



In this five-part series, WorkSafeNB's Nancy Boucher, assistant director of safety leadership, reflects on bridging the gap between health and safety compliance and a positive safety culture.

(1) INTRODUCTION – Exploring a positive safety culture and how to get there

Over the past three to four years, WorkSafeNB has focused on creating a “positive safety culture” in New Brunswick. “Culture” has become a buzz word. Getting beyond the buzz words, I think we can all agree that we want to be part of workplaces that support our physical and mental health and prioritize our safety and well-being – in theory, a positive safety culture would provide such a place.

The big questions are “What does a positive safety culture look like” and “How do you make it happen?” “Where do you even start?” It can seem overwhelming. The obvious place most organizations rightly begin is with the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Ensuring that a workplace is safe and has health and safety policies in place is important. And it is the law.

I (and many researchers and consultants) advocate that basic compliance is not enough. Compliance does not in itself create a truly sustainable safety-driven business. Having safe equipment/materials and having binders of rules will not ensure that your teams consistently choose the safe behaviour when no one is watching.

A positive safety culture is based on valuing safety before all else.

When a positive safety culture exists, cutting corners on safety would feel terribly uncomfortable or unthinkable for a person. Leaders consistently ask “How will this decision impact the risk to my staff?” before they implement something and everyone does the safe thing even when no one is watching. A positive safety culture creates trust and empowers the organization and people to bring up safety concerns and solutions.

So what’s the missing link?

Having **leaders who are really good at people** is the answer. Leaders who care about their team members as individuals, who are able to build and maintain trust, and who are able to influence people without threat or coercion are successful at creating long-lasting positive safety cultures.

Effective leaders are the bridge between compliance and a positive safety culture.

What a leader values will set the tone and focus for everyone else. What a leader does and says or does not do and say will send messages about what is really important to the organization. Whether

safety takes a back seat to productivity, customer service or client satisfaction will depend on the leader.

It sounds like a lot of responsibility, doesn't it? Well, it is. With a position of authority comes inherent influence that must be understood and leveraged to ensure health and safety messages are clear, feedback will be willingly provided, positive behaviours are reinforced, unsafe behaviours are redirected, and team members feel supported, valued and protected.

The effort by a leader to create and maintain such an environment never ends.

While this may be overwhelming to a leader, it doesn't have to be. There is no magic bullet – there is no complex report to read or write, no extra meetings to arrange. There is no “one big thing” that will solve all your health and safety problems. **The biggest impact comes from the small things that leaders consistently do and say every day** to reinforce the message that the well-being of their people will never be compromised.

(2) TRUST: an essential component of a safe workplace culture

In part one of our series on safety leadership, I talked about leadership's role in creating a positive safety culture. Leaders within any organization must understand and leverage the influence they have in supporting a safe workplace that:

- Ensures health and safety feedback will be willingly provided by team members
- Reinforces positive behaviours
- Redirects unsafe behaviours
- Makes team members feel supported, valued, and protected

All these elements of a safe workplace have one thing in common: trust.

It's a small word that carries so much weight within teams, relationships, and organizations. Think about someone you don't trust. How willing are you to communicate with them? How much do you value their opinion or follow their lead? Likely, not very much. Now, think of someone you trust very much. It's different, isn't it? You want their opinion. You have no trouble working with and for them.

When we apply this concept to health and safety, **trust is key**. Safety concerns will be raised and feedback will be accepted only when trust-based relationships exist between leaders and their team members. **Trust fosters a collaborative, caring relationship where people work together to prevent harm and promote health for everyone.**

How is trust established?

Trust can be built or broken in the simplest ways. Leaders do small things, sometimes unknowingly, every day that builds or breaks down trust. I want to reflect on two important factors that make trust happen – credibility and reliability.

Credibility – know what you are talking about and what you don't know

When we think of someone being credible we usually think of someone who knows what they are talking about. You can believe them. Credible safety leaders know what they are talking about. Just as importantly, **credible safety leaders know when they don't know what they are talking about**. And they ask the right people. In the case of health and safety, the right people are usually the team members doing the work. They know the risks and hazards that they face every day. They also know solutions. A credible safety leader is comfortable enough with not knowing all the safety solutions and can ask those who do.

Reliability – it's all about follow-through

Does a person do what they say they are going to do? When a safety concern is raised, does a leader follow through in addressing it? This also involves the important circling back to the team to let them know what has or is being done or perhaps why an alternative action is being considered.

If trust is lacking, using the context of health and safety can help build it. Simply asking your team members for input on and following through and following up on any actions can help get you there. Our team members don't see our intentions, only our actions. **It's our actions that build trust in any relationship.**



(3) FEEDBACK: a powerful tool for behaviour change

In part two of our series on safety leadership, I talked about how safety concerns are raised and feedback is accepted only when trust-based relationships exist between leaders and their team members. Trust fosters a collaborative caring relationship where people work together to prevent harm and promote health for everyone.

In part 3, I want to talk about giving feedback in the context of health and safety.

I chose to write about trust first, because feedback is far more effective if trust is already established. Think for a moment of someone you trust. When they tell you something or provide advice, how do you receive it?

Typically, when we trust the people speaking to us or asking us to do something, we listen to them. We value what they are saying. Heck, we might even seek them out! Of course, the opposite is also true-- when there is mistrust defensiveness can rear its ugly head.

I want to walk you through three important steps to giving effective feedback that is heard and valued. Following these steps may cause improved trust, communication, and more collaboration with your team members.

1. Know the critical safe behaviours you want to see from your teams

We have been trained through a health and safety lens to go out and look for the hazards and risks, to find the bad stuff and fix it. This is the opposite of what we know drives a sustainable behaviour change, which is positive reinforcement. So instead, focus on what behaviours you want to build within your team.

2. Take time to observe

Schedule time to go to where the work is happening and look for those behaviours you want to see more of. Or plan to give feedback when you know you are already going to be doing a visit, a meeting or a walk-around.

3. Now, brace yourselves, step 3 is where it gets really wild. **Encouragement and acknowledgement**

When you see positive behaviour, tell the person you noticed it and thank them for it. Acknowledge that they are reducing risk to themselves and perhaps others and that it is appreciated.

Good leaders tend to acknowledge the positive things their team members do. Saying things like “Great job!” or “You’re so good at working safely” can go a long way. Great safety leaders are able to give specific feedback, on a specific behaviour, at the moment that the behaviour occurred. This gives a clear message that safety is an important value, it gives a clear message about what is expected; it makes the other person feel good and appreciated and they are more likely to continue doing that behaviour.

So, pick a behaviour. Go find people doing it and give them some positive feedback!

(4) DISCIPLINE: Yes or no?

If you’ve followed along with my thoughts from previous stories on creating safe and supportive workplaces, you’ll recall that we’ve talked about the importance of leaders in creating supportive and safe work environments. I hope that my last stories have inspired you to start thinking about how to develop and maintain trust with your teams and how to give specific and positive feedback to drive the behaviours that you’re looking for.

Today, I’m talking about discipline. Just seeing that word on the screen feels so negative, so opposite to my previous stories. If you’re thinking “But Nancy, how does discipline, a term associated with negative reinforcement and punishment, fit in?” you are not alone. We get asked regularly about whether discipline is an effective way of stopping risky workplace behaviour.

Here is my view.

There is a place for discipline. However, it can be done right and it can be done poorly. The same goes for recognition, but that’s the topic for next time! Imagine for a minute if you have a supervisor you do not trust –how well do you think you’d receive any type of correction, reprimand, or discipline from them? Likely, not very well.

Here are some key things to keep in mind when considering discipline in the workplace to address at-risk behaviour.

- **Be very clear about which behaviours will have disciplinary consequences.**

Usually these are behaviours that are high-risk for serious injury. For example, not locking out a machine, not wearing fall protection, or being violent toward a co-worker. Some organizations call these behaviours lifesaving behaviours, or zero tolerance behaviour.

- **Be very clear about what those consequences are.**

Everyone needs to know that performing the risky behaviour will result in a specific consequence.

- **Be consistent in the application of the discipline.**

Everyone must know that the consequence will occur NO MATTER WHAT – for any person, at any level of the organization regardless of if they were having a bad day, or forgot, or had never done it before.

- **Be sure employees are trained, supported, and have the tools to perform the job safely.**

Safety leadership is about creating an environment where workers can easily perform their job tasks with the least amount of risk possible. We cannot discipline someone for taking risks when we haven't provided them with the tools to do the task differently.

Excellent safety leaders know the critical behaviours needed to keep workers safe on the job, they are clear about safety expectations, and they are consistent in applying consequence when risk is taken.

(5) RECOGNITION: How do you do it right?

I've so enjoyed sharing my thoughts with you on how to rock it as a safety leader. By now, you know how important a trusting relationship is for creating a healthy, safe, and supportive workplace. You've practiced giving feedback to reinforce those critical behaviours you want to see and you've wrapped your head around how to give tough love in the form of discipline when it's necessary. If you're thinking that it still seems like it takes effort, then you're right. It does.

Safety leadership must be nurtured every day

I was giving a talk on safety leadership to a group of HR professionals when afterward, a gentleman came up to me and said "Nancy, I just find that I have to always be on it – talking to the guys, reminding them of safety procedures and protocol." My response was, "Yes. You do – and likely always will."

The topic may change, the behaviour you're trying to drive may change, but **to lead with safety requires intention and commitment to find ways to send clear messages, give feedback, and stay connected every day to learn from those doing the work.**

Now, where was I?

Recognition

Recognition is important in any workplace. Not just to encourage and support safe behaviours but also for work performance. Like discipline, recognition can be done right and it can be done very wrong. When positive recognition comes from a supervisor who is trusted, the impact is far more powerful.

Here are some key things to keep in mind in order to recognize effectively:

Be specific about what the person has done that has resulted in your noticing

Move beyond statements like "Good job", "You did that well", "I liked what you did". This type of feedback is nice, but it leaves it to the person to figure out what exactly they did that was "good". For example, I was working with a group of supervisors once who said they wished they had more specific safety data from senior management. They wanted to know more specific information than simply being told that their accident rates were "good". One fellow said "General recognition doesn't help me know what I should have my team keep doing. "Good job means I have to assume or guess what we're doing that's making the impact".

Be consistent about what you recognize

Being a consistent leader is important. We lose credibility and trust if at one time we recognize someone for something and another time we correct them on it. Or if we walk around telling everyone they are great at everything all the time! It waters down the meaning and is unclear.

Keep it simple and personal

This one is SO important. Pizza parties and gift cards as rewards for positive performance are ok, but they don't result in lasting behaviour change or do much to improve workplace relationships. I was facilitating a session with a group of joint health and safety committee members recently, and I asked them to quickly jot down some ideas on what leaders could do to recognize their teams. In a minute or two, they came up with 20 items that included: post-it note saying thanks, job well done boards, offer help and encouragement, give positive feedback right away, handwritten card, customized and special gifts. Not a bad list after just a few moments of reflection! Ideas like this are simple and thoughtful.

Safety leadership is about driving critical behaviours and strong relationships through positive recognition. **Be specific, be consistent, and be personal!**

Keep at it every day. You got this!

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