



## Safety Leadership: Clear Concept ... or Cliché?

Colleagues talk about it all the time. And it's perennially addressed at professional meetings. But have we used the words "safety leadership" so much and so often that they've been scrubbed of any real meaning?

By Evelyn Sacks

**N**o!" say those in the know, and we couldn't agree more. The experts who contributed to this article are consultants whose thought leadership on the topic is actively sought and widely respected. Hopefully their responses to our questions will contribute to your understanding, as well.

### Please Define (and Use in a Sentence)

Definitions abound, but the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) offers one that is focused yet descriptive. "Safety leadership is the process of defining the desired state, setting up the team to succeed, and engaging in the discretionary efforts that drive the safety value."

That definition is accompanied by a recommended set of attributes and activities.

JASON GREGORY

- **Vision.** The effective leader can see what safety excellence looks like and can convey that vision in a compelling way throughout the organization. The leader acts in a way that communicates high personal standards, helps others question and rethink their own assumptions, and describes a safe future.
- **Credibility.** A leader fosters a high level of trust in peers and reports, and is willing to admit mistakes and communicate honestly about safety, even if the message is not popular.
- **Collaboration.** Leaders promote collaboration and cooperation, actively seeking input and encouraging others to implement their decisions and solutions.
- **Communications.** Leaders communicate. They encourage honest and complete feedback. And they keep people informed about safety goals and progress, reaching across the organization.
- **Action.** Leaders are action figures. They address safety proactively. They give timely, thoughtful responses to safety concerns, demonstrate a sense of personal urgency, and focus on delivering results with speed and excellence.
- **Feedback and recognition.** Leaders are responsive to the views of others and recognize their contributions. They find appropriate ways to celebrate accomplishments.
- **Accountability.** Leaders present a fair appraisal of efforts and results, clearly communicate team members' roles, and foster the sense that everyone is responsible for safety.

### Kevin Burns: "Leadership Is an Attitude"

Safety consultant, speaker, and author Kevin Burns ([kevburns.com](http://kevburns.com)) emphasizes that the best definition is one that comes organically from within an organization. He advocates that safety leadership is an attitude, not a position and, as such, advises against using the words leadership and

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management interchangeably. The risk is that when employees perceive leadership as defined by a job title, they may shirk from safety responsibility because they don't think it's their job to be involved.

"A safety cop who fancies himself a safety leader makes a joke of what leadership really is. We've all worked for a manager at some point who had no leadership capacity, but who had position and title, and especially authority." Burns says anyone who believes leadership is embedded in a title looks foolish in the eyes of his or her employees.

Leadership is a shared responsibility. But that doesn't mean duties and tasks are the same at all levels. Burns encourages safety pros to emulate the baseball manager who does not personally field the ball, hit, or run the bases, but who empowers players with the skills and motivation to field, hit, and run. Leaders give team members the tools and guidance to get more hits, which translate into more wins. It's not about preaching the rules and meting out consequences for breaking them, Burns suggests. "A good coach or manager improves the performance of each player within the rules."

#### Trust and Respect

Because leadership is not a function of job title, safety leaders can be found anywhere within an organization—

from the CEO to a first-day employee who holds strong safety values. Leaders influence others by gaining their trust and respect. Burns recalls working for a manager who held every conversation with an employee while seated behind his desk. "He raised his chair to be a little taller than the chair we sat in. Everything happened across the barrier of the desk."

Burns contrasts that boss with a "real leader" at a different workplace. "Every conversation in his office took place at a chair next to the employee. He made everyone feel like an equal part of the team and encouraged us to improve performance."

Anyone can become a safety leader, and leaders attract others. "Focus on the word 'lead,'" Burns says. Those who go first and acknowledge that safety is important to them and demonstrate it through their actions are individuals others will want to follow. Employees want to fit in, so they will follow a strong leader and emulate his or her commitment. Burns clarifies, however, that safety leadership is not about copying what someone else is doing—it's about being authentic, selfless, keeping your word, and advocating for your people.

#### Tips to Inspire

Burns offers these tips to inspire safety professionals' efforts to become better, stronger safety leaders.

## STRATEGY

- **Remember the 2-sales rule.** As a safety professional, you're trying to sell a point of view. And in every sale, there are really two elements—one is selling the salesperson, and the second is selling the idea you want to advance. Trust and respect must be in place before you can sell anyone on your beliefs.
- **Have a personal mission.** Much like an organizational mission statement, safety professionals need to clearly define why they do what they do, and why it matters. Make your personal mission about your employees and not about yourself.
- **Raise your expectations.** Tossing out statistics at a safety meeting is not effective communication. It's noise, says Burns. As a safety leader, you need to be clear about what your people can expect from you. Only then can you articulate what you expect of them. Be consistent and focused in your expectations.

### Shawn Galloway: "There Is No Safety Leadership"

When organizations communicate about leadership, they don't refer to individuals as "ethics leaders" or "production leaders," says Shawn Galloway, president and chief operating

## "CREATE A STRATEGIC AGENDA AND CLEARLY DEFINE WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE."

officer of ProAct Safety (proactsafety.com). In the same way, he maintains, "There's really no such thing as safety leadership. It's just leadership."

Galloway, a prolific author and consultant, has been striving for years to embed safety thinking and practices into business. What's needed today, he says, is to embed business practices into safety organizations.

"I encourage safety leaders to become familiar with business—not just *their* business," he explains. "You want to become an expert in your trade, but you need to understand

strategy, coaching, and value." Read profit and loss statements—immerse yourself in the business of business, he suggests.

Safety leadership is about inspiring people and influencing how they think and what they do to mitigate risk, says Galloway. "If you're really trying to be a great leader, there's no difference between leading in safety, leading in quality, or leading people in general."

What activities define best practice for leaders? Galloway lists these:

- Communicate effectively.
- Coach for performance.
- Focus on value rather than on reducing cost.
- Create a strategic agenda; clearly define what success looks like.
- Think transformationally. If you could achieve one thing that would make the biggest difference, what would that be?
- Maintain positive discontent. Sure, you want to celebrate success, but keep your eye on your next goal.
- Continuously learn.
- Be insatiably curious.
- Lead by not leading; bring others along, then let them take over.

When safety professionals master these, safety performance improves. But so, too, do service, quality, on-time delivery, and other organizational metrics.

Many businesses make the mistake of signing on for a leadership development program, implementing it, crossing their fingers, and hoping it makes a difference. Galloway says they often fail to describe what success looks like, envision how a true leader acts and thinks, and then seek people who resemble that vision. He explains, "I have a client who has about six leadership development efforts going on, so it's no wonder that their people are confused. It's good to bring in new ideas, but not without a definition of where you're trying to go and what a great supervisor or leader looks like."

## Connect in a Way that Matters

**What does a safety leader look like?** There is no one profile and no absolutes, observes safety consultant Kevin Burns. He describes his own leadership style like this: "I don't follow people around with a clipboard and take notes on everything they do. I don't like to make the people I help feel like they are being watched and monitored." Instead, he provides tools and helps employees internalize those tools to achieve a shift in perspective.

Burns speaks with admiration about one exemplary safety leader—an operations manager who oversees an underground mine. "Twice each week he goes 4,800 feet underground and walks the mine, simply to engage each of his people and contractors in conversation. And each conversation turns to safety at some point." The manager has done this for years and has earned the respect and trust of employees as a result. "People connecting with other people in a way that matters? That's leadership," adds Burns.

## EnPro Learning System: “Leadership through Self-Reflection”

EnPro Industries is a collection of diversified industrial companies whose 5,000 employees produce engineered products sold to more than 50,000 customers in over 100 countries.

The company has been widely recognized for safety, so widely that in 2012 EnPro launched EnPro Learning System (ELS, [www.enprolearning.com](http://www.enprolearning.com)), a safety consulting business based on its own winning process. EnPro businesses that were amassing significant injuries in years past are now largely injury-free. And as EnPro has acquired new businesses, they implemented the company’s proven tools and practices, resulting in remarkably improved safety performance within a short time.

ELS Vice President Joe Wheatley says it became clear that the early safety successes were not just lucky developments but were part of a replicable process. Today, EnPro Learning System offers consulting services, courses, and conferences to help other companies on their journey to safety excellence.

Wheatley notes that most organizations seeking to raise the bar on safety typically pursue the tactical route. They institute behavioral-based safety programs, engage in leadership training, create safety action teams, etc. There’s also an over-reliance on rules and regulations.

“When safety performance isn’t good,” says Wheatley, “companies just add more rules and more enforcement, or perhaps they fire someone, and if that doesn’t work they fire someone higher up.” That approach has a “bottom-limiting effect,” promoting a fear-based culture that hinders progress. EnPro discovered that lasting change in safety isn’t about tactics but is a product of cultural transformation. And leadership is a key element in that transformation.

### Take a Look in the Mirror

To develop true safety leaders, ELS urges individuals to engage in serious

self-reflection to evaluate their ethics and approach. They’ve developed a “360” process to get leaders to examine their behavior and communications and to see how their reports view them. The idea is to match employees’ perceptions of leaders with their own self-actualized view.

The process is quite revealing. For example, a safety manager who says he believes that safety is more important than production realizes, upon self-reflection, that while he does hold this priority, he never really talks about. He may come to see that, in fact, he never even points out unsafe conditions as he walks through the plant. The EnPro process

encourages the use of “I” statements, encouraging safety leaders to speak in the first person about their priorities. Leadership flourishes once individuals begin to acknowledge and articulate their own beliefs.

Wheatley has seen instances in which an entire safety management team came to acknowledge that, despite what they believe, they failed to make their views, intentions, and expectations clear to those they were supposed to be leading. This sort of honest appraisal goes a long way with employees, convincing them of a leader’s authenticity and commitment. Achieving a broad and deep view of oneself can have more impact than enforcing rules and focusing on procedures.

### Lessons Learned

Jonathan Neubauer is director of safety and organizational change for EnPro Learning System. Having gone through the same process of self-reflection ELS clients undergo, Neubauer found the experience humbling. He says he came away more aware of how he is perceived as a safety leader. “I [now] know that earlier in my career in EHS I was probably a roadblock due to my desire to be in control of the subject matter.”

He gained an appreciation for supporting the team, rather than on managing safety and health functions. “It’s easy for an EHS manager to roll out a policy, train people, and

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give directives to the workforce.” But the real challenge and the big payoff come when you can relinquish that control and turn it back to your employees.

When thoughtfully addressed and even debated, a big, complex concept like safety leadership does not lose meaning. Rather, it gains depth and substance, becoming a tool for sustainable change. The more sharing of successes, failures, and experiments, the better the chance for meaningfully advancing the practice of worker protection. **SD**

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