Safety Leadership: The Way We Do Things Around Here

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Introduction

Academic programs in safety are composed of a number of critical courses that help students become knowledgeable, problem-solving professionals. Typical programs of study include foundational courses in math and science, and core safety courses in areas such as accident prevention, legislation and standards, accident investigation, workers' compensation, systems safety, ergonomics, and fire science. Students are easily able to recognize the importance of these topics to their success as a safety professional. Some may complain that chemistry, statistics and systems safety are tedious and unnecessary, but the bottom line is they *get it*, they just *don't like it*.

However, I teach one class that some students just don't get. The course is titled Psychology and Philosophy of Safety and it focuses on the more intangible concepts of leadership, culture, communication and organizational behavior. In an effort to make the course title more descriptive, we recently changed the name to Safety Leadership. Since I began teaching this course, I have had to find ways to make the material more meaningful for students, who often do not immediately recognize the relevance of the topics in terms of their future careers. A couple of years ago a student came by my office at the end of summer with some questions about the upcoming semester. The conversation was enlightening, and went something like this:

Student: "I was looking at my class schedule and I'm in your Psychology of Safety class next semester. I looked at the course in the catalog and just wanted to know if you could tell me about the course."

Me: "Sure. Is there something specific you'd like to know?" (Anticipating a question about how many papers would be required, image my surprise to hear what comes next.)

Student: "Well, I just don't see the point. It doesn't relate to safety and it seems like a waste of time as far as I can tell."

Me: (I managed to keep a straight face, since that was the first time someone insulted my class before they even took it.) "This isn't the traditional safety class in the fact that we don't look at federal or state rules and regulations, but we look at the culture of organizations and the impact of

leadership, how to manage change, developing productive teams, employee motivation, and a number of other related issues."

Student: "What does culture have to do with anything?"

Me: "It impacts everything. The culture of an organization dictates how things get done, or if they get done at all. You will see it in employee attitudes about safety and other issues, quality of work, and in so many more places."

Student: "Well, I don't see how it relates to safety. I don't know what the point is or why we have to take it."

Me: (At this point, it's a losing battle. So I changed tactics just a bit.) "OK. The bottom line is, it's a required course and you need it to graduate. It's a three hour course and I can't give you an entire semester's worth of information in the next five minutes. I promise the material relates to safety and I'll spend sixteen weeks showing you how. If you still don't get it when the class is over, come back and we'll talk."

Student: "OK. So, I have one more question. What do you know about this new guy teaching statistics? Is he any good, and what kind of work is required for that class?"

Me: (Don't ask – that's another story.) …..

It was after this conversation that I realized the extent to which some students just don't get it. I began looking for a way to make the topics feel more relevant for those students.

Framing the Issues

The issue of leadership is expansive with many diverse definitions, which are typically tailored to fit the specific needs of the researcher (Yukl, 2002). Yukl defined leadership as "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives" (p. 7). Bolman and Deal (1997) indicated that leadership is "a subtle process of mutual influence fusing thought, feeling, and action to produce cooperative effort in the service of purposes and values of *both* the leader and the led" (p. 296). In class, we look at several formal definitions of leadership. Students are then asked to make a list of the characteristics of the best and the worst boss they've ever had. What is it that makes an individual a good, or bad, boss? This is a fairly easy task and the lists are typically very similar from semester to semester. Students think good bosses are organized, trustworthy, ethical, competent, caring, willing to admit mistakes, willing to stand up for their workers, and display flexibility and self-confidence. They classify bad bosses as individuals who are arrogant, intentionally embarrass workers, only look out for themselves, micromanage, refuse to listen to others, don't keep promises, and overall have poor people skills. They know what good leadership is because they've seen it. The task then becomes reflecting honestly about how they do things and how others perceive them.

Bolman and Deal emphasize that good leaders possess the ability to frame problems from multiple perspectives. They describe frames as not only windows for looking at the world around us, but also as "lenses that bring the world into focus" (p. 12). They have classified the frames

into the following: structural, human resource, political and symbolical. Individuals operating from the structural frame focus on rules, policy, authority, and organizational charts. The human resource frame looks at the fit between humans and the organization, and seeks opportunities to maximize human potential above all else. The political frame focuses on scarce resources and competing interests. Individuals operating from the political frame focus on conflict, power, bargaining and negotiation as a method of solving problems. The symbolic frame spotlights organizational symbols, stories, ceremony and rituals.

By reframing problems from different viewpoints, leaders can create a larger picture with more vivid detail to enhance decision-making processes. Bolman and Deal clearly articulated the importance of multi-frame analysis with the warning that "In assessing any framework for improving organizations, ask if anything is left out. The frame you don't see could be the one that bites you" (p. 277). The students complete a leadership survey as part of the course to determine which frames they tend to lean towards. Results consistently show that students favor the human resource and structural frames. They like order and clear expectations, and a structural approach to problem solving makes sense. However, the down side for individuals who use the structural approach too often is that they "overestimate the power of authority and underestimate the authority of power" (Bolman and Deal, p. 280). Students often have little intuitive distinction between authority and power. Students often believe that once they take their first job, employees will simply follow the rules because they tell them to. They mistakenly believe they have power because they are in charge. In the end, authority comes with the job and can be undermined if workers don't respect you. Power, described by Kanter as "the ability to get things done" (p. 166), is earned and can come in many forms.

The inability to reframe your viewpoint can create fundamental leadership problems. In a classroom conversation about creating "fun" work environments, a student commented "Why do I care if their work is fun or not? They're hired to do a job, not to have fun. They either do the job, or I'll fire them." This student is looking at a human resource/symbolic issue through a structural frame, and simply cannot make the connection. The ability to have fun at work certainly doesn't mean that work is not being accomplished. Many companies have social gatherings to celebrate milestones, host luncheons and holiday parties, and provide opportunities for employees to have a little fun. Employees enjoy opportunities to relax and the organization benefits from reduced stress and boredom while increasing employee satisfaction (Newstrom).

Culture, Leadership and Moral Decision Making

Schein (1992) defines culture as "the accumulated shared learning of a given group, covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of the group members' total psychological functioning" (p. 10). More simply put, Deal and Kennedy (Bolman & Deal, 1997) describe culture as "the way we do things around here" (p. 231). Culture goes beyond organizational charts, policies and procedures (the way we say things work around here) and includes the informal aspects of organizational behavior.

Much debate exists about the distinction between leaders and managers. Yukl (2002) cited Bennis and Nanus' description that "managers are people who do things right, and leaders are people who do the right thing" (p. 5). Bolman and Deal suggested that "Leaders think longer-term, look outside as well as inside, and influence constituents beyond their immediate formal jurisdictions" (p. 295). Schein (1992) proposed that leadership and culture are inextricably

intertwined and that "leaders create and change cultures, while managers and administrators live within them" (p. 5). Although some publications on the subject view leadership and management as verging on being mutually exclusive, Yukl cautioned that "The term manager is an occupational title for a large number of people, and it is insensitive to denigrate them with a negative stereotype" (p. 5). In class, we discuss that the term "manager" is something that you get with the job, while the term "leader" is something you earn on your own.

With regard to leadership, "The most important element in an executive's ability to be persuasive and exercise influence in the academic environment is trust and credibility" (Julius, Balridge & Pfeffer, 2000, p.17). Carillo also shares that "lack of trust and credibility between labor and management is the most-frequent obstacle to improving safety cultures" (p. 42). Exhibiting ethical behaviors and decision-making is critical to both attaining and retaining trust and credibility. Effective leaders not only promote an ethical climate, but also discourage and oppose unethical practices (Yukl, 2002). Methods of promoting an ethical climate include leading by example, which parallels Argrys and Schon's concept of congruence between espoused theories and theories-in-use (Yukl, 2002; Bolman and Deal, 1997). Espoused theories encompass those things we say we do while theories-in-use represent those things we actually do. Ethical leaders can discourage unethical practices by refusing assignments involving unethical activities, speaking out publicly against unethical or unfair policies, and by seeking to get unethical decisions reversed (Yukl, 2002). In the end, "Thoughtful leaders, those who aspire to ethical practice, must seriously consider the impact of both their actions and their failure to act" (Beck, 1996, p. 10).

Tying it All Together

A recent search of Academic Search Complete, an online EBSCOhost database, produced 3,614 article results for the key words "safety culture" and 1,330 results for "safety leadership". A more specific search limited to *Professional Safety* produced 84 articles for "safety culture" and 80 results for "safety leadership". It is not difficult to show that the issues are timely. I often assign students articles to read and review from *Professional Safety*. It is critical that they read what safety professionals are reading and writing. A 2002 article by Carrillo focuses on trust and credibility as they relate to improving safety cultures. Individual stories and real world examples help tie it all together and students see how good leadership makes a difference, and everything becomes a little more relevant. Perhaps among the best insights offered in the article is the question "Do I have the courage for self-assessment and the willingness to change?" (p. 47). Students, like the rest of us, must look inward with an honest lens. Experience has shown that this is a daunting task. Some of the worst micromanagers I have known would self-describe their leadership style as collaborative and collegial. They lack the ability, or willingness, to see themselves as others do and they do not perceive the disconnect between their espoused theories and their theories in use.

As future leaders of the safety profession, our students have an obligation to set positive examples and behave ethically and with a sense of social responsibility. Beck (1996) pointed out that "the impact of our moral decisions and actions is enormous" (p. 10). This statement rings very true in any field, especially the field of safety. Daily decisions made for economic and scheduling purposes can have profound impacts. Unfortunately, there are a number of safety issues impacted by decision-makers who have misperceptions about risk and make decisions

without accurate information or for all the wrong reasons. In the arena of safety, the ramifications of leadership without ethics and morals are extremely dangerous. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt: "To educate a person in mind and not morals is to educate a menace to society".

The piece that ties it all together and typically sells students on the importance of leadership and culture to safety is a review of the 2005 explosion of BP's Texas City refinery. First, students formulate a good picture about the incident and it's causes by watching the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) video *Anatomy of a Disaster: Explosion at BP Texas City Refinery*, which can be found on the CSB website. The 55 minute video outlines the sequence of events leading to the explosion and focuses on a variety of organizational and safety deficiencies that contributed to the disaster. The students then spend time reviewing The Report of the BP U.S. Refineries Independent Safety Review Panel, more commonly referred to as the Baker Report. The report is divided into sections and students work in groups to develop a presentation about their section. They are often surprised by the video and the findings of the report, which cite corporate safety culture, lack of process safety leadership, employee empowerment, and poor decision-making as critical breakdowns contributing to the disaster.

Student discussion is normally lively and engaged as they discuss other issues brought out by the Baker Report. They see connections between leadership and items such as management turn-over, complacency, consistent failure to adhere to policy and procedures, outdated safeguards, poor communication, lack of trust, resource allocations, and worker fatigue. Students start to look at their text book and realize that all of these issues are there. In my last class, a student asked "Are we going to do more of this? I like looking at the real world examples and how it all relates to what we are studying. Everything really makes sense this way."

There are other examples that can be used in the classroom to help make connections between safety, leadership and culture. The 1986 explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger brought to light the cultural problems at NASA. The Rogers Commission Report cited poor communications which led to a degradation of decision making quality, the "silent safety program", and external pressures. Bolman and Deal commented that "It is disturbing to see political forces corrupting decision making, particularly for highly technical issues with human lives at stake" (p. 162). Seventeen years later it seemed that little had changed in the culture at NASA. The 2003 explosion of the Space Shuttle Columbia reignited old concerns. The final report of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board set forth the following "Organizational Cause Statement":

" The organizational causes of this accident are rooted in the Space Shuttle Program's history and culture, including the original compromises that were required to gain approval for the Shuttle Program, subsequent years of resource constraints, fluctuating priorities, schedule pressures, mischaracterizations of the Shuttle as operational rather than developmental, and lack of an agreed national vision. Cultural traits and organizational practices detrimental to safety and reliability were allowed to develop, including: reliance on past success as a substitute for sound engineering practices (such as testing to understand why systems were not performing in accordance with requirements/specifications); organizational barriers which prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled professional differences of opinion; lack of integrated management across program elements; and the evolution of an informal chain of command and decision-making processes that operated outside the organization's rules." (p. 177)

The space shuttle explosions provide a rare opportunity for students to see how leadership and organizational culture directly impact safety in one organization over a significant period of time. Students learn to ask why they are making decisions. It is to meet a deadline, to beat the competition, for personal gain, or for the safety and health of their workers? Students learn the meaning of making safety a core value, not just a priority. Happily, by the end of class, most students reach a point where they *get it*. Changing "the way we do things around here" requires the ability to challenge the basic underlying assumptions that guide our organizations. Additionally, good leaders must become adept at "frame breaking" to look at organizational operations from new viewpoints to gain a clearer picture of where we are.

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