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FROM COMPLIANCE TO CULTURE: HOW LEADERSHIP SHAPES A SAFER WORKPLACE



Churchill's legacy: the power of leadership in a crisis

During World War II, Britain faced relentless bombing raids, threatening the nation's spirit.

In 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill showed true leadership when he walked across the rubble of Coventry, speaking with survivors and comforting families. His presence showed that leadership is not about leading from safety but standing beside your people in hardship.

He later inspired the nation with his famous words: *We shall fight on the beaches... we shall never surrender*, reinforcing Britain's resilience and his unwavering belief in their strength.

His leadership during this crisis reflected a vital principle: true leaders are visible, present, and lead by example.

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The importance of safety leadership in the workplace

The same theory applies in workplace health and safety. Leaders who actively engage with employees—walking the floor, identifying risks, and showing care for people's wellbeing—create a safety culture that goes beyond compliance.

Safety leadership is not about policies on paper; it is about leaders who *stand in the rubble* when it counts, reinforcing through action that safety is a shared responsibility.

When executives prioritise safety through consistent, visible behaviours, employees follow suit. They see safety as more than compliance—they see it as part of who the organisation is.

Example: A plant manager who always wears PPE, participates in safety inspections, and engages workers in toolbox talks sends a stronger message than a poster on the wall ever could.

The cost of disengaged leadership

Too often, workplace health and safety is approached as a regulatory checkbox rather than a foundational part of organisational culture.

Some executives assume that once systems and policies are in place, safety will run itself without their direct involvement. This passive, hands-off approach creates a dangerous gap between policy and practice.

When leaders are absent from safety efforts yet expect employees to comply, they send a mixed message.

Minor infractions like smoking in assembly zones, ignoring parking rules, or using phones while driving company vehicles may seem trivial, but they reflect deeper cultural cracks. If safety rules are not consistently modelled by leadership, employees may interpret them as negotiable.

The consequences of a weak safety culture are real and costly: increased incidents, *compensation claims*, legal disputes, and reduced productivity.

More critically, it places employee health and business sustainability at risk. For safety to thrive, leaders must move from delegation to demonstration, actively championing the standards they expect others to follow.

How can leadership turn safety protocols into practice?

A key distinction in organisational success lies in the difference between management and leadership.

Management focuses on executing predefined tasks and coordinating resources to achieve organisational goals. Leadership, however, is about inspiring and guiding people towards a shared vision. It involves strategic planning, decision-making, communication, relationship-building, and fostering motivation (University College Dublin, n.d.).

Leading by example is particularly critical in workplace safety. When executives actively participate in safety initiatives, they reinforce their importance and encourage a culture of accountability. A top-down approach where leadership prioritises safety and demonstrates unwavering commitment, significantly increases adherence to protocols and reduces potential losses. For this strategy to be effective, top management must not only understand safety regulations but also engage with them firsthand, ensuring that employees recognise their significance and embrace best practices.

Top-down engagement is more than oversight; it is ownership. When leaders model safety excellence, they permit others to do the same.

The power of leadership communication

One compelling case study is BP's approach to safety leadership. BP, a multinational energy company, recognised that effective leadership is essential for maintaining safety standards. In 2023, BP's internal learning and development team partnered with an immersive training vendor to enhance leadership behaviours that drive adherence to safety principles.

The training focused on improving communication, building trust, and having difficult conversations about risks. A study involving 82 leaders measured the impact of this programme, revealing that 91% of participants improved the effectiveness of their safety conversations. This demonstrates how leadership directly influences workplace safety and reduces hazardous incidents (Paul Leone, 2024). It reinforces a key truth: leadership training is not optional. It is foundational to prevent incidents and foster a resilient safety culture.

In conclusion

Organisations that thrive in safety do so because leadership does not delegate culture; it drives it. When leaders walk the talk, they build more than compliance; they build trust, resilience and performance. It is time to lead from the front, because safety starts with you at the top.

SERR Synergy helps business leaders embed health and safety into their company culture by making safety leadership visible, measurable and impactful. Our Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) team works alongside executives through coaching, compliance support, and structured feedback, ensuring that leaders remain actively engaged and accountable. By shifting safety from a compliance obligation to a core business value, we help organisations to build trust, strengthen workplace culture, and achieve sustainable long-term success.

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Bibliography

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