

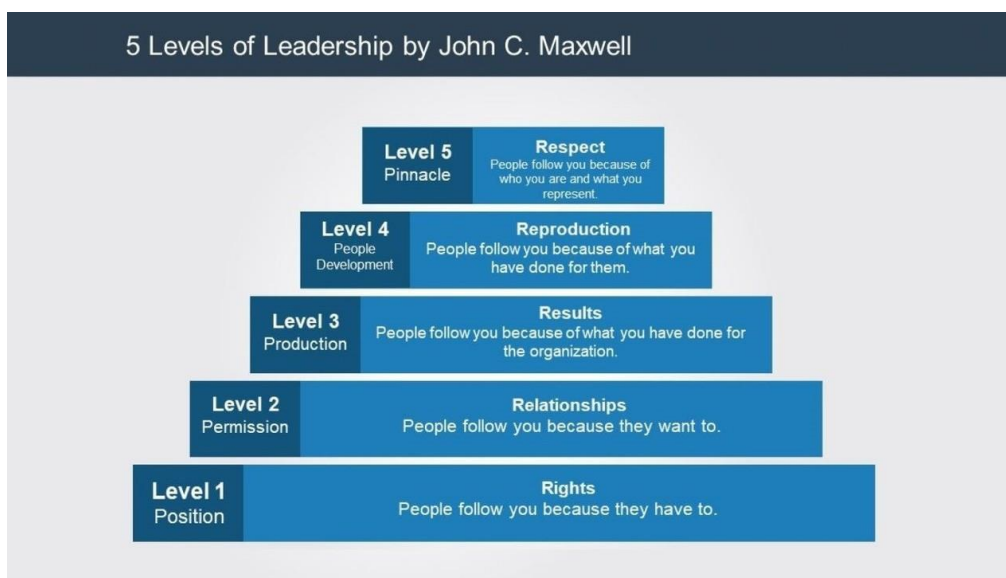
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Leadership in Safety

The fact that you are reading this would indicate that you are in the role of safety in some way, shape or form. Maybe you are new to your position and simply trying to absorb as much information to improve in your newly chosen path or seasoned and looking to hone skills you built over the years. Regardless of where you fall in your journey as a safety professional, most probably the greatest skill you can possess is that of a strong leader. Leadership and the safety profession go hand in hand, as achieving success is based upon one’s ability to influence others.

There are countless books on leadership. One of the most formidable and greatest selling authors on leadership is John C. Maxwell. There are “Laws of Leadership” that can and should be applied to the safety profession practice and if applied correctly, may result to fewer accidents and more effectively run businesses.

You might say, “I don’t have people reporting to me,” therefore, by definition, I am not a leader. Nothing could be further from the truth. The very simply put and pure definition of leadership is “influence” and shouldn’t be confused with “manager.” You may have the responsibility of managing hundreds, but be an ineffective leader, or you may not manage anyone and be an excellent leader, simply because you influence behaviors of people within your circle of exposure. With all that said, let’s break down the five levels of leadership as outlined by John Maxwell and apply them to the safety function to better illustrate the concept.



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Level 1–Position

No one starts out at Level 5 or the Pinnacle of Leadership. Positional leadership is based solely on one’s title or position in an organization. Team members may do what is asked of them but only out of fear or desire to comply as sort of a “check the box” mentality. Positional leaders often lack buy-in from subordinates and their results are limited regardless of their desire to help contribute to the “health” of the organization. A safety professional that is a positional leader either takes the form of or is perceived as a “safety cop.” Hopefully, safety professionals seen as positional leaders will remain so for a limited period. Otherwise, he or she will never successfully implement sustainable solutions for the organizations they work for or represent.

Level 2–Permission

Safety professionals reaching Level 2 of the leadership pyramid are headed in the right direction but still have limitations in their effort to improve safety within an organization. This level of leadership will have limited influence on a broad scale basis but may have some success with a small population as they only influence individuals that want to follow.

Level 3–Production

Organizations often have systemic issues such as ineffective management systems or people. Building off small successes can help move the safety leader along. Successful pilot solutions with a small group or groups of individuals is a smart way to gain traction as an emerging leader if properly communicated. Don’t lose sight of the fact that you are merely attempting to expand your circle of influence. It is also much easier to correct the course with a small project and build off the correction(s) as your influence grows. Having to make corrections with a large population is much more difficult and you may lose your audience as it is more difficult to be as intimate in your communication with them.

Level 4–Reproduction

Communicate and replicate your success. Establishing metrics will draw others in. Keep them simple and objective. Align them with departmental or organizational goals. Credit the team as they are implementing your steps. After all, who doesn’t want to be recognized?

Level 5–Pinnacle

There is a concept referred to as push versus pull. You will know that you are on track to being at the Pinnacle of Leadership when you are “pulled” into situations and your expertise is requested to improve safety processes. Not only is your expertise desired but valued by management and team members. Many safety professionals can provide solutions for safety issues, but never reach the Pinnacle of Leadership because they are not influential. Technical understanding simply isn’t enough, but if it is combined with strong leadership skills, it can be indispensable.

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Moving-On and Up the Pyramid

Strong and effective safety leaders embody many desirable characteristics. The following five are core to the safety profession.

1. **Establishes SMART Goals**—**SMART** is commonly used in the business setting and is an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Reasonable, and Timely. SMART is rarely used in safety and risk management circles based upon dozens of risk management assessments conducted over 30 plus years of experience. *What gets measured, gets done* is a fitting statement relative to setting safety goals. Refer to a list of SMART goals at the end of this. You may find one or more that is fitting for your organization.
2. **Communication**—As with setting goals, communication often suffers in safety circles. It needs to start as high up in the organization as possible. Establishing clear and concise goals, working with executives to communicate goals, and providing on-going progress reports is critical and appreciated by management and team members. There is nothing worse than communicating expectations and not informing the organization along the journey. Methods of communication include both written and oral, but don't be trapped by hiding behind a keyboard and firing off directives and avoiding personal interaction with your team. This is a good example of how a positional leader interacts and is least effective in safety. Use all forms of communication that are necessary and appropriate.
3. **Serves Others**—Strive to be a servant. Your way to the Pinnacle of Leadership in safety is significantly based upon servanthood. The achievement of a Servant Leaders' goals is a byproduct of participating with others to achieve their goals.
4. **Prioritize and Manages Time**—In one of the bestselling business books in history, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," Steven Covey lists Habit #3 as "Put First Things First." Prioritize, make, and evaluate your list daily and avoid focusing on insignificant items. When prioritizing, A list items are most significant, B list lesser so, and C list items are nice to get to. Control your schedule, otherwise your schedule will control you. Saying no to the insignificant items will do more for your success than will saying yes to everything.
5. **Values Feedback**—Spending time observing operations and listening to others is essential to your success as a leader in safety. Safety professionals are quick to jump to solutions albeit with the best of intentions but often take the same solution without complete knowledge of all the contributing variables. There are no "one size fits all" remedies. You may need to enhance training or work with management to increase accountability or address a combination of items. Getting to your options requires a good listening ear. In fact, your best resource is often the individual working on the floor and/or their supervisor.

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Seek to understand processes, people, operating procedures, as well as the related risk and exposures and you will have established your foundation for improvement. Present your ideas and work with affected individuals. By allowing them to participate in the solution, you're more likely to be successful and gain respect and credibility along the way.

None of us have "arrived." Improving as a leader can be a lifelong venture. We can always improve to gain our influence with others. The result will positively affect businesses, people, and personal satisfaction.

SMART Goal Examples

- Reduce Total Case Incidence Rate (TCIR) 10% by December 31, 2021.
- All departments to achieve 95% compliance with their assigned training courses by year end.
- Reduce customer slip, trip, and fall claims and other claims by 20% in 2021.
- Obtain a Days Away, Restricted or Transferred Incidence Rate (DART) of 10% less than the industry average.
- Reduce the number of workers' compensation claims by 20% as compared to the previous 3-year average by July 31, 2022.

Suggested Leadership and Business Books

Author—John C. Maxwell

- [Developing the Leader within You](#)
- [The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership](#)
- [Winning with People](#)
- [How Successful People Think](#)

Author—Patrick Lencioni

- [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#)
- [The Advantage](#)

[7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)—Steven Covey

[Who Moved My Cheese](#)—Spencer Johnson

[How to Win Friends and Influence People](#)—Dale Carnegie

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