

# >> Can Safety Be Led?

## Putting Up the Safety Flag Pole

*A lieutenant is with a sergeant and two privates. Near them is a hole in the ground, a flag pole, several lengths of rope and assorted tools and equipment. What command should the lieutenant give? The correct answer is, "Sergeant, get this flag pole up."*



**I**n the military, there is a clear distinction between those who formulate strategies, those who develop tactics and those who actually carry out the battle plans. In safety, these distinctions are not always clear.

How do leaders lead safety and what do they task to others? Leaders can promote safety and try to control risks, set policies, provide training and establish rules and procedures. They can threaten punishment for non-compliance, ensure that accidents are investigated to determine influences that impact worker choices, identify systems issues that limit workplace behavior and conditions and look for multiple causation of accidents among the myriad elements that make

up processes and the workplace.

But is all this leadership? Can an organization be led into improved safety performance? What can a site manager or corporate officer do to impact the probability that a line worker will or will not get injured on the job? It is not as easy as giving an order to be safe, but not as complicated as personally taking over the job of the safety manager. There is a lot of debate about what constitutes safety leadership, but there also are some concrete guidelines used by successful safety leaders. I would like to offer the following four suggestions for improving the effectiveness of safety leadership:

**Strategy vs. Tactics** – Leaders should be the developers of strategy. They should develop the battle plan to defeat accidents. Remember, failing less is NOT a safety strategy. A strategy is the methodology by which you accomplish a goal. It is not just the goal and it is not the tactical plan to win each battle. The most common goals I hear from leaders are numeric targets for reducing accident rates. That is the mathematical version of "failing less." A strategy should focus safety efforts on particular risks or precautions that could impact a significant percentage of accidents.

Once a strategy is developed, it is critical to let others in the organization help develop the tactics to accomplish it. Deming said, "People support what they help create." If leaders develop the tactics as well as the strategy, they fail to get buy-in from the people who control

the success of their battle plan. If leaders say, "Let's focus on these issues," others should decide how to develop the focus and how to direct the actions of their own teams or business units. Effective leadership is not micromanagement, and following the strategy developed by the safety manager is not leadership.

**Level of Expectation** – Just establishing a focus seldom will accomplish the goal. Levels of expectation are set by consistency and follow-up. If expectations are that instant perfection will be attained, people will dismiss the goal as unrealistic. If expectations are set too low, people will not be motivated to act. More often, however, the level of expectation is realistic but not maintained. If leaders don't stay on message and constantly remind and reinforce, expectations tend to diminish or disappear.

Once a strategy is set, a good leader will ask for periodic progress reports. When progress has been made, the efforts should be positively reinforced. When inadequate or no progress has been made, the level of expectation must be re-established. Everyone must be convinced that this expectation is not going away.

**Visible Caring** – A good general is one who wins the war. He wins by empowering his officers and soldiers win battles. Effective leaders are perceived as deeply caring about success and valuing the contributions of the people involved. Leaders should create an atmosphere of teamwork and winning. People take pride in contributing toward victory and want to be part of a winning team.

An effective safety leader shows leadership in a very visible way. Workers can't see what the leader truly cares about and can't know their thoughts. Plans and priorities must become visible. Constant and effective communication is a trait of such leadership. The goal of this communication is not just the transfer of information, but the recruit-

ment of everyone to join the battle. Good leaders don't just convince; they convert. This can't be accomplished with communication that is infrequent or too distant from the audience. Safety visibly must be led in the field, not just from the office.

**Personal Example** – A principle of both leadership and effective

communication is the importance of personal example. Many great speeches were undone when the speaker did not practice what was preached. Safety practitioners must lead safety. When leaders don't set a personal example for safety, it unravels the message and destroys the credibility of the cause. Commu-

**Encon**<sup>®</sup>  
SAFETY PRODUCTS

# beyond compliance<sup>™</sup>

Tempered Water System



- Operates in conjunction with virtually any 3rd party certified Encon<sup>®</sup> combination shower & eyewash
- The right temperature - right away
- Up to six months of visual check, per ANSI standard

**More info at [www.enconsafety.com/tws3003](http://www.enconsafety.com/tws3003) • 1(800) 283-6266**

Encon<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark of Encon Safety Products, Inc. Houston, TX.

CIRCLE 141 ON READER CARD OR LINK TO THE VENDOR ONLINE AT [WWW.EHSRS.BIZ/40804-141](http://WWW.EHSRS.BIZ/40804-141)

**A successful safety leader shows leadership in a very visible way and delivers constant, effective communication.**

nication happens at several different levels: the word choice, the tone, the body language. Leading by example is perhaps the strongest component of body language. When your words and your example don't match, the message is contradictory.

Workers understand that leaders don't have the same safety challenges they do. They are not expected to take the same precautions in their office that workers take on the job. However, when they visit the floor and fail to wear the PPE required of visitors, it sends the message that they

are not serious. Leaders don't have to be perfect, but they must try to demonstrate that they care.

Safety leadership is an often-misunderstood concept. Many leaders who truly want to make a difference in safety are defeated by their own battle plans, or lack of them. Success in leadership is not measured by the intensity of the effort, but by the effectiveness of the strategy. Following these four guidelines is an effective way to not only get the flagpole in place, but to run up the right banner and rally the troops to victory. **EHS**

Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, recently was named one of the 50 most influential EHS leaders for the second consecutive year by EHS TODAY



magazine. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC and ASSE SeminarFest. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.

**Does Your Breathing Air System Add to the Dangers of Confined Space Entry?**

**When faced with the potential for ignition of volatile vapors, dusts and/or toxins, using Intrinsically safe products are critical**



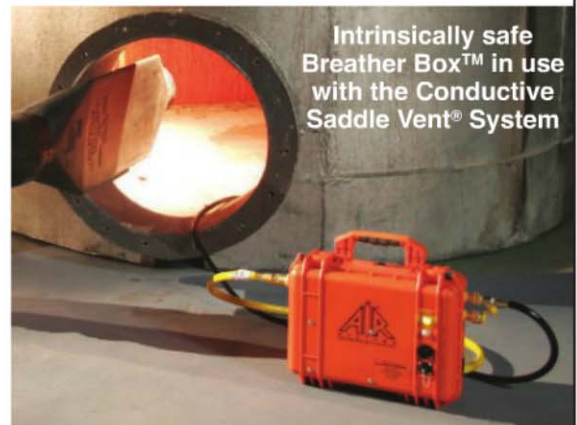
When working in hazardous locations, the Intrinsically Safe Breather Box™ provides portable Grade-D air filtration for up to eight workers while continuously monitoring for carbon monoxide.

The IS Breather Box™ is approved for use in Class I, Division 1, Groups C and D environments. Units are DC (9-Volt) operation only.

Optional oxygen sensor and/or the Auto-Air™ System is available



**For Use In Hazardous Locations**



BB50-COIS

Manufactured by Air Systems International  
 For more information: 1-800-866-8100 or 1-757-424-3967  
[breatherbox@airsystems.com](mailto:breatherbox@airsystems.com) [www.airsystems.com](http://www.airsystems.com)

CIRCLE 142 ON READER CARD OR LINK TO THE VENDOR ONLINE AT [WWW.EHSRS.BIZ/40804-142](http://WWW.EHSRS.BIZ/40804-142)