



## What Is Your Safety Management Style?

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Thu, 2014-11-13 11:29

Your designated management style can help shape the safety performance of your workforce.

Does your organization designate a particular style of management they desire and promote for safety? Strategically thinking organizations often do. Sometimes the "official" style of management for the overall organization is applied to safety, and sometimes safety has its own style.

Whichever way you choose, your designated management style can help shape the safety performance of your workforce. In fact, defining what excellent worker performance might look like can help you determine which management style can help you achieve your goals.

Worker performance goals should parallel organizational goals and strategy. Don't hesitate because your view of success might change as the workforce matures or evolves. Management style can change with shifting needs and realities; just picture what success would look like in the near future. If your main goals include tight control of worker behaviors, increased engagement, teambuilding or continuous improvement, then certain management styles can help.

**Control** – If you have a new work team, an acquisition or merger workforce or a historically difficult-to-manage group of workers, your goal (at least in the short term) might be better supervisory control. Prescribing an authoritative management style might help you accomplish this goal, but don't get caught in the limited thinking that control is all about enforcement and punishment. There are many other techniques for establishing authority, and ultimately, control.

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is being a great leader,  
but leading great people.*

A clear definition of decision rights – where only supervisors or leaders can make key decisions in the workplace – can help establish authority. Delegation of tasks also clearly can define who assigns and who carries out work. In close cultures, authority can be more family-oriented than position-dictated. Many organizations have tight controls with an almost paternalistic management style.

**Engagement** – If your goal is to get your workers more engaged in safety, authoritative management styles will work against you. Workers tend to do only as they are told, rather than stepping up and taking personal initiative. What will work is a more collaborative style of management. However, it is critical to define the type of engagement you desire.

**Buy-in** – If you want workers to simply buy in, your management style will need to take on a marketing approach in which you sell workers on the importance of safety and a particular approach to make it happen. Organizations taking this approach often make use of a strategy that puts a human face on safety. They

downplay the statistics and stress the human impact of safety. Excellent safety makes for better quality of life, while poor safety creates suffering and hardships for both workers and their families. Supervisors become the medium through which the safety message constantly is delivered and reinforced.

**Participation** – If you want workers actively to participate in safety, the participative role should be clearly defined. There is a great difference between serving on a safety committee, becoming a safety representative or doing behavioral observations. The role of the worker needs to change as well as the management style, and both should be reflected in job descriptions and accountability metrics.

**Ownership** – If your desire is to get workers to truly "own" all or part of your safety initiatives, a different management style is needed. This style almost is the diametric opposite of the authoritative style in that it empowers the worker rather than the supervisor. Such a style must be more democratic and delegation must be more complete. Supervisors may need to become facilitators more than bosses and help workers to accomplish their roles in safety.

**Development** – If your strategic objective is to consistently enhance workers' safety knowledge and performance, your management style needs to be a form of coaching. Supervisors need to define their role as a coach and view their work team as the players. The coach should bring the game plan and be engaged in consistently helping each player perform better. Supervisors must encompass the vision that the focus is on their workers' performance, and not their own.

The definition of success no longer is being a great leader, but leading great people. Most supervisors never have received training in performance coaching and this may be a crucial part of accomplishing this management style.

A critical, and often missing, part of many coaching models is the setting of improvement targets. Most safety strategies have a goal to be better than the year before. The way to accomplish this is to target specific improvements in safety and coach them into real performance. Taking on too much at once is a formula for failure in coaching, and often in safety as well.

Targeted improvements make coaching feedback especially effective. It also makes feedback effective since it postures the coach and worker collaboratively working toward an improvement rather than pitting the coach against the player in a policing or authoritative role.

Many organizations have found that supervisors struggle to adopt a coaching management style if their managers don't do the same. This may necessitate training the entire management staff in performance coaching. If upper managers already use a coaching model for their prescribed management style, that same model, or a very similar one, should be the one taught to supervisors and/or leads to ensure that the organizational management style is consistent and reinforced.

Designating a specific management style is a technique that has helped many organizations improve safety performance. It begins with developing a safety strategy that targets a certain kind of safety performance from its workforce.

Once this performance is envisioned, the prescribed management style is designed to promote it. Everyone in the organization who manages others is expected to adopt this style and lead safety performance accordingly. This is an application of Covey's admonition to begin with the end in mind. As the organization's safety performance matures, the prescribed management style might need to change. The most effective safety strategies combine these qualities of targeted performance and flexibility.

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