



I got a feeling ...

When organisations work to holistically integrate health and safety into their operations, the benefits include lower incident rates, enhanced employee engagement, increased motivation and improved productivity. ANDREW SHARMAN explores the role of “felt leadership” in health and safety at work

The traditional view of culture change is that it is deemed to be effective only when everyone is involved; from the boardroom to the shop floor – every leader, manager, supervisor and frontline worker.

Of course a coordinated approach is best, but, frankly, it is nonsense to suggest that only a totally inclusive approach can be impactful. I would not argue against the notion that 100-percent engagement of the entire workforce would be beneficial in many respects, but I don't believe that it has to be an “all or nothing” approach to influencing safety behaviours.

In his magnificent and highly provocative book *Viral Change*, psychiatrist Leandro Herrero explains that culture change works one person at a time. Herrero tells us that change is most effective when it spreads like a virus; step by step, gradually infecting everyone – just like catching the common cold from that guy sneezing next to you on the bus.

When we realise that effective change

comes from this individualised action, not only does developing a positive safety culture feel more achievable, it actually becomes more practical to manage too.

“Felt leadership” operates in exactly the same way as this sort of viral-change process. It's not necessarily a new style or theory of leadership; instead we might consider it the distillation of some of the more impactful elements from a range of schools of thought on leadership.

It's essentially about “walking the talk”, demonstrating that commitment to safety is as strong as it's claimed to be. In my view, it's the foundation for building trust and supportive relationships at all levels within the organisation.

Done well, felt leadership moves an organisation from a focus on compliance, to a deeper, more cultural approach, based on shared commitment. And the results can be impressive!

Over time, many organisations have found that their safety cultures have been considerably enhanced through the

application of felt leadership. Studies have shown that good safety leadership can positively influence the safety behaviours of workers by up to 86 percent, and reduce incidents and accidents by around 35 percent.

The benefits don't stop there, however, as it's known that improving safety culture and performance delivers sustainable, shared value to other areas of the business too, such as quality, delivery speeds and operational efficiencies.

The corporate bottom line is also positively impacted – as organisations with good safety performance also appear to have better economic performance.

Is there a connection between the two? The answer is undeniably “yes”, as reduced incident rates and improved working conditions boost employee morale, enhance engagement and generate positive influence over productivity and, therefore, profitability.

VALUES-BASED LEADERSHIP

For leadership in safety to be “felt” by those

around us, leaders must hold an absolute personal commitment to the organisation's value on safety. In our own research, three safety values in particular were found to recur again and again. It's worthwhile to take a look at these:

- All workplace injuries and ill-health are preventable;
- Everyone has the right to go home safely at the end of every day;
- Safety is a line responsibility that is owned, led and driven by the entire team of leaders within the organisation.

These values act as the blueprint for felt leadership. Acknowledging that safety is a core business value, integral to the very existence of the organisation, is crucial for setting the scene. When demonstrated through the actions of leaders, it can have a profound effect on employees. Pause for a moment and consider how these values might be reflected in your organisation.

PRINCIPLES OF FELT LEADERSHIP

How can we utilise the concept of felt leadership at work? Over the last few years, as our consulting business has partnered with many organisations around the world, we've come to learn that taking a principled approach to safety provides a strong framework, and also yields great results.

Through our work we've identified five principles of felt leadership that can add significant value to any safety management system. They are:

1. Inspire people with a clear vision of what success looks like;
2. Lead by setting a great example;
3. Empower people to think and act in safety;
4. Use meaningful praise wherever possible;
5. Take the time to coach rather than tell.

Look at that list of leadership principles one more time. Now consider who in your organisation would undertake these



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actions. I passionately believe that these principles are for everyone: felt leadership in safety is not the exclusive domain of senior executives.

While commitment must start from the top, all levels in the organisational hierarchy can spread the safety change – just like the common cold virus spreading on the bus.

The five principles are as relevant and useful to the new team member as they are

- Work to anticipate – rather than react to – risks;
- Demonstrate a personal commitment to driving safety forward;
- Proactively discuss hazards with employees and within peer groups;
- Respond quickly when unsafe conditions are discovered in the workplace;
- Inspect the workplace frequently and intelligently;

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to the CEO, so, whatever your role in your organisation, you can certainly use the viral approach to lead.

In which of the five principles do you feel you have strength? Are there some in which you might want to gain further development?

CAN YOU FEEL IT?

How can we demonstrate that we're truly committed to safety? Here are some specific actions that can help your own personal leadership in safety to be felt by those around you:

- Show that you understand the business operations and activities;

- Ensure effective corrective actions from accident investigations, audits or surveys are prioritised, attended to, and completed;
- Objectively investigate incidents and accidents, take a "helicopter view" and resist the urge to apportion blame;
- Understand the needs and aspirations of workers with regard to safety;
- Make safety part of the everyday business – start every meeting with a brief safety point to discuss;
- Find a way to involve everyone – risk assessments, investigations, project teams or even just asking people for their thoughts all count!

Felt leadership is an approach that can be used by anyone, regardless of their role, seniority or place in the organisational hierarchy. It works because it builds strong safety cultures through the inter-relationships between leaders and followers.

As we've discussed in this article, it is action-focused – and even the smallest actions count towards making a difference. When felt leadership is demonstrated within an organisation in the area of safety, a cultural transformation can occur. More importantly, that transformation becomes sustainable as it becomes part of the fabric of the company and the work environment.

Great safety leaders ultimately challenge those around them to make a personal commitment to be the best they can be – while making safety easy and fun and releasing people's energy, skills and ideas to create safety in the workplace.

Remember that safety excellence is a journey, not a destination. Along the route you'll get the level of safety performance that you, as a leader, personally demonstrate that you want. So, don't forget that attitudes, behaviours, actions and inactions will all be viewed as illustrations of our personal level of commitment to safety in the workplace.

What we say, speak and write as leaders – no matter where we are in the organisational hierarchy – must be visibly reflected in what we do. Lead on! **| SHEQ**



Sharman on Safety is a series of extracts that SHEQ MANAGEMENT is running this year, from Andrew Sharman's new book: From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and chief executive of RyderMarshSharman - consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at www.rydermarshsharman.com. SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers will receive 20 percent off the price of Sharman's book at www.fromaccidentstozero.com using the code SHEQSA.

From Accidents to Zero

A practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture

Thought-provoking and insightful. From Accidents to Zero progressively pushed me to see new connections, and new ways to address organisations' safety culture and risk management challenges.

Mieke Jacobs, Global Practice Leader – Employee Safety, DuPont

This A to Z of safety represents an eminently practical knowledge toolbox, one filled with tools which will add value to the CEO and the front line Safety Practitioner in equal measures. Relevant, accessible and applicable, this is safety distilled and a 'must-read'.

Steven Brown, Brewery Manager, Heineken

Read more at www.fromaccidentstozero.com

