



## SAFETY LEADERSHIP

### Making the Connection

*Great safety leaders establish relationships as a first step of leadership.*

Terry Mathis | Jun 12, 2019

I recently attended a conference aimed at increasing my skills as a consultant. I attend a few of these each year for my own personal development since most often

the safety conferences I attend are as a speaker rather than to learn. As a frequent presenter I tend to study other speakers to determine what works for them. I realized at this conference that the speakers I enjoyed and learned the most from made me feel like I knew them personally.

Thinking back about other speakers I enjoyed in the past, I found the same thing to be true. I did not simply enjoy their subject matter, but I liked them personally. This seemed strange since I hardly knew them. What did they do to make me feel this way? They did not befriend me or convince me so much as they simply made a connection.

The week after the conference I was working with the CEO of an organization who had just acquired a new company. The CEO was an industry expert who had worked wonders with the other companies his organization had acquired. He thought his expertise and reputation would make the employees of the new acquisition pay close attention to his suggestions and directives, but that didn't happen.

I suggested he hold a series of meetings to get to know people and let them get to know him before taking command and spouting orders. By the end of the week I overheard an engineer from the new company tell the CEO, "If anyone else had told me that, I wouldn't have believed them!" What happened? They had made a connection.

Safety leaders and managers use a wide variety of attempted styles of leadership and direction, but very few start with making the connection. After enough time and exposure, the connection may make itself, but I find most safety folks don't make connecting their first priority. Few people in safety are bashful and most think of themselves as a "people person." This makes them comfortable talking to strangers and often hides the fact they have not really connected before trying to influence their workforce.

Ignoring the importance of connecting can also lead to disregarding the importance of inclusion and involvement. Deming wisely stated that people support what they

help create. Yet, most safety efforts are strictly the brainchild of safety professionals or leadership with little to no involvement or input from workers. Getting input and participation from workers not only builds ownership and useful ideas, it also builds connections. When workers work with safety leaders and organizational leaders, they get to know each other. If leaders open themselves up during such interactions, the connections are made more quickly and effectively.

It is a proven fact that human beings tend to react emotionally before they react logically. Yet we tend to lead off with logic and then, maybe, we follow up with examples or stories that can get emotional reactions. This is backwards. Great leaders often establish relationships as a first step of leadership. It is possible to force or intimidate without making a connection. It is virtually impossible to influence lasting improvement without connecting first.

There are three epiphanies leaders often have as they progress toward operational safety excellence:

- First, they realize that you do not become great simply by being a great leader. You become great by leading great people. This is especially true in safety where performance is measured by the outcomes of the workforce, not just the leaders.
- Second, they realize that forced change is almost always temporary. Permanent change comes from within, and leaders who inspire workers to change and improve do not do so with force or intimidation. They do it with a level of influence that is not possible between disconnected people.
- Third, they discover that effective communication is not necessarily eloquent or perfect, it is simply believable. It is hard to believe someone with whom you have no real connection. There must be a level of experience and trust that causes you to put aside doubt and accept the message.

Great consultants focus on building relationships as well as delivering effective service and advice. People may recognize your expertise, but they connect with you

as a person. Certainly, substandard performance cannot be tolerated simply because you have a connection. But, likewise, when more expertise is needed, people tend to look for good past relationships, not just successful projects.

If consultants or leaders are assessing existing programs and/or culture, connecting with workers is always necessary. If interviews are going to be honest and revealing, a connection must be made almost immediately. Fear and distrust must be abated for a connection to be made. Workers can be alarmed by non-routine activities and may be reluctant to give open and candid information unless they trust how the information will be used or have a strong connection to the interviewer. The ability to connect quickly with an unknown audience is a necessary skill for an effective assessor and interviewer.

In some parts of the world, the relationship is the dominant determinant of selecting a consultant or a new employee. The cultural fit is considered of utmost importance as long as the skill and ability are adequate for the job. Such workforces not only connect to the boss, but to each other. Several organizations profile the interpersonal styles of prospective candidates for positions in leadership teams to ensure that they can connect with the other team members and will exercise similar management styles.

When coaching executives, they often tell me it is not important for workers to like them but to respect and follow them. If leaders and workers truly connect, liking and respecting are not mutually exclusive. Why not get both?

**Source URL:** <https://www.ehstoday.com/safety-leadership/making-connection>