

## LEADING THE WAY TO SAFETY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE S.A.F.E.R. LEADERSHIP MODEL

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Organizational leaders play a substantial role in initiating and maintaining the safety attitudes and behaviors of their employees (for review, see Mullen, Kelloway, & Teed, 2011). Although research supporting this conclusion is widespread (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002; Mullen et al., 2011), few studies have focused specifically on the specific leadership *behaviors* that foster safer workplaces (Wu, 2008; Wu, Lin, & Shiau, 2010). Consequently, little is known about the specific behaviors and actions that leaders must perform in order to influence employee safety behavior over time. Most studies on the relationship between safety and leadership have modified existing leadership theories to fit the safety context (e.g., transformational leadership, Barling et al., 2002). While these findings speak to the generalizability of basic leadership principles, little is known about the extent to which general leadership theories can be applied to workplace safety. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to operationalize a practical safety leadership model that clearly identifies the types of leadership behaviors required to promote workplace safety. Specifically, S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model, (Wong et al., in press) was developed to identify and better understand the specific leadership behaviors that encourage workplace safety and promote positive safety climates.

Workplace safety culture is related to the extent to which leaders a) plan and monitor safety, b) communicate about safety in the workplace, and c) demonstrate that they care about the safety of their employees (Wu, 2008; Wu et al., 2010). Using a safety-specific scale adapted from the Full Range Leadership Model (Bass, 1985), Lu and Wang (2010) also found that safety motivation involving a) recognition/reward, and b) employee engagement was positively related to safety compliance. Based on these findings, we theorized that these behaviors fall into five categories: 1) Speaking about safety, 2) Acting safely, 3) Focusing on safety, 4) Engaging others in safety initiatives, and 5) Recognizing safe performance at work. The S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model is not intended to replace existing models of leadership, such as the Empowering Leadership model (e.g., Martinez-Corcoles et al., 2011), or the Full Range Leadership Model (e.g., Bass, 1985; Barling et al., 2002). Instead, it draws on each of these models and has been designed as an amalgamation of these theories.

To operationalize the S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model, we followed a process recommended by Hinkin and Sriesheim (1989). We first developed 15-20 items for each category and used a panel of expert judges to test the face validity of the revised items. To test the S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model, we used a sample of 264 blue collar workers in the United States. Following a factor and reliability analysis, we retained 15 items in total (i.e., 3 items in each category). Sample items include 'My leader talks about safety related problems at work' (Speaking about safety), 'My leader practices what he/she preaches when it comes to safety' (Acting safely), 'My leader is committed to promoting a safe workplace' (Focusing on safety), 'My leader asks employees to share their perspectives on safety' (Engaging others in safety initiatives), and 'My leader praises employees when they are being safe' (Recognizing safe performance at work).

Results indicated that the S.A.F.E.R. measure correlated positively with safety-specific transformational leadership (Barling, Loughlin, & Kelloway, 2002), safety leadership behaviors (Griffin & Hu, 2013), and safety communication (Hofman & Stetzer, 1998)—demonstrating convergent validity. The measure also correlated with several outcome measures including safety compliance and participation (Neal, Griffin & Hart, 2000), safety climate (Zohar, 2000), safety citizenship behaviors (Hofmann, Morgeson, & Gerrass, 2003), and safety-specific trust (Conchie & Donald, 2009). Together, these findings demonstrate the predictive validity of the S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model, suggesting that strong safety leaders cultivate positive safety cultures by a) communicating about safety, b) enacting safety behaviors themselves, c) focusing or paying attention to safety concerns, d) engaging others in safety initiatives, programs, and concerns, and e) reward employees for safe performance at work.

By moving away from pre-defined leadership styles that have largely dominated the safety leadership literature, we have turned to a consideration of what leaders actually do to facilitate safety performance. By focusing

on specific workplace behaviors, rather than on leadership styles, researchers may be better able to develop and evaluate more comprehensive workplace safety programs that provide leaders with practical, behavior-focused guidelines on cultivating safer workplaces (Haccoun & Saks, 1998; Zohar, 2002). Similarly, a focus on specific behaviors may help organizational decision-makers improve their workplace safety performance evaluations and goal-setting and feedback procedures (Komaki, Heinzmann, & Lawson, 1980; Zohar, 2002). In doing so, the S.A.F.E.R. Leadership Model offers a platform for both research and practice in workplace safety.

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