



SAFETY LEADERSHIP DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

By Anil Mathur and Robert Pater

Master strategists know that certainty is an illusion, that the best leaders are most needed and actually make their greatest impact when everything is up in the air, changing, shifting and buffeting.

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During those times even the most clear-eyed visionaries can at most predict a wide range of possibilities that might be marginal at best. When branching paths veer toward vastly disparate, not readily predictable futures and where the only certainty is stress. In the land where the classic VUCA situation (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) prevails. Situation normal for many leaders.

Ultimately, safety (and safety leadership) entails anticipating and evaluating hazards, and recognizing that the hazards that actually manifest depend on which particular uncertain outcome unfolds. And uncertainty always poses a wide range of risks to operational integrity and to organizational fitness (or even survival). To avoid getting blindsided, the best safety leaders dedicate time and emphasis to dealing with current unknowns and toward preparing for different or even greater uncertainties. They know it is not possible to know everything and that what they don't see can lead to hurting workers and to damaging company capabilities.

Uncertainty has many shapes and flavors. External contributing forces include wild market fluctuations, looming-or-only-maybe mergers or acquisitions, leadership upheavals, who-knows-what-or-when changing regulations (or regulators), shrinking or folding operations, partial downsizing, market shifts, customer or competitor upheavals, and more.

But uncertainty is not just external forces that are outside leadership control. Internal factors also boost uncertainty. These are potentially more influenceable by leaders and are often related to a lack of strong planning, weak communication or a culture that doesn't allow thinking through how to execute work safely.

It's during these times of unsureness or upheaval that best leaders are most needed and best shine, relying on their well-developed perception, decision-making and make-it-happen skills to right a rocking ship, prevent capsizing and steer it toward safer or at least calmer waters.

Anil has been CEO and president of Alaska Tanker Co. (ATC) for 18 years. During that time, the company has been profitable and even working with a myriad of potential risk exposures (e.g., rolling/listing vessels, long hours, working in the dark, vertical ladders, physical work with slip/trip/fall potential), ATC has worked 23 million hours with one lost-time injury (a broken finger), going through times of letting ships go, changing over to fewer but

much larger tankers. All this in an industry with significant ups and downs and looming uncertainties. He has found, and he has a long track record to back him, that people can achieve extraordinary performance under difficult conditions.

So, here's the secret of best leaders: they don't wait for the storm to hit to start steering. They prepare in advance. And, like master internal martial artists, they live in each moment as much as possible so they are ready for any attack of change. Seems obvious? As that martial arts saying goes, "The best secrets keep themselves." Saying is easy, doing during stress-thumping times, not so much. The key is having concrete, detailed plans for different outcomes. These plans can become something to adapt from if yet a different path manifests.

High-level safety leadership is a subset of overall leadership. One article cannot cover everything we've experienced and learned about leading during times of uncertainty, and by nature of the medium, it has to be generalized. Words aren't always impactful change-provokers. As a reader, you'll get the most by framing the situations you face in such a way that the plan results in tangible, effective action. In the end, only action produces results.

Seven High-level Strategies, Principles & Practices for Leading Through Uncertainty

Safety (and safety leadership) ultimately entails anticipating and evaluating hazards. To avoid getting blindsided, which can result in mounting injuries and eroding culture, wise leaders rely more on managing potential uncertainties than just on scrambling to react effectively to emerging problems. This is how we think of strongest leadership. And our experience with many organizations over numerous years (Anil in the oil and shipping industries with a wide array of risk exposures for over two decades, Robert consulting with hundreds of such companies) consistently shows the core attributes for successfully leading during rocky conditions boil down to: 1) taking care of people first; and 2) setting protective daily practices into place. How to accomplish this?

1) Turn to Your North Star

When faced with difficult choices, turn to your North Star for navigation. Best safety leaders are willing to take career risks to reduce the physical risks their teams have to deal with. Rather than tell workers, "You should stop this job any time you feel it's less than safe," find opportunities to actually do

so yourself. Lead by example, not by articulating highly cerebral commitments that can't be verified or put into practice.

Tack to and take comfort in your beliefs. Remember that there's no way to know for certain that any implemented strategy will produce desired effects. Leaders should best rely on their underlying belief system to be their guiding North Star in stormy or dark times. And remind themselves to trust in this, to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. So, of course, be sure to know and strengthen your own belief system; after all, how can you change others' beliefs if you aren't deeply anchored in your own?

During dynamic times, keep your end point in mind (e.g., uncompromising worker safety) even when you're not always sure how to get there without being wedded to any one preset method.

How to best use your North Star? Have the courage (and we recognize this is a lot easier to write or say than to do) to take visible stands that might disagree with or go against the prevailing norms or current culture. Anil relates several stories of the importance of him standing up for his beliefs even when, in fact especially when, this could risk his leadership position. For one, when he was working offshore (in the North Sea) for BP Exploration, he shut down an expensive-per-day rig due to lack of adequate planning for safe transfer of new equipment and supplies. His boss later tacitly backed him up, even though Anil knew when he took action that he risked getting disciplined or fired. And this is far from the only such story that Anil shares where he has stood up for his North Star safety commitment and beliefs when doing so was potentially dangerous for him.

That's the point of a North Star. When land is in sight, when weather is clear, an inner navigation compass is not needed as much. Compare this to moving through choppy or worse seas where visibility is obscured; this is when to seek out and latch onto such guidance.

Asking pointed questions is another way to demonstrate your values. Remember that asking is better than telling (management guru Peter Drucker contended that asking the right questions is more important and useful than trying to come up with the right solutions). Better than just saying, "I care about your safety," sample concrete North Star questions of workers that delve deeply into the specific safety aspects of the job they are executing. Examples might be, What job are you working on? How does safety fit into this task? When you're lubricating that valve, how old is the grease? Does this action actually create any safety concerns for you? How do you check the brakes on that to know they are engaged? If the O-ring needs changing and you don't have the right one on hand and this is a potential safety risk, what will you do?

Another example of demonstrating your values: fighting for the time, money and people resources

necessary to do a job safely. And let your team see that you're doing this.

Yet another enlisting North Star opportunity: how you handle it when job safety analyses (JSA or JHA) are being discussed. Do you raise objections and concerns or try to talk workers out of bringing these up?

General rules of thumb: Talk less and engage more. Remember that choices and actions reveal your priorities. Speak in terms that workers relate to, rather than in well-meaning but too general terms, such as, "Safety is number one" or "We want you to be able to go home unhurt at day's end."

You may not receive many kudos in the short term, but a consistent and sincere belief in and passion for safety will show itself in your actions and, for many companies, actually accrue respect and allow you to do even more. Anil is a living example. But, according to him, if this doesn't work out too often, think through and consider whether your company is a good fit for you in the long term. Working out of sync with the navigation signals from your North Star typically leads to job dissatisfaction and eventually burnout.

2) Cultivate Trust

Trust is a critical foundation supporting receptivity to change, engagement and leadership, all of which are essential high-performance ingredients especially in uncertain times. And leaders can go a long way toward forming, rebuilding and reinforcing stronger trust. Your team has to trust you to follow you, and you can't be a leader without followers.

We've seen during times of stress that people tend to listen less to what leaders say and watch more what leaders actually do. And anything a leader says or does will be examined even more closely when the organization is under the stresses of uncertainty. Leaders should keep this in mind, not relying on the assumption that saying the right things is enough to reassure or redirect a stressed workforce. Most of your team have heard the right high-level statements made many times, and have likely become tone deaf to them.

Studies such as the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer continually reassert that the trust link in many relationships has become more rusted. Three takeaways from the 2019 Edelman study: 1) the more informed people are, the significantly greater their levels of trust; 2) both the informed and mass public share an urgent desire for change; and 3) "engagement and action" are critical to elevating trust. An Edelman (2019) recommendation? "Employees are ready and willing to trust their employers, but the trust must be earned through more than 'business as usual.'"

Think of two pillars of trust: intent and competence. The first basically means "Do you care?" While saying the right words are important, these are even more potentiated when linked to experience and consistent with actions.

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The second pillar of trust, competence, refers to whether I believe you have the power and ability to get done what you say you're going to do. Many managers and professionals undercut trust by over-promising what they can effectively accomplish in a given period.

During times of uncertainty, it's critical for leaders to demonstrate consistent intent (e.g., uncompromising dedication to worker safety) and competence (following through on complaints, concerns, potential safety and other pitfalls that arise). While there is a lot that goes into this, some tips include:

- Avoid the trust impatience trap, the desire to build trust quickly. If leaders push too hard for acceptance, it will fail or even backfire. The song lyrics say, "You can't hurry love" and neither can you hurry trust.
- When instituting less-desirable changes that look like takeaways, fully explain the reasons for this: how times have changed, how even if this is not an ideal option it is better than the alternative (e.g., layoffs). Always present a balanced view. Clearly show the potential advantages and downsides of any considered change (explaining how the chosen change has more upsides than downsides).
- Exemplify leadership. Do what you expect of others rather than broadcasting that rules don't apply to you.
- Find common ground in times of conflict and distrust, even if this initially appears to be minimal. Build on this to strengthen relationships.
- Focus on being hard on issues and gentle on people, but remember that people can take any criticism as a personal attack. So leaders have to do their best to reduce defensiveness.

3) Practical & Ongoing Scenario Planning

Project the varying effects of different potential futures. For example, determine what kinds of events might ripple out from a significant downturn in product (oil) prices or if regulators change direction on safety or environmental regulations. The keys to strong scenario planning are: 1) do this over time, not just in a one-shot retreat; 2) involve several people with different perspectives, including some who are in opposition to senior leaders' perspective; and 3) be open to considering even least-desirable or unlikely possible futures.

4) Experience It

Understanding comes from experience. Don't underestimate the power of showing up. Face time is key to building trust. Leaders have to spend time with workers beyond meetings or conferences to deeply understand workers' issues and concerns. It's critical to visit sites while people are actually working. Too many leaders we've seen don't understand this, assuming this is wasted or low-leverage usage of their in-demand schedule. Remember that developing organizational relationships takes time and patience, it's more emotional than cerebral

(although making sense is also prerequisite, but not enough by itself, for building strong working relationships).

Further, don't underestimate the power of individual communications, rather than only broadcasting mass messages to change mind-sets. This is one reason that it's critical for leaders to get out and about on work sites, where workers are doing their daily tasks. What you say even in a small group is bound to spread to others, sometimes in a much more effective way than announcing it to a large group.

Listen, listen, listen. We can't underestimate how very powerful it is for your team to experience the sensation of being fully heard and understood. Don't wait for issues to come to you; sincerely seek out and sample others' concerns. Have you heard a leader say, "There's no point in going to the work site because I don't have anything new to say"? Better to listen than to tell, especially in times of uncertainty and stress. There's significant value in leaders becoming a lightning rod for concerns, fears and hopes during times of change. As well as potentially reducing worker negativity and heightening trust, this can spur more creative alternatives in leadership planning.

5) Monitor Others' Reactions

Remember that all actions are actually interactions. It's essential to go back to what the workforce believes in as a starting point in change. Almost all difficult and successful change takes individuals through a four-step process: denial, anger, acceptance and then cocreation. Patience and excellent listening skills are both needed to let this cycle play out to effectively implement change.

Bear in mind that uncertainty always involves current or potentially looming change, which always involves losing something (at the very least, accustomed ways of doing things, even when these are only minimally effective or pose undue safety risks). Impending loss and having to adjust to new methods is a main reason that people tend to resist change, especially change over which they have limited control.

6) Boost Self-Control

So, provide workers with as much control as feasible. At the very least, transfer mental and physical skills that workers can deposit into their internal safety bank to draw from as they need. Mental skill sets include: practical mindfulness, attention control, better assessment and decision-making, how to elevate sleep health, a mind-set of taking control of personal safety and more. Physical skill sets include: balance (a truly internal skill that can significantly help prevent a wide range of injuries from soft-tissue to slips/trips/falls), redirection of forces away from more vulnerable body areas (e.g., lower back, knees), elevating usable strength and employing leverage.

Uncertainty typically elevates stress. We define stress as the feeling of being out of control. And

most people's first mental reaction to stress is narrowing attention; this tunnel vision is associated with a wide range and numbers of close calls and injuries. Tunnel vision also results in short-term thinking or planning.

A common reflexive reaction to uncertainty or change is "how will this affect me?" Often, the immediate response to this is panic-projecting, imagining a worst-case scenario. Any safety strategies, methods or techniques that boost self-control will also help people enlist rather than be victimized by the stress of uncertainty. Note that this doesn't necessarily change outside forces at play, but will help leaders and everyone else better utilize, redirect and minimize adverse impact of these forces.

7) Change Mind-Sets

This is the both the most difficult thing to do but also the most leveraging. One important aspect of this is for leaders to send consistent messages to members of the workforce that they care. We have repeatedly seen how much good can come from this.

There are two critical elements to changing mind-sets: 1) Leaders should be open to their own mind-set being modified by others' thoughts, perspectives or concerns. If you want to influence others, it's important to be receptive to their influencing you. Information or perspectives may come up that you didn't think of. 2) Communicate with concern, even if/when your ducks are not totally in a row, and your ducks will never be totally lined up in a row during uncertain times. Let them know early. Your team's capacity to understand and accept that a situation is still developing may amaze you. People can handle this. This demonstrates actual concern much more than just words (e.g., "I'm concerned about you").

Be willing to share partial/interim information and plans, rather than waiting until everything is signed and sealed even if this means communicating, "I can't tell you more at this time, as some things are undecided or up in the air. Here's what I can say. And I'll let you know more as soon as I can."

Enlist curiosity and wonder as positive reframing mind-sets during uncertainty. Uncertainty is stressful, but stress definitely has positive elements: excitement, energy, wonder. Adam Smith is famous for being the "invisible hand" free market proponent of capitalism. In his 1795 book, *History of Astronomy*, Smith wrote that wonder is crucial for science (in that it's a strong driver for scientists and all other explorers/breakers of new ground), defining wonder as that staring and sometimes that rolling of the eyes, that suspension of the breath and that swelling of the heart (Prinz, 2013).

In both personal face-to-face and written communications to his entire company, Anil often lauds the power of curiosity. This reframes uncertainty as a time of new rather than hopelessly dire possibilities, where change is possible for the better, when chal-

lenges and exploration can be exciting and further achievements possible.

Changing mind-sets during times of uncertainty entails leaders developing the wisdom and skill of knowing what to say and when and how to say it. Yes, this can entail taking leadership risks. But, as the saying goes, fortune favors the bold.

Uncertainty is like the storm. Leaders have to develop the flexibility to handle how it plays out. Communicate with the underlying mind-set that together we will find a way to do well. Even in times of threatening turmoil, miraculous results can occur when people really trust that leaders are both truly concerned about them and are able navigators. Strong leadership steadies a ship and an organization before, during and after uncertain times. **PSJ**

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