

# A TALE OF THREE SAFETY LEADERS

Safety culture is often defined as “the way we do things around here”. The nurse, the mechanic and the prophet help us to explore cultural differences from around the world and how leadership is key to creating safety excellence

I recently returned from a week of work in Siberia: three flights, two taxis and a train ride; it was certainly a long way from my home in Switzerland. It's Russia at its most remote.

I'm no stranger to long-distance travel: the previous week I'd been working in Johannesburg, one of my favourite places in my most favourite country in the world; glorious South Africa, where it had been upwards of 30°C with scorching sunshine and warm, happy faces everywhere.

In Siberia I had been well wrapped up in my goose-down jacket, woolly hat and gloves and thermal underwear: -25°C is no joke.

As I wandered downtown, dodging Russian drivers – keen to get wherever they were going – while simultaneously focusing on the snow and ice beneath my feet, it was clear that the relaxed flip-flops and the sunshine smiling “sawubona” of South Africa had been replaced with heavy boots and a sombre attitude of “let's just do what we need to do and then get back into the warmth”.

With a temperature difference of almost 60°C between my work locations, and a physical distance of 11 366 km, it felt as though I really was on a different planet.

No matter where I find myself in the world, I'm always intrigued by the local culture. In South Africa I always feel that there is a real and true burning desire for learning and growth.

During each visit I make to the Rainbow Nation, many

people I meet are keen to point out that their South Africa is “second world” by comparison to Europe. Yet, despite still being “under development”, there's such a strong sense of pride regarding the journey completed so far, and a calm, understated confidence that the future is bright.

For many countries, pride and optimism can seem like a veneer, but in South Africa, in my experience, there is typically a deep and reasoned commitment, too. Working with South African clients always brings a smile to my face, as I see people from different backgrounds coming together to demonstrate a strong sense of community, team spirit and a mindful dedication to improving workplace safety.

## KEEPING COOL: A BALANCED APPROACH TO LEADING

Despite the chill in the air, Siberia showed similar signs of humility and hunger when it came to improving safety. Working with the top team of an oil company, during our Safety Leadership masterclass workshops we'd been discussing how to develop safety culture and build authentic safety leadership.

We'd been exploring classical styles of leadership and with many of the executives present coming from engineering backgrounds, they identified with the transactional style as their own natural or “default” style.





Typically process-oriented, transactional leaders are skilled in planning, direction and facilitation. They quickly get things under control and are expert at identifying and driving appropriate action. These are leaders who “find and fix” and “make things happen”.

The Siberian oil company in question is, unusually, run by two chief executives. Nicolay is the visionary, having strategically plotted out the corporate direction well into the future.

Transformational leaders (like Nicolay) are those who have energy and drive in abundance. Like prophets, they look far ahead to create a vision for the prosperity of their organisations. Usually highly charismatic and attentive to the needs of others, they then paint clear pictures that persuade others to follow and support their cause.

For Marina, a tightly focused former lawyer with a disarmingly warm smile, nothing is a

problem. Her natural style is to operate as a servant leader. Servant leaders, like nurses, can appear selfless, concentrating on how they can support others in achieving their tasks and goals.

Totally committed, with high levels of awareness and empathy, they – like nurses – are also excellent listeners. Servant leaders actively seek out opportunities to help; bringing teams together and building a sense of pride and community.

The combined joint leadership at the oil company got me thinking. It’s not unusual for an engineering company to have a wealth of transactional leaders – after all, getting oil out of the ground is key – but could the blend of servant and transformational leaders at the top provide a more effective climate for engineering mindsets to prosper and safety excellence to flourish? I suspect it does.

### THE MECHANIC LEADING FORWARD

It would be easy to conclude from my Siberian trip that transformational and servant leadership styles give the biggest bang for our buck when it comes to improving safety culture and performance.

While there is plenty of scientific research supporting the value that each style brings to safety, it was while reflecting on a South African leadership masterclasses that I noticed something important.

The previous week, back in Joburg, a quietly confident chap sat at the front of the room, occupying the very end seat on our boardroom table; the nearest seat to where I stood. Seventeen of his colleagues were in the remaining places.

As the first session unfolded and each delegate made their introductions, this quiet man waited his turn before explaining that he was the MD of the business, a leader in the South African construction industry. His name was Marc.



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Now it's not unusual to find the top executive in the room when we deliver these leadership programmes. Often they arrive bang on time, state the importance of what's about to follow, assure everyone of their utmost personal commitment to safety – and then depart.

Not Marc. For two full days he listened carefully and participated fully – not even once playing the “hierarchy card” – and, impressively, resisted the temptation to tap-tap-tap away on his Blackberry. For two days, Marc was, in his words, “just one of the senior team interested in learning how to be a better safety leader”.

Over coffee on the second day I was keen to pick his brain. “Why are you really here? Why are you giving up two full days of running your business to sit and talk safety?” I asked.

Looking at me with a relaxed and friendly face his response was as perfect as it was simple: “If I don't walk the talk, Andrew, how can I expect others to?” And there it was; the most senior leader in the organisation demonstrating his own personal commitment to sending people “home without harm” every day.

By investing his time and effort in the workshop with his management team, Marc was, at the same time, learning about and resolving (or “finding and fixing”) many of the most important safety issues in his business. He was both setting the tone, and making things happen. He was facilitating the future actions of his team, as well

as very subtly ensuring they would move forward in the right direction.

When the group exercise came around and the delegates identified their own default leadership style, it came as no surprise that Marc was a transactional leader. Just like a great mechanic, he uses his skills to discern when things are not running as well as they might, makes his adjustments to improve things, and then sets off leading by example to make things happen.

### THE SAFETY LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE

While leadership style should certainly be relevant to context, great safety leadership – combining transactional, servant and transformational elements – may just be the secret to bringing smiles to faces, warming the team spirit and keeping us on the right track in creating safety excellence ... no matter where we are in the world.

So what's your natural leadership style? Are you a nurse, a prophet or a mechanic? How can you adapt your style depending on the situation in which you find yourself?

Which servant, transactional and transformational leaders could you recruit as safety ambassadors in your business to help you provide an effective climate to further strengthen your organisation's safety culture? **SM**



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](http://www.rydermarshsharman.com). SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers will receive 20 percent off the price of Sharman's book at: [www.fromaccidentstozero.com](http://www.fromaccidentstozero.com) using the code SHEQSA.

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