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Dialogue Session Contributing Poster: The Role of Leadership in Fostering Employee Safety Behaviors

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Synopsis

During the last decades significant improvements have been achieved when it comes to raising the level of safety in high-risk organizations. However, many organizations are still suffering from safety related problems such as lacking employee safety behaviors and high injury rates. Research has indicated that leadership can have a vital role in promoting safety. Most of the studies investigating the relationships between leadership styles and organizational safety have tended to focus on the role of a single leadership style, such as transformational leadership or transactional leadership. A few studies have also examined the association between safety-specific leadership, that is, a leadership style that specifically emphasizes the promotion and enhancement of safety, and workplace safety outcomes. Still, no study up to date has investigated the relative importance of these three leadership styles. In addition, previous research on leadership and safety have provided ambiguous or only weak support for leadership styles being related to accident and injury frequencies.

Based on this background, the first aim of the present study was to investigate the relative importance of three different leadership styles for employee safety behaviors and injury rates in a high-risk organization. The three investigated leadership styles were transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and safety-specific leadership. The second aim of the study was to examine whether a relationship between leadership style and injury frequency could be found when the occurrence of minor injuries was measured in addition to that of major injuries.

Data was collected through a web-based survey responded by 269 employees at a paper and pulp mill in Sweden in 2013. The results from a hierarchical multiple regression analysis showed that safety-specific leadership contributed more than the other styles to overall safety, since it was most strongly related to both safety compliance and safety initiatives among employees. Although transformational leadership was slightly related to improvements in employee safety initiative behaviors, it did not contribute to any safety outcome over and above that of a safety-specific leadership. Transactional leadership was found to be negatively associated with safety, in that it contributed to less safety initiative behaviors and to an essential increase in the frequency of minor injuries. None of the leadership styles showed any significant relationship with major injuries.

The results imply that general transformational leadership can be beneficial for safety to a certain extent, but in order to achieve more extensive safety improvements it is imperative for leaders to engage in behaviors specifically focusing on promoting safety. The main conclusion is therefore that the extent to which a leader exhibits leader behaviors associated with the promotion of safety among his or her subordinates, regardless of the behaviors' transformational or transactional character, is the most important leadership factor affecting safety outcomes. Another important conclusion to be drawn from the results is that an overly correcting and controlling leadership style can under certain circumstances have a negative influence on safety. The fact that an association was found between at least one leadership style (transactional) and minor injuries, but not between any of the leadership styles and major injuries, also gives support for the benefits of registering and measuring minor and seemingly insignificant injuries and accident in addition to more severe injuries and accidents. This way the identification of relevant relationships between organizational factors and safety outcomes can be facilitated.

By broadening our understanding of the relative impact of different leadership behaviors on various safety outcomes, the findings in the present study contribute to a number of both practical and theoretical implications for the achievement of increased safety within high-risk organizations.

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