

Chapter 1: Why LEAD?

Chapter Summary

There are many different views on what safety leadership is and isn't. Workers tend to think safety leadership is primarily about compliance, which is secured through close scrutiny and enforcement of rules and standards. But safety leadership is so much more. The LEAD model is an evidence-based approach to safety leadership that lines up specific practices with specific situations. LEAD is also compatible with emerging ideas about how to do safety 'differently', as well as holding onto the best of what has come before. Overall, LEAD is built on a compelling argument that safety leadership is essentially good leadership, just applied to safety-specific settings. Understand the LEAD model, and you understand how to lead not only safety, but all other aspects of work as well.

When you ask workers "what is safety leadership", they tend to say the same things. They say: "reminding us about protocols to follow", "insisting on compliance", "going over safety regulations", and "saying that safety is very important". These are all examples of what 100 workers actually said when asked this question.

Safety is usually seen as a process of exerting control. A process of pushing back, slowing down, and 'toeing the line'. Mostly, safety is achieved using rules, standard processes, and safe working procedures. Add leadership into the mix and it becomes a process of *enforcing compliance* with such rules, processes, and procedures. Going a little further, safety leadership is described as care and concern for human life and the reduction of suffering.

Safety leadership, when done well, is just as much about freeing up and empowering your workers, as it is about making work predictable and holding people to account to fair standards of performance. Safety leadership is about striving and encouraging success under routine conditions, and also about creating an environment in which people feel safe to speak up and take on-board lessons learned. Safety leadership is *purposeful*. Safety leadership is *practical*. Safety leadership is *dynamic*. And most importantly, safety leadership is *specific to the situation*.

Here's some other ideas about the answer to the question: 'what is safety leadership':

"Good safety leadership manages to integrate safety into overall organisational performance. So, it's not a standalone goal, but it's part of what they need to do as their job."

"I think probably the best way to describe safety leadership is that it's a focus by on the safety culture of an organisation."

"It's about taking a proactive approach to engaging your people, and being interested in what's going on with those people"

"It's about interactions, and that's social interactions with people, and the way that in their social interaction that you convey the standard that you expect to see, or that you wish others to meet."

These quotes shine a path down which we can start to explore a more complex, realistic, and ultimately, more practical view of safety leadership.

LEAD takes safety leadership in exciting new directions, with practical tools to boot, that will give you the skills you need to make a difference to your team's safety. As a bonus, you will also see improvements in workers' engagement, morale, trust, and motivation to do the job well.

LEAD is designed to map specific safety leadership skills onto the work situation. This means that safety leadership is situationally-specific – *what* you do and *when* you do it matters. It also means that effective safety leadership isn't a stubborn and fixed 'style' that we learn about and apply mercilessly across all work domains.

As explained in several scientific papers¹, LEAD is a handy acronym that stands for four different safety leadership strategies: Leverage, Energise, Adapt, and Defend. Each of these strategies map onto specific work situations. For example, Leverage is about acting to clarify goals and roles, reinforcing effective safety practices (e.g., giving recognition and reward), and coordinating work, all of which are best used when work is routine and low-risk.

Energise is the next leadership strategy and refers to practices that concentrate on empowerment and ownership over decision-making among the team, inspiration, and fostering worker growth and development. It is best used when change is being considered or implemented.

In contrast, Adapt is about creating flexibility and prevention, through practices such as encouraging workers to reflect on past performance, building resilience to emergency and high-tempo situations, and fostering a team environment where people

feel safe to speak up and raise concerns. Consequently, Adapt is best used after an incident or following a major deployment or work shift.

Finally, Defend is the strategy that is best used during high-risk work. Practices include monitoring performance (i.e., taking an active interest in work), driving accountability and responsibility within the team, and creating a sense of vigilance and wariness to risks.

The four leadership strategies are important in all workplaces, so don't think of only one strategy as being the right one for you. Some workplaces might require more of one strategy than another. For example, working with hazardous chemicals will mean that Defend strategies are critical. However, we have found that a combination of strategies works best in almost every workplace. The reason is that every workplace will require people at different times to be motivated, or careful, or cooperative, or adaptive, or vigilant... the list goes on. No single strategy fits all the time, and no single workplace works in only one way

Have you ever experienced a static and fixed approach to safety in your workplace? If you haven't, I'm sure someone you know has. All it does is deal damage to the reputation and credibility of safety. Policing safety in an inflexible, intolerant, and, dare I say it, ignorant way, erodes trust, conveys a sense of disrespect, and drives a wedge between leader and worker. There has to be a better way.

Consider your typical working day. Within that day, there might be a whole host of different tasks and work situations that you deal with. Yet, safety is stubbornly fixed. 'Enforce that rule'; 'apply this procedure'; 'watch those troublesome workers and make sure they are following the right way of doing things'.

Most of what we know and do regarding safety, and as a direct result, safety leadership, is founded in thinking that is roughly a century old². It's called 'Taylorism' or 'Scientific Management'. Taylorism is the product of Fredrick Taylor, a mechanical engineer who wanted to improve industrial efficiency.

Around the time of Taylor, we were just coming off the tail-end of the Industrial Revolution, a period of great change and innovation. Taylor strived to understand how work could be done faster, better, and safer. In trying to reach this noble goal, Taylor made some discoveries and developed some principles about work:

- there is 'one best way' to do work,
- we can discover this best way by breaking work down into components, studying it, optimising it, then reassembling it, and,
- the way to achieve maximum output (and safety) is to prescribe the one best way into a procedure and enforce compliance with that procedure.

Many of you will see the hallmarks of modern safety management within these ideas promoted by Taylor. Unfortunately, Taylorism also drove a wedge between management and workers, which persists to this day. Taylor advocated for hierarchical organisational structures and the division of labour into those who do the work, and those who design/manage/supervise the work.

Today, we see signs of 'Taylorism on steroids'. Reports from big consulting firms like Deloitte state that over \$250 billion in the Australian economy is spent on compliance with regulations, laws, and internal bureaucracy³. Leaders spend eight hours or more each week doing compliance paperwork. Safety researchers are screaming that such activities, at best, add little value to operational safety, and at worst, actually make

things less safe.

Subsequently, we find that leaders in modern organisations tend to sit separate to workers who perform the ‘hands-on’ parts of the job. Leaders specify the one best way to do things, communicate that way to workers, and enforce compliance (or reinforce effective performance). Such a leadership style is best described as ‘transactional’, and we see this applied to safety wholeheartedly. Does your organisation routinely use punishment to ‘fix’ problems with safety? What about the use of terms such as ‘violation’ and ‘non-compliance’?

Transactional leadership is rife in the safety world. Many people think that they can only show their commitment to safety by writing a prescription, monitoring compliance, and sharply redirecting non-conformance. Granted, some of these actions will be needed from time to time, but this is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to safety leadership.

At this point, I encourage you to think about the answers to the following questions:

- how do you define safety?
- how do you achieve safety?
- how do you know you have achieved safety?

Jot down your answers here; we’ll come back to them shortly.



Others take a small step beyond the transactional and believe that safety leadership is about genuine care and concern. Psychologically, showing care and concern to workers is thought to build commitment and motivation by activating the ‘norm of reciprocity’. This norm or unwritten social rule states that when we receive something nice, we feel obligated to return the favour. This characteristic has been hardwired into us to create socially harmonious groups. It serves a useful purpose, and for safety, when care is coupled with transactional safety leadership (rewarding and punishing safe/unsafe acts), creates the conditions for improved compliance.

This idea of ‘care’ as a tangible expression of safety commitment nudges things forward a little, but still doesn’t get us to the core of what safety leadership is about. Safety leadership as care and concern slightly expands our domain of practice to include mental health and wellbeing, which is helpful, but is still lacking the punch we need to drive truly exceptional safety performance.

In short, safety leadership is very much determined by our ideas about what safety is (and isn’t) and the techniques and tools we have used to achieve safety. For decades, the dominant approach to safety has been rooted firmly in the idea of safety being about ‘preventing the bad stuff’ and achieving this through developing lumbering bureaucracies

that are a complex web of procedures and rules. A safety leader's job then becomes that of an enforcer or police officer.

In some organisations, workers are expected to comply with literally hundreds of different safety procedures. Organisations, in their quest for moral supremacy and cynically, perhaps to satisfy their clients' demands, espouse slogans like 'Zero Harm'. Yet is all this just 'wind in the willows'? How does a leader lead 'Zero Harm' in practice? How can a leader him/herself possibly enforce compliance with procedures and rules that workers, let alone the leader, couldn't possibly memorise or apply?

But this is changing. Take this short example of 'safety leadership differently' as a case in point:

"They had bookshelves full of procedures, operating procedures, safety procedures, so there's this poor culture about compliance. Often, they were not even workable, or they applied to a previous version of the equipment that they had. Top management, said look, we're going to turn this around. We're going to actually listen to all our team members, invite them to have their say in how they actually do the jobs on a day to day basis and document that and not just document that blindly into procedures. Can it be a job aid or does it have to be a step by step multiple pages document. They did this with all their workers and had discussions about this is from now on going forward the way that we do this job. Everybody could buy into that. They were involved in it. I think it was very modern thinking on the part of that organisation."

Our ideas about safety are evolving. Some would say a revolution is quietly

brewing and bubbling away. A few organisations have already embraced it; they call it things like ‘Safety Differently’, ‘The New View’, and ‘Safety-II’. For our purposes, let’s just call it ‘SD’ for short.

SD turns safety on its head, and as a result, our ideas about safety leadership as well. SD adds to the story by defining safety as the ‘presence of the good stuff’ or fostering positive capacities to succeed under varying conditions.

SD means we ask tough questions about why we are doing certain things, particularly if they don’t add value (think of the Take-5 tick-and-flick checklist). SD wants leaders to go beyond simple reward and punishment models and lift their eyes up from the forest of procedures so they, and their teams, can see the beauty of the sky above, and all the possibility for growth, development, and improvement that it brings.

Whereas our traditional ways of managing safety are founded on ideas like “people are a problem to control”, “variability or non-conformance is a threat to be corrected”, and “safety is a bureaucratic accountability”; SD takes safety into a new era with ideas like “people are solution to harness”, “variability is an opportunity to learn”, and “safety is an ethical responsibility”.

What does SD mean in practice? And importantly, what does it mean for safety leadership?

Well, for starters, SD means that leaders need to build trust with their teams. We need to create an environment that is ripe for learning. An environment where people feel safe to take interpersonal risks, like sharing a mistake, non-conformance, or ‘near-miss’ without fear of retribution, punishment, or ridicule.

SD means we need to understand the way work is actually done. Rather than

coming up with fanciful ways of doing the job that rarely match the actual practice (work as imagined), leaders need to get among the weeds, get their hands dirty, and jump down into the trenches (I've run out of clichés).

Safety leadership, under the SD philosophy, is about removing barriers, hierarchy, and constraints. It's about truly understanding what makes work, and workers, tick, and doing more of things that make it successful. It's about paying equal attention to things that go well and things that go wrong. It's about fostering expertise within a team, growing capabilities, and fostering a sense of purpose and meaning. Safety leadership goes beyond safety, and connects us back to 'good leadership'.

Another example of safety leadership that exemplifies SD is below:

"People on the ground were armed with the right information – they were owning a lot more of their safety stuff and that was led purely from a leadership group who at one point in time wouldn't even get out of the office and all of a sudden they're doing the field once a month to three days at a time and they were driving this new agenda and then all of a sudden you see a completely different demeanour. On the project, people weren't worrying about the 24/7 roster, they were there delivering their job and they made a significant amount of money doing it and they got out on time, on budget, and both companies were happy."

From an SD perspective, safety leadership is dynamic, which means our mode of operation changes in response to the work situation. It's no longer appropriate to have blanket rules and processes that apply blindly in all situations. Sure, some order and

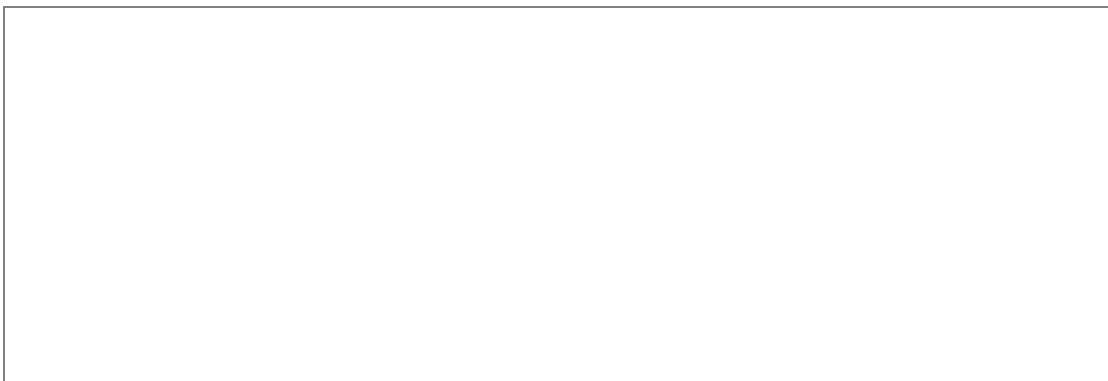
stability are helpful, but the trick is knowing when and how. LEAD offers some ideas in this space.

We need to measure safety by the presence of positives, as well as the absence of negatives, which means getting to know your team extremely well, warts and all, and working with them to develop their capacities to succeed. It means an effective safety leader knows when to apply the brakes, and how hard, and also when to put their foot on the accelerator, and even let their passengers have a go at taking the driving wheel.

Do you think you can build trust with your team if you throw safety procedures down their throats regardless of the situation? If you focus on the absence of negatives and compliance with unworkable processes? If you weigh safety heavily when the pressure is off, but when the proverbial hits the fan (which is precisely when we need safety the most), you focus instead on production?

I'll ask you those same questions again, differently (no pun intended):

- how could you define safety using new words and ideas?
- how else could you achieve safety?
- what else could you do to find out if you have achieved safety?
- what does all this mean for how you might do safety leadership differently?



For safety leadership to remain relevant and useful, our ideas about it must also evolve and keep up with this progress in how safety is thought about, practised, and improved.

An effective safety leader is nimble. He or she knows when the situation requires accountability; when it requires vigilance; and, when it requires monitoring. Even when a situation strikes that needs this type or mode of safety leadership, he or she has the tools to do the job respectfully, and understands the need to be fair, just, and understanding.

Now, I know what you might be thinking. Safety leadership is not just about being ‘soft’. About ‘going easy’ or ‘doing the fluffy stuff’. Quite the contrary. LEAD demands that leaders will need to make their expectations known. That they will set challenging goals and drive their teams towards them. That they will engage with workers directly and influence participation in the organisation’s initiatives. Safety leadership is not for the faint-hearted. You must thirst for improvement, success, and operating discipline. A LEADer uses the best of what has come before (Safety-I) and integrates it with the latest thinking in safety science (Safety-II). A blend of compliance and standardisation with the benefits of empowerment and engagement.

Not only is LEAD practical, but it is built on a foundation of science and evidence. There is a lot of pseudoscience out there when it comes to leadership, safety, and safety leadership. Rest assured, the LEAD model was developed through an academic collaboration between three universities, and has also been adopted by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (a safety regulator in Australia). We’ve carried out important and ground-breaking research to verify that LEAD is a valid and reliable safety leadership model (if you want to know more about this work, see the Appendix).

You're in good hands.

LEAD will also carry benefits outside safety and beyond. When a leader engages with workers meaningfully, helps them to learn, clarifies goals, and reinforces high performance, *all* domains of work activity receive a shot in the arm. This happens because LEAD defines safety leadership as good leadership practices applied in the domain of safety. In short, there really is no such thing as 'safety leadership'. There's no magical combination of behaviours that safety leaders do that sets them apart from everyday leaders. If there was, we'd have an infinite number of 'leaderships': production leadership, innovation leadership, quality leadership ... Plus, we like to keep things simple.

Phew!

Are you convinced?

Please, read on, and learn more about LEAD. I can promise you that if none of what we said above resonates, you'll find at least one of your own reasons why you could use LEAD in your workplace to improve safety leadership.

Reflection Questions

- How has your definition of safety leadership changed (or not) as a result of this chapter?
- What signs of the 'old view' or Taylorism with respect to safety can you see in your organisation?
- What are some of the 'pointless' safety activities undertaken in your organisation, and what could you do to either remove them or increase their effectiveness?

Practice Points

- Safety leadership is good general leadership applied to safety-relevant settings.
- Consider the specific work situation and how your leadership skills maximise your team's performance in that situation.
- LEAD has four key bundles of practices: Leverage, Energise, Adapt, Defend, which require markedly different skills to execute effectively.
- The key to good safety lies in embracing flexibility and adaptability as much as it does in ensuring compliance and minimising variability; the trick is understanding when to be flexible, and when to emphasise consistency.

Chapter References

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