

# Impact of Transformational Leadership on Safety Culture

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## Introduction

One of the key leadership approaches adopted by many leaders to influence subordinates' safety behaviour is to use reward and punishment systems. This is known as transactional leadership (Northouse 2016). In contrast, transformational leadership style "evokes changes in subordinates' value systems to align them with organizational goals" (Clarke 2013) and numerous studies had shown that it has positive effects on the safety behaviour and safety participation of subordinates. This presentation will highlight how leaders can adopt transformational leadership style so as to engender positive safety culture in their workplace.

## Transformational Leadership

Many leadership theories were developed over the years, but since Downton (1973) coined the term *Transformational Leadership*, it became one of the most widely researched leadership theory (Northouse 2016). So what is *Transformational Leadership*? It is widely accepted that transformational leadership encompasses the following distinct but correlated dimensions (the 4 'I's):

1. idealized influence, i.e. leader instils confidence and behaves in admirable ways that cause the followers to identify with him/her
2. inspirational motivation, i.e., leader inspires others towards goals, provides meaning, optimism and enthusiasm, and articulates a vision that is appealing and inspiring to others
3. intellectual stimulation, i.e., leader challenges assumptions, takes risks and encourages subordinates to be creative
4. individualized consideration, i.e. leader shows interest in subordinates' personal and professional development and listens to followers' needs and concerns

## Transformational Leadership and Safety Culture

At the same time, many research had shown that workplace safety and health (WSH) leadership is one of the key criteria of a positive safety climate or culture (Zohar 2010). In essence, "leaders create climate" (Lewin et al. 1939). To facilitate ease of discussion, climate is deemed to be a proxy to culture in this article, i.e. they are treated as "pretty much the same thing". In the case of transformational leadership, it is quite intuitive that transformative leadership will have positive impact on safety culture. A closer look at each of the 'I's in transformational leadership will shed more light on the relationship between transformational leadership and safety culture (adapted from Clarke (2013)):

1. Idealized Influence: managers adopting transformational leadership are role models by doing what is morally right as compared to focusing on production goals only. Idealized influence encourages focus on WSH and sustainable ways of working, in contrast to prioritising short-term

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benefits due to work pressure. Leaders high in idealised influence will demonstrate their personal commitment to WSH as a core value. The personal commitment will improve followers' trust in management and loyalty, which can lead to improvement in overall performance.

2. **Inspirational motivation:** transformational leaders motivate followers to be part of the organisation's shared vision and go beyond their individual needs. In terms of WSH, transformational leaders inspire their followers to achieve safety levels previously believed to be impossible, e.g. Vision Zero. Transformational leaders frequently use symbols and stories to articulate their vision and inspire followers.
3. **Intellectual stimulation:** Intellectual stimulation arises when leaders encourage followers to address WSH issues and enhance information sharing by challenging long-held assumptions and promoting innovation in WSH. This engenders a learning culture, where followers become more aware of and better understand WSH problems, encouraging innovative, rather than reckless solutions.
4. **Individualized consideration:** transformational leaders have strong and sincere interest in their followers' well-being, which naturally includes WSH. Transformational leaders are not satisfied with compliance with WSH legislations because they want to ensure that their followers do not experience injuries and ill health.

### Empirical Evidence

The positive impact of transformational leadership on safety culture and safety performance is supported by empirical studies. For example, Barling et al. (2002) studied 174 restaurant workers and 164 young workers from diverse jobs using selected questions from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio 1990), shortened version of the safety climate questionnaire by Zohar (1980) and they also measured the self-reported safety consciousness and safety incidents. The study showed that, among other factors, safety-specific transformational leadership play a significant role in influencing "safety climate, safety consciousness, and safety-related events." On the other hand, passive leadership is shown to be related to poorer safety climate (Kelloway et al. 2006). Thus, past studies had shown that leadership influences climate and in turn, climate had been shown to influence occurrence of workplace injuries (Huang et al. 2012). Thus, transformational leadership is a potentially powerful tool to influence safety culture and WSH.

### Transformational Leadership Practices

Based on the 4 'I's, leaders can adopt the following practices to be more aligned with transformational leadership (Kouzes and Posner 2002):

1. **Model** the way: Be clear about own values and philosophy and be a role model.
2. **Inspire** a shared vision: Develop compelling vision that help followers visualise the positive outcomes and see how their dreams can materialise.
3. **Challenge** the process: Transformational leaders are pioneers because they are willing to experiment, try new things and learn from mistakes so as to achieve better results.
4. **Enable** others to act: Outstanding leaders are effective at working with people by building trust, promoting collaboration and listening respectfully. They empower others to make decisions and feel good about their work by linking with greater purposes.
5. **Encourage** the heart: Be attentive to followers' need for recognition and reward. Show appreciation and encouragement to others.

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### Conclusions

Transformational leadership has the potential to improve the performance of organisations, including safety culture and hence WSH performance. Positive changes in followers' behaviour will take time, but persistent implementation of transformational leadership will reap results in WSH and organisational performance in general. This is not saying that it is the only leadership style that is applicable to all situations. Successful leaders will have to have the wisdom to observe and apply the suitable leadership actions in different situation so as to improve WSH. In the end, leaders have to take upon themselves to use transformational leadership or other approaches to convince their followers to adopt safer work methods.

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