



The X factor: 10 habits of exceptional safety leaders

Nowadays it seems that the world of work is all about leadership. Take a look around your local bookstore, or that kiosk at the airport departure gate and you'll find myriad titles proclaiming the latest leadership brand, process or method. Sure, there's probably something in each of these books that may inspire you, but, with so many choices, where should you begin if you desire to develop your own learning?

Despite the wealth of book titles, blogs and research papers, great leadership can still be hard to define – and to understand. What is it really? We've all probably found ourselves working for a great leader at some point – and we've felt it, but even those leaders we hold high in our estimations may have a tough time explaining just what it is that makes them so effective.

Great leadership is fluid, dynamic and complex – there's no one-size-fits-all secret recipe for success, instead it's about how we use a range of skills in certain contexts or situations.

When it comes to matters of safety at work, leadership is the glue that binds everything together. It's the flag that points the way forward. It's the difference between people going home or not.

We've come into the "age of leadership", where everyone has a role to play. Whether you're a leader through bestowal of a title, (such as director, vice president or head of department), or a leader of people, teams,

functions or activities – you are looked upon to lead.

In this new age, however, those without these obvious "leadership responsibilities" also have the potential to lead effectively ... What can we, as practitioners, learn from the art of leadership that will benefit health and safety at work?

GOING BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Around 430 BC, Xenophon was born in Athens. He went on to become a soldier and an historian, though he is remembered more easily as a student of Socrates. Although Xenophon was not regarded as one of the classical Greek philosophers, his writings have shaped much of the modern-day science of leadership.

In some of his more considered writings, Xenophon pares down the art of leadership and reveals the importance of building culture:

"The true test of a leader is whether his followers will adhere to his cause from their own volition, enduring the most arduous hardships without being forced

to do so, and remaining steadfast in the moments of greatest peril."

In our pursuit of safety excellence, many of us have, like Xenophon, come to learn that effective leadership is about going beyond technical knowledge and a focus on compliance, in order to develop a sense of maturity that allows us to gain an understanding of people, their behaviour, motivation and influence.

Socrates would remind Xenophon that: "wisdom begins in wonder". So, if we could be included in their discussions now, what wisdom might Socrates and his student bestow upon us in order to become great safety leaders? Here are ten essential traits and behaviours that we've identified through our own research on leadership – each supported with a more modern-day quotation.

1. Action visualisation

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."
– Proverbs 29:18

Great safety leaders visualise the target, but also clearly see and articulate the steps



required for success. Look beyond your goals and identify the milestones along the journey. Plan each step towards these, and share the results of your progress. As well as pointing to the horizon, also show what's coming up around the next corner, too.

2. Big picture perspective

"The big picture doesn't just come from distance; it also comes from time."

– Simon Sinek, Author

Seeing the big picture means avoiding getting stuck in narrow mindsets, looking

out with a wide-angle lens and being sure just how safety fits, aligns with, and supports the broader business aims and objectives. It comes from the daily grind: the dust, sweat and tears that make us who we are. Great safety leaders understand this and pull back from the inevitable close-up and use their experience to see the solution.

3. Encourage a learning culture

"The best leader is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

– Theodore Roosevelt, 26th President of the United States of America

Having sufficient emotional intelligence to understand that people are fallible, and to accept genuine mistakes as part of the learning process, is vital in developing a "just culture" in the workplace. Share the opportunity to learn, grow and develop with those around you and watch your safety culture flourish.

4. Communicate fluently

"Speak to a man in a language he understands and it goes to his head. Speak to him in his language and it goes straight to his heart."

– Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa

In matters of safety, it's all too easy to get caught up in our own language – filled with jargon, abbreviations and technical terminology. The best safety leaders recognise this and think carefully about their target audience and stakeholders' needs and preferences before they begin to communicate.

5. Flexibility

"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand."

– General Colin Powell

"Black and white" thinking rarely delivers constructive progress when it comes to matters of safety. More often than not it serves to eliminate options and stifle creative thinking. Great safety leaders operate with the purpose of >>



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providing service for others, including their thoughts, and responding to their concerns.

6. Tolerance of complexity

“Si tout est compliqué, ça ne colle pas. Si tout est simple, ça ne suffit pas.” (“If everything is complicated, it does not stick. If everything is simple, that is not enough.”)

– Alain Bashung

French singer-songwriter Bashung recognised that if “everything is complicated, it doesn’t work. But if everything is easy, it’s not enough.” An acceptance and understanding that things are never simple and, sometimes, things are tough is, of course, necessary, but, beyond this, the ability to find the sweet spot or balance point in each situation can almost always help us find a way forward through the complexity.

7. Gratitude attitude

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.”

– Max DePree

The fast pace of business life – whether at the boardroom or on the shop floor – subtly encourages us to be brief and to move quickly. Great safety leaders consistently acknowledge the worth of each individual in an appropriate manner –

recognising their contributions in word as well as in deed.

8. Horizon Awareness

“As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.”

– Bill Gates

Back in the 1990s, Gates recognised the dawn of a new age where empowerment at all levels would become the norm. Continuously scanning the horizon allows us to see what’s “coming down the pipe” and helps us to make sense of new ideas, theories and concepts. The smart safety leaders have no hesitation in introducing and championing the contributions of others, and removing the barriers from their paths to enable positive action.

9. Optimistic Influence

“When inspiring and motivating positive action in others towards their goals, you don’t lead by hitting people over the head – that’s assault, not leadership.”

– Dwight Eisenhower, former President of the United States of America

In safety, it’s not always “sweetness and light”, is it? There are rough, dark days aplenty and, as safety leaders, we are not alone in feeling them. Try to find the positive light in which to share safety at work, and show the value and benefits of your approach and ideas. Choose the carrot over the stick.

10. Perseverance

“Leadership, like swimming, cannot be learned by reading about it.”

– Professor Henry Mintzberg

The ability to self-motivate, set appropriate goals and manage time efficiently are all key skills of the great safety leader. However, the really impactful work is done out there in the field, among the men and women of the workforce. Everyone will not always buy into what we propose, but, come hell or high water, we will show up every day and give our best, no matter what.

BUILDING FORWARDS

Being a great safety leader doesn’t mean that you have to do all of these things at once. In fact, that might be a recipe for disaster rather than success. Choose one or two things that resonate with you and, as you become more effective, choose others to add to your skill-set.

Remember that emulation is an acceptable form of personal development. It’s okay if you need to “act out” some of these traits to get you going in the right direction. The more you practise, the more natural and useful these new behaviours will become. As you step forward on your own journey as a great safety leader, keep in mind this final thought, that a leader always leads by example, whether he intends to or not. | 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’.

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