

IF YOU ONLY HAVE A HAMMER

By Dr Brett Solomon

14 November 2015



It is not uncommon to hear leaders complain about their workforce's poor performance, unwillingness to take responsibility and, in particular, their unsafe actions. Managers often wish workers would just listen, follow orders and comply to set procedures. The burning question is: how do they, as leaders, influence their team's behaviour?

On the surface, it seems like a valid question. However, it too easily overlooks the reality that people's behaviour is often a reflection or response to their working culture. For example, if a supervisor is habitually overbearing, unreasonable and, at times, demeaning toward their team members, this can produce resentment, which will have a significant impact on their commitment and feelings towards the company.

To create a healthy working environment, we might want to consider a different strategy. Could we be more efficient if we moved away from the notion of trying to change our workforce's conduct, toward creating working conditions where employees naturally want to give their all? Results are always the outcome of behaviour. Having mindful people working safely reduces the likelihood of incidents. This is why we naturally gravitate to implementing systems. These are an attempt to coordinate or control our worker's actions. Logically, if you are able to get the appropriate behaviour, the results will naturally follow, but a critical component is missing; behaviour is always a reflection of one's attitude and beliefs.

Someone's belief system is the way someone thinks and feels about something. These beliefs trigger matching behaviour. It is irrelevant whether it is right or wrong, if I believe safety is a hindrance to achieving my targets then whenever possible I will take shortcuts. The working conditions and how leaders interact with their staff have a direct bearing on the beliefs and attitudes of their team members. Leaders can preach safety, but if they demand unreasonable production goals, workers will believe that high-risk behaviours are expected. Regardless of what the leader intended, what people believe will ultimately fuel their actions.

Wouldn't it be a joy if we no longer had to monitor employees on a regular basis? This can only happen in an environment where they give their best and choose to work safely, because of a positive intrinsic attitude. It will never materialise in a culture of forced compliance. There

is an old saying that “you manage systems and lead people”. Management is critical when it comes to systems and processes; however, when it comes to our team, it requires leadership.

Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate how we lead our people and the culture we have created. Instead of trying to modify worker’s behaviour, it might be more advisable to ask ourselves: “How effective is my leadership? How much of my team’s functioning is actually a reflection of how I treat and engage them?” Probably the change required lies with us as leaders first.

As leaders, maybe we should amend the questions we are asking. Consider these questions to reflect on your safety culture:

- What type of working environment do I need to create that will stimulate responsibility, initiative taking, innovation and safe practices?
- What benefits would come from focusing on building internal motivation instead of relying on external reward schemes or disciplinary processes?
- What could I do to empower my people to take responsibility for their safety?
- What systems or policies are counterproductive to the culture we desire?
- What adjustments do I need to make?
- How can I engage my team in a way we get more buy-in?

As leaders, we can be comfortable with our leadership style irrespective of whether it is working or not. We are in charge, and we expect our people just to do whatever we say. However, if what we are doing isn’t getting us the results we want, is there a different approach that could? As the saying goes – if you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail

Dr Brett Solomon is the CEO of The Kinetic Leadership Institute and is a recognised leader in combining neuroscience, change management and leadership theory to drive cultural transformation processes. Brett specialises in neuroleadership, especially when it comes to an understanding of what motivates human behaviour and how to influence it. He has been involved in numerous culture change and leadership development initiatives throughout Africa, Australia, Canada, Saudi Arabia and the USA.