

Safety Leadership

Experts from DEKRA Organizational Safety and Reliability weigh in on what leaders need to know

How leaders can rethink their role amid the COVID-19 pandemic

By Don Martin

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Achieving and sustaining an injury-free workplace demands strong leadership. In this monthly column, experts from global consulting firm DEKRA Organizational Safety and Reliability share their point of view on what leaders need to know to guide their organizations to safety excellence.*

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC is creating unprecedented disruptions in our personal and professional lives.

As a leader, this moment requires thinking differently about how you manage. It starts by taking stock of new realities that are increasing the risk we face at work.

You might have fewer people working. Your teams might be smaller, they might be doing more work and they might be working longer hours. Some people may be working remotely; they may be using more technology, which may be a new experience for many; and they may be following new work practices that require physical distancing.

People are also distracted by adjustments in their home lives. Their children are home from school, or maybe their spouse is sharing their home office.

With all of these new realities in mind, what can you do differently as a leader? Here are seven things you can do right now to show your workers that you have their back and will help protect them during this time of heightened anxiety.

- 1. Frequently check in on your people.** Do this individually and in groups. Ask about their well-being, as well as that of their family, friends and co-workers.
- 2. Help them make better, safer decisions that are protective of themselves and others.** For example, help them recognize opportunities when decision-making comes into play. If my normal crew has four members and now I only have two, I might ask, "Can we pace the workload so we don't run into brain or physical muscle fatigue? Is it OK to slow down? Is it OK to swap jobs more frequently? Can we take more ergonomic stretch breaks during the day?"
- 3. Be more accessible.** This may mean widening your door of availability. Recognize that people are worried and may need to talk with someone in management. This might mean checking in with them more frequently. You also need to make it easy for your team to get in touch with you. Give them your cellphone number and answer when they call. Being more accessible will help you

guide them through the decisions they need to make to control their exposure situations.

- 4. Be empathetic.** See things from their point of view and walk a few steps in their shoes. This will help convey a sense of understanding of what they're up against.
- 5. Express confidence and support.** "We will get through this" and "It's OK to pause work for safety reasons while we figure things out."
- 6. Say "thank you" and acknowledge that what they're doing to help each other and their company is appreciated.** Know that people are managing disruptions in their personal lives and they still continue to do their jobs well and safely. Convey sincere gratitude for the professionalism and the care workers bring to their job every day. When people know you care about them, they'll likely do more for you and their co-workers. This is a great chance for you to show that your organization has a human face.
- 7. Identify who your go-to person is.** Someone you can talk with, to lean on for support. Burnout is a real threat for all leaders, and you need to remember to take care of yourself so you can take care of others.

This is a moment in time that will shape not only the future of your company, but your future as a leader. The ultimate financial consequences of this crisis are unknown, and we can't control that. But what we *can* control is how we behave as leaders.

The best boss I ever had taught me something important decades ago, and it's still true today. He told me, "It's easy to be a good leader when things are going great, but your real test as a leader comes when times get tough."

So, how will you measure up? 

This article represents the independent views of the author and should not be construed as a National Safety Council endorsement.



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