Creating a team culture

IIRSM member Dan Terry considers the advantages of developing safety followers through soft leadership skills.

Over the last 40 years, many businesses have increased their organisational morale and made enormous strides in creating safer workplaces for all concerned by developing managed safety systems and procedures. Nevertheless, year-in, year-out, we are still experiencing some very serious and disturbing incidents. Systems management is obviously not enough to reduce such incidents; improved safety leadership is necessary.

What is followership?
It is axiomatic that the quality of leadership depends on the quality of followership. In comparison to ‘leadership’, little is heard about ‘followership’. A focus on followership helps to increase our understanding of leadership, especially within the safety and health arena.

Followership has been defined as ‘The leadership influence of a manager on subordinates’ (Conger et al. 2000). Leaders need followers; without followers, anybody would have immense difficulty in becoming any sort of leader. The question is ‘What are the best leadership practices to promote healthy followership?’

Many stress-loaded managers I meet want to manage less anxiously and to lead more effectively in response to our technologically, economically and demographically changing times. For this they need professional leadership techniques that, while assisting them in improving the bottom line, will also

generate fewer incidents, accidents, absenteeism and job dissatisfaction—a common symptom of the poor, outdated or inappropriate leadership that results in uninspiring organisational rigidity, and counter-productive presenteeism, a symptom of an employee’s insecurity in the workplace, for example being there in the place with subconsciously being present in the work. Combined with rapid changes in technology and an increasingly globalised marketplace, this all loads much more pressure on managers, leaders and companies to perform at optimally flexible and proactive rather than reactive response to the shifts, twists and turns of very competitive and mercurial markets.

The organisation’s best defence against being overwhelmed by such external competition is its impregnable, goal-focused internal cooperation to compete effectively, efficiently and economically. The relationship between cooperativity and competitiveness can thus be described as the balance of leadership with followership in the organisation. To this end it should be recognised that to achieve strategic organisational goals the common keynote of all leadership and followership decisions must be their ‘unity of purpose’. Such unity breaks down the redundant and counter-productive ‘us and them’ constructs of ‘capital and labour’ and thereby strengthens the whole organisation. The maintenance and development of this unity of purpose is therefore the core-duty of both leadership and followership in mutually supportive and developmental fellowship.

What are soft skills?
Many managers, while very well trained and educated in the technical skills side of their work, lack the soft skills necessary for the complex people issues and daily situations they face in their organisations.

Soft skills are those mutually understood attitudes, behaviours and practices of leadership and followership that polish technical competencies into accomplished performances. They include leading the organisation’s ‘climate’ in respecting and developing the uniqueness of each person’s emotional intelligence; their personal traits, skills, talents, gifts and abilities; their communication styles and their interpersonal skills. It is only in such a climate of cooperative, competitive and self-developmental followership-partnership that leaders and followers can together accomplish their team’s unifying purpose.

Some managers and leaders with whom I meet are open with me about their reservations regarding the use of soft skills, expressing that staff will believe they are potentially weak and cannot manage or lead a department. This is often rooted in their team’s conventional expectations of a manager to display stereotypical role behaviours, beliefs and attitudes.

I spend time with these leaders to explain that while technical skills are critical to a manager; the higher they ascend the management ladder the more pressure on managers, leaders and companies to perform at optimally flexible and proactive rather than reactive response to the shifts, twists and turns of very competitive and mercurial markets.

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with your followers, use the sort of role-inclusive words that will encourage them to draw out from their inner resources the very best of themselves. People are least likely to feedback when they are fearful of being judged – this can happen when departments are forced to compete unhealthily with each other, for example to compete without cooperation. A culture of ‘beating’ another department is the cancerous internal breakdown that rips apart organisations. Good leadership in unity of purpose is what creates good followership. Building rapport

When building rapport or tuning into the vast majority of the time this raising of rapport to the next level while getting buy-in is unnoticed to the person whom you are interviewing.

Developing followers

An organisation comprises a variety of people from different lifestyles and cultures. Each person has individual beliefs, attitudes and motivations, all of which have to be considered in recruiting and developing followers and, most importantly, in encouraging their safety. Many will have worked with you for some time, others will be relatively new and still not reflexively adapted to current safety performance norms. How robust and equally important, how universally recognised, understood, implemented and respected, are your safety management systems?

Examples

Do you talk to your team members? What about mostly?

Do you discuss the future and the past of the team and the balanced integration of role efforts? Do you help them make basic decisions in such a way that it develops their decision-making expertise, both individually and collectively? Do you deepen their understanding of their work by questioning and expanding their self-belief and confidence?

How do you build rapport with them?

Do you use appreciative inquiry, for example asking powerful questions that encourage inclusion and alliance?

How do you talk to your team members?

Do you pull them, push or inspire them? Are you communicating or just talking?

Do you listen to their views?

Do your followers understand how important it is to the team to know at all times how people view the current status of their roles in the evolution of the organisation if you are to adjust and keep projects on-track? Are you this flexible?

Do you know their names and use them?

Do you do so respectfully and with professional reserve? Always Mr or Miss etc.

Only you can answer this...

Become curious about your followers and how they actually do the work. Do not judge them: instead become a learner. Ask questions both of them and equally of yourself. Who? What? When? Where? How? Why? The best leaders do just that. If your followership fails it’s because somewhere along the line your leadership failed them.

Praise, discipline and recognition

Many of us will have heard the phrase ‘praise in public and reprimand in private’, but one has to be careful when giving praise in public if another member of the team has not performed, so take care in how and when praise should be given. The essence of powerful followership is unforgiving fellowship. Draw praise for a follower from that followers’ fellow. It is much more powerful and the sign of a leader rather than a boss.

What do they choose to do?

What do they have to do?

What do you really know what motivates your staff?

Do you respect individuality while still maintaining the team’s focus on its individual and collective goals?

Do you promote policies of inclusiveness, ability-sensitive procedure-differentiation, trained situational self-leadership procedures, documentation and feedback-centred, set review cycles?

References

Building high morale workplace by Anne Bruce (McGraw-Hill, 2003)

Tongue-Fu by Sam HAREN

Emotions revealed by Paul Ekman

Punished by rewards by Alfie Kohn

Safety followership

To unite ‘employees’ in purposeful ‘followership’; build quality one-to-one relationships and give and appreciate valuable feedback.

To unite ‘employees’ in purposeful ‘followership’; generate a true spirit of gratitude, when you say “Thank you!” it mean.

To unite ‘employees’ in purposeful ‘followership’; practise what you preach. Be every change that you want to see in your team.

To unite ‘employees’ in purposeful ‘followership’; promote your organisation’s culture, values and mission; coach and mentor your staff, make new team-members feel welcome.

And this above all things; integrity! To be the leader who can unite, for example integrate with ‘employees’ in purposeful ‘followership’; know yourself and be true to yourself. You need follow-through to transform activity into unity.

Sounds like a lot of work. But this is what is happening in many organisations as the profound influence, market-importance and cost-effective application of soft skill techniques on the bottom line becomes more deeply understood. Comparisons of the ‘before and after’ returns of these organisations starkly reveal the true, hidden costs of poor morale, avoidable incidents, absenteeism and the sort of unwittingly divisive ‘leadership’ that generates inappropriate followership. It’s no use expecting the team to pull together if everybody is pulling in different directions – nobody gets anywhere. Good leadership drives good followership, good followership drives even better leadership which in turn… well, you know the rest.

Team unifying techniques

The results of mastering these simple team-integration techniques are extremely useful for promoting between leadership and followers their unity of purpose.

To be interesting; be interested. Be mindfully present in every contact-moment with your team. Most of us can drift into being so busy talking about our work or ourselves that we can get carried away with getting our own point across rather than listening appreciatively to other points of view. Ask your followers questions about their current understanding of the work; get to know how they think. An 80/20 split where you contribute only 20% to the conversation and absorb 80% can have magical results. Listen with your eyes: observe the nonverbal behaviour of your fellow team members – see the meaning inside their words.

Remove certain words from your daily conversations:

Replace ‘but’ with ‘and’

Replace ‘should’ with ‘next time’

Replace ‘don’t’ block exit with ‘keep’ exit clear.

Many of these role-divisive words do not help when building the relationships about the ways in which they carry out their daily work. You may have done the job yourself at some point; however that was your way. The more trust, openness and respect you give to your team the more vital information you will absorb about the actual status of your mission.

Exhibit your appreciation of every individuals’ individuality, make the power of your leadership in appreciating the dignity of individuality the driver for the achievement of your team’s unity in common purpose. Your team will only value your leadership as much as you value their followership. That value of evidence-based, team-focused self-esteem is naturally expressed as the health and safety of all aspects of the team’s mission to accomplish its goals.

Matching and mirroring

This is a simple but effective process of observing and modelling the idiosyncratic spectrum of physical and verbal cues displayed by the subtle behaviours of a person with whom we are communicating. Without realising it, we all match and mirror others much of the time; even standing at a bus stop or during a training course people will, to some extent, automatically match communication cues. Matching and mirroring can be achieved by noticing and reflecting:

idiosyncratic speech patterns cultural vocabulary styles or specific words pace, tempo, pitch, tone and volume body language, such as the crossing of arms or legs the vast majority of the time this raising of rapport to the next level while getting buy-in is unnoticed to the person whom you are interviewing.

As with any cultural change journey, body language is not something to be forced on people but to encourage them. I use the ‘have to choose to’ technique on every training course I deliver:

What do you do on your team members? 
What about mostly?

Do you get on with your team members?

Do you really know what motivates your staff?

Do you really know what motivates you?

Course I deliver:

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What do they choose to do?

What do they have to do?

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