

LEADERSHIP AND CULTURAL KEYS TO WORLD-CLASS SAFETY.

Robert Pater, Managing Director, Strategic Safety Associates, PO Box 80161, Portland, OR 97280

How does an organization move towards world-class safety performance?

What are the critical keys to play and the false notes to avoid?

I have had the privilege of working with many organizations I've heard outsiders refer to as having World-class Safety. And I've worked with several other companies that are making significant improvements on their way to the top echelon of safety performance.

With sufficient determination, focused time and the strongest strategic leadership keys, it is possible for most companies to enter the lofty ranks of safety excellence. There's a lot to this - and every company has to clear it's own path. But following are critical elements to include - and those to steer away from - on the way to World-class safety performance.

Motivation to World-class Safety

Interestingly, I've seen several motivations for organizations wishing to attain a level of world-class safety. Recognition is the name of the game for many companies - I suspect they'd be far less motivated if they had world-class performance, but no one "noticed." For example, some organizations that sell business-to-business highlight safety performance in their marketing; we've especially seen this in fields such as the Petroleum industry where safety is highly prized. For example, a large oil service firm may be barred by past or potential clients from bidding on large contracts if their safety record is not considered up to snuff.

Others want to make a statement to their parent company - or to their workers. For example, some executives see getting kudos for safety as a personal feather in their professional bonnet; others hope that strong safety performance might take some heat off less-than-expected profitability numbers.

Still others calculate that achieving some safety status will immunize them from regulating inspections that would otherwise have the potential for disrupting operations (or uncovering hidden problems).

All these reasons make sense. But, in my experience, these "external" motivations rarely produce continuous and growing safety performance on a world-class level. The best safety organizations - the ones where safety seems to be understood and embraced by everyone, where people are never self-satisfied with last year's results - focus on the intrinsic benefits of safety.

In these competitive times, executives rarely seek safety solely because it is "the right thing to do." This is more something safety professionals declare - understandably so. But executives in such world-class organizations think that safety:

1. fits with and reinforces lean processes for lean times

2. generates gains in motivation, receptivity to change and flexibility - all of which are critical to organizational profitability
3. affects retention of best employees, as well as, in some cases, attracting desirable potential hires
4. can heighten organizational control. The CEO of a multi-national company explained to senior managers, “We want to run our company independently – accidents & environmental incidents get government regulators involved & they’ll tell us how to run our business.”
5. is one of the most potentially controllable contributors to profits. Basically, a company can make money three ways: a. boost incomes/sales b. heighten return on investment of retained funds and c. reduce losses. In this competitive age, loss reduction may be the most controllable of these three for many organizations. Referring to point, one CEO said, “Customers aren’t willing to pay for a company’s EHS mistakes – they’ll go elsewhere.”
6. perhaps most importantly, is an indicator of operational excellence and reflects every aspect of organizational strength. One CEO of an conglomerate that relies on acquisition as critical to its growth stated, “The first thing we look for in a potential acquisition is its Safety, Health and Environment record. This indicates how well a company is managed.”

In a similar vein, another CEO said, “To achieve operational excellence, we need to have Safety, Health and Environment excellence & everyone has to be involved.”

Yet another proclaimed, “Safety, Environment and Health should be the first subject of every operational review.”

While managers, unions, employees may disagree about priorities and specific methods, Safety is the one area that everyone (at least verbally) agrees is important. A concentrated focus on safety excellence has the potential to overcome profit-draining conflicts and drive overall organizational strength. Tom Malone, CEO of Baldrige Award-winning Milliken and Company explained at a conference of managers with multi-plant responsibilities, “In plants where leaders makes a real commitment to safety, employees make extraordinary breakthroughs.”

Increasingly, safety excellence can be a critical strategic tool for executives steering their company through maelstroms of change and competition.

Beyond Statistical Seduction

World class safety is more than attaining strong trailing numbers. Certainly, top safety statistics is one way to define world class safety. These numbers have their usage. And, clearly, World Class safety organizations should have strong statistics. But having these - especially for a relatively short term - are not enough to admit entry into the highest echelon of safety performance.

But as they are based on what is “reported”, statistics such as recordables, lost-time injuries and severity rates among others are potentially massagable by a company or executive wishing to put a best foot forward and hide weaknesses short-term. In addition, as a matter of determining safety excellence, top incidence and severity rates:

1. are notably unreliable with international operations, where standards and reporting may be open to different interpretations
2. are after-the-fact and don't lead the way to what it takes to attain excellence.
3. often don't last - and can backfire. Then again, nothing does without continuous effort. Nature tends towards entropy. How many highly profitable bedrock-of-industry companies, lauded in books and articles but a few years ago, are either gone or in newsworthy trouble?

Strong safety numbers can lead to complacency, inattention or arrogance (“We know we're the best; whatever we do is right”). Nature - physical, organizational, human - leads to entropy, breakdown. Not continuing to improve leads to degraded performance. As Lao-Tsu wrote, “That which is not growing is dying.”

Especially when safety is not intrinsically embraced, there is a tendency to equate good numbers with a we've-made-our-mark-let's-move-on-to-what's-really-important mentality.

4. And statistics “lie.” To move from an incident rate of 40 to 20 takes little effort; almost anything that is done that shows concern or attention can help drop these numbers - either through very basic Safety 101 interventions or Hawthorne effect.

Improving from 20 to 10 is not as easy. Same 50% improvement, but the lowest hanging fruit has already been picked.

Going from 10 to 5 is harder.

Moving from 2.5 to 1.25 is even more difficult, 1.25 to 0.63 more so - you're likely dealing with some long-standing habits or procedures that are inertially tough to change.

And even staying at 0.63 can be a significant challenge. At that level of metrics, it may only take one or a handful of slips to dramatically balloon this record.

Usually because they've learned this from experience, the best safety organizations understand it can take greater effort to sustain a strong culture that it can to initially get there. High expectations are critical to behavioral change - but expectations should be of behavior, rather than end results.

5. Statistics may reflect factors that are outside of anyone's control. In an unusually severe Winter, a package delivery company or one with route sales representatives may see a higher than expected rash of slips, trips and falls. I don't believe this temporary change indicates they are no longer a World-class operation - but if tracking short-term numbers is the main

determinant, too-hasty decisions may result in throwing out what's working long-term ("the baby") in lieu of chase-the-trend quick fixes ("the bathwater").

Master gardeners know that to help an apple tree improve the quality and quantity of the fruit it bears, they have to focus on strengthening the tree - amount of light, water, position, number and size of branches, fertilizer. And it may be as critical to strengthen what can't be seen, the root system, as the branches and leaves. Merely polishing up the fruit already on the tree rarely helps.

Similarly, master professionals develop world class safety organizations by growing highest level internal leadership and culture.

The driving force behind World-Class Safety performance is creating a Culture/surround system where safety is imbued into every organizational and individual decision and action. Easy to say - actuating this entails simultaneous leadership on all levels.

I think of "Safety Culture" as a surround system, that sends both clear and subliminal messages throughout the organization. It includes not only the tip of the iceberg messages that management and others convey but the bulk of signals and directions that lie below the surface. You know, those things that no one talks about but everyone knows is going on:

- What you have to do to keep your job
- Who gets promoted and why
- Who really has power, at the present time
- How strong or tenuous are the leaders' power at the moment
- What we say that's politically correct vs. what we really believe
- What we believe vs. what we actually do
- Which behaviors we should adopt when we know we're being monitored
- What managers and other leaders are willing to accept regarding safety performance. In short, the "real" expectations of performance and safety in our organization.

Some organizations have strong quarter-to-quarter statistics, but their expectations of behavior are past-based.

- Where the disconnects are. I've had the opportunity to work with several organizations who I've heard described (by other clients) as "World Class." I've seen that, even in the best companies, there are areas of discordance and low-level safety performance (most often reflecting a leader whose attention or beliefs were directed elsewhere).

Conversely, there are pockets of excellence even in organizations that struggle with their safety performance. My experience is this is usually associated with a leader who fights for safety

performance out of personal conviction. These iconoclasts eventually either leave out of frustration - or become lighthouses when the organization is ready to let the safety beacon shine.

10 Leadership Keys to the World-class Safety Kingdom

As earlier mentioned, I've had the opportunity to have as clients numerous companies commonly described as having "world-class safety." I've found that "World-class" means excellent, not "perfect" - there's always room to grow, always opportunities to lift lower-performing units within an organization. But in my experience, these high-echelon organizations do most of the following:

1. Avoid the Compliance Trap. Best companies think and communicate "beyond compliance" or injury avoidance. They expect this as a matter of course, instead aiming for best level of safety actions that lead to zero injuries.

Top performing companies deeply know what others either fight or only repeat in words alone: focusing on compliance tends to keep a company stuck in a quagmire of mediocrity. A punitive approach never leads to world-class performance; attempting to force prescribed behaviors severely limit the heights to which people can climb. Intel Chairman Andrew Grove wrote in his book, "High Output Management", "Fear never creates peak performance, only minimal performance."

World class safety organizations understand on some level that workers will ultimately choose for themselves what safety actions they'll take - or avoid. While you can pressure people to wear PPE, they'll only comply while they think they are being monitored. And in this day and lean age, what organization has the time and resources to monitor each worker at every moment? Or to investigate whether each worker lifts incorrectly (thereby building up units of cumulative trauma) or wears PPE or seat belts in their personal, off-work time?

Primary focus here is on internal motivation and self-monitoring. To develop world-class behavior, workers have to want to do what's safe for them, whether they believe anyone is watching or not. Beyond a low level of compliance based on fear, people engage in safety because they personally want to, or because they've developed safe defaults.

The best safety motivation and training is geared to helping workers become excited about Safety, and showing time-effective realistic methods for protecting themselves while simultaneously getting tasks done well.

2. Leverage Safety. The highest-echelon safety companies employ strong leverage to their advantage. Leverage means:

- applying minimal input to get maximum returns
- having any action strategically designed to deliver multiple positive results.

World-class companies know that safety is not their ultimate aim. Even highly mission-oriented safety professionals in such organizations have a strong overall-business orientation; they realize that, for most executives, Safety is a means to an end for maintaining an effective productive, responsive workforce.

World-class organizations include safety into everything they do - new hire orientation, productivity messages, all training, new equipment purchasing, etc. In these companies, decision-making focuses on simultaneously boosting productivity, safety and morale. This saves the precious time and resources of having Safety be a patchwork addition that competes with other pressing organizational needs, weaves the message that Safety should be part of everything decision and action - and also sends continuous reinforcement messages about the importance of safety.

They also look for ways to spread safety everywhere with as much involvement as possible. Rather than safety being the realm of the safety department or that of a few managers, safety is part of everyone's job. Hourly workers may be safety coaches, supervisors are trained in safety. Managers have safety performance metrics as part of their performance appraisals.

Safety gains are leveraged as well, publicized to everyone. Rather than wait for safety successes to be revealed, highest echelon companies aggressively seek out anecdotal and statistical safety wins - and let all (managers, workers, clients, etc) know about them.

3. Have a supportive structure for safety. Because these organizations value the potential impact of safety, they strongly select and support those in the safety chain of leadership. Emphasis is on choosing and developing high-performers.

And these companies create an infrastructure that supports smooth efforts - sufficient staff, budget, logistical support - as well as having access to senior executives with pull.

4. Develop trust. Trust appears to be at a low ebb. An October 2003 survey of 22,000 people commissioned by the Wall Street Journal revealed that only 38% of US workers trust managers.

Yet noted organizational development expert (and one of my mentors) Jack Gibb believed that a healthy level of trust between employees and managers is critical for effective communications and motivation and a cornerstone of positive, lasting behavioral change.

Understanding this, highest echelon organizational leaders communicate with respect - even during times of downsizing, uncertainty and insecurity. They know that it's more effective to let workers hear, "There are some changes coming that haven't been fully decided. But we will let you know as soon as we do" rather than staying mum - and end up unintentionally fueling the rumor mill.

Effective organizational leaders have realistic expectations of their workers (e.g. not expecting them to learn totally new procedures without sufficient training, or on the fly while still expecting a heavy and high-paced work load). They understand that changing habits requires some effort and may not instantly occur with the snap of a document or the immediate purchase of new equipment.

They also show support and concern for those individuals in their company who are motivated but not performing as expected. In line with this, highest performing safety organizations

generally watch for those who have repeat accidents and apply interventions that are geared to changing attitudes and skills. They don't have a punish-first orientation.

5. Focus on self-correction.

Here, it's as if world-class organizations have internalized the theme, "The best never rest." Emphasis is on continued improvement and self-correction, rather than being self-satisfied with the lofty position they have attained. These companies have a long-term plan and focus and aren't hyper-reactive to quarter to quarter statistics (these metrics aren't ignored, just don't dominate actions).

They don't seem to take themselves too seriously, excuse-making is minimal, as are complaints or blaming.

There is an understanding on some level that mixed messages are inevitable to some degree. Focus is on rooting out and reducing conflicting expectations that might otherwise lose credibility or result in second-best decisions. They don't wait to hear negative feedback through the grapevine - leaders are tied into informal communication channels.

Promotions, policies and procedures, selection of contractors - all of these and more are examined to make sure messages about safety are as consistent as possible. For example, contractor are expected to show the same standards of safety performance as employees.

One big difference I've seen between highest-level safety organizations and others is the former are not in a reactive maintenance mode, while the latter often take a "if it ain't broken don't fix it" attitude.

Consistently, these best companies tend to focus on helping their individual employees become self-motivated and self-monitored. While outside observation is used appropriately, they go beyond the external reinforcement quagmire and don't tend to get caught up with safety "rewards" that have to continuously rise in value for them to get employees' attention.

In contrast, lower performing companies seem to flit from safety prize to prize, as if in search for the key reward that will elevate safety results without costing too dearly.

6. Have a visibility strategy

Managers show up for Safety (whether it is for a short time during safety meetings, at safety conferences, ask about safety performance of others, write about safety in company newsletters).

Safety is included in everything - meetings, reports, emails sigs, website and newsletters.

Recognition systems often involve members of employee's family.

Suggestions and requests for corrective acts are responded to soon (though not necessarily "fixed" immediately).

Safety has a present, past and future. Past programs are kept alive and referred to with followup reports and next-level training and communications. and “coming attractions” are broadcast regularly.

7. Focus at work and at home. World-class safety organizations realize that people are a complex mix of creatures of habit while being attracted to energizing change. They switch around their messages to keep their people mentally fresh, all the while helping build safe default behaviors that can be used at work as well as at home.

This is one of the reasons that high-performance companies employ a strong at-home focus in their safety training and programming. For example, in the early 1990’s, Exxon developed a Home Safety Leader system, where each employee was asked to designate a family member as their “Home Safety Leader.” This Leader could be a son or daughter, spouse, etc - just not the employee. These Home Safety Leaders were brought in periodically to be trained and to take part in employee recognition ceremonies.

8. Go beyond technical safety. The best performing organizations know that, ultimately, performance rests with the people within the company. Housekeeping, PPE, policies and procedures are outward manifestations of culture and leadership and are important. But world-class companies don’t stop there - they also highly develop their workers’ skillsets:

- physically to accomplish tasks with minimum wear-down and tension and
- mentally - specifically developing skills in judgment/decision-making, attention control, how to take personal control for their own safety at work and at home.

9. Develop personal - and safety - leadership on all levels. World-class Safety companies understand on some level that each person is the safety director of their own lives; some are very poor at this, others good safety directors, still others mediocre. Organizational leadership knows their job is not to force automaton-like compliance but to get people thinking, helping them become more effective safety leaders everywhere in their own lives. World-class safety organizations embrace a concept Tom Peters wrote about, “The best leaders don’t create followers - they create other leaders.”

Best companies develop personal leadership skills in supervisors, line employees, everyone. Employing a leveraged scissors approach, new programs are implemented both topdown and bottom-up, with workers being trained and released to become instructors, formal or informal coaches and reinforcement agents of safety.

Focus here is on helping people develop an understanding of a set of principles for safe performance and how to apply these to tasks at work and at home, rather than a memorize-and-follow approach.

Safety committees are active, rather than pro-forma. They are trained, often have a budget and given responsibility to make positive change occur - not just meet once each month to satisfy the requirement of a regulating agency. Safety committees usually have the support of and access to senior executives.

10. Emphasize energetics along with procedures.

The strategist Miyamoto Musashi wrote that the best leaders “perceive those things which cannot be seen.”

In addition to providing critical training, PPE, policies and procedures and other structures, highest level safety organizations have sharpened their antennae; they monitor the Safety climate.

They look for signs of rising or lowering morale, perceptions of management safety concern or lack of consideration, to what safety is valued by workers or seen to be valued by managers.

Energetically, they know that Safety has to be alive and exciting. They retire older interventions that no longer elicit response and periodically inject “AHA” experiences (energetic excitement) along with tangible safety strategies.

And, very important, world-class safety organizations spread enthusiasm and hope during these challenging times.

Attaining World-class safety performance is possible for numerous companies. By persistently applying critical leadership and cultural key strategies and skills, organizations can boost their safety behaviors and record to the highest-echelon level.

About the Presenter:

Robert Pater is the author of “Leading From Within”, published in five languages, as well as of articles on safety leadership, safety culture development, attention control and injury prevention published in Professional Safety, Occupational Hazards, Industrial Safety & Hygiene News, Occupational Health & Safety, Safety+Health, World Safety Journal, Business Insurance, Safe Workplace, Human Resource Magazine, Training, Nation’s Business, Executive Female and many more.

Robert has a master’s degree in Industrial Psychology (focus on Human Factors) and an undergraduate degree in Organizational Development.

He is the creator of the MoveSMART® system for prevention of soft tissue injuries, slips/falls and hand injuries that is in place in companies in over 60 countries.

Robert has keynoted and presented at conferences for ASSE, Canadian Society of Safety Engineering, many statewide conferences, as well as for Alcoa, Amtrak, Anheuser-Busch, ChevronTexaco, Columbia Forest Products, Exxon, Frito-Lay, Herman Miller, Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, Phelps Dodge, Potlatch Corp, Shell Canada, Sempra Energy, Textron, United Parcel Service, United Airlines, Weyerhaeuser, Xerox and many others.

He has been interviewed on the topic of leadership on ABC World News, CNN, in Success Magazine, Darwin, The Motivational Manager and in many other broadcast and print media.