leaders often have the desire to increase their visibility, but feel concerned that they are not being authentic. The reality is, the person in the field will often know a great deal more about the specific activities and risks in their roles than the senior leader. So, the discussions of senior leaders could actually focus more around process and systems such as you have suggested. Some suggestions in this context may include:

• What successes are you having with the existing processes and systems?
• What could we do to have these processes/systems be successful across the business?

• What are some of the barriers you are experiencing with this particular system or process? And what are you and your group doing to remove these barriers?
• How could managers and senior leaders potentially assist you to remove these barriers?
• What are some of the challenges you think we face on this project around health, safety and wellbeing?
• How do you rate the existing safety culture with the groups that you work with?
• What advice could you provide me with about the way that we are progressing with the cultural change strategy?

The reality is, many people enjoy receiving time and attention from their leaders, and enjoy the opportunity to talk. Authentic and impactful leaders, who create opportunities for people to share their thoughts in a trusted environment, will be rewarded with great information and insights from those around them, and ultimately great outcomes in safety and wellbeing.

Views expressed in this interview are those of the interviewee as at 9 July 2020 in response to questions posed by the Journal. Letters to the Editor expressing opinions on topics subject to interview are welcome and will be published in the next Issue of the Journal subject to normal editorial review and protocols.

Footnotes

1   Hogan R, Curphy GJ and Hogan J. What we know about leadership: effectiveness and personality. Am Psychol. 1994;49(6):493–504.

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