
The Role of a Leader in Shaping the Safety Culture of an Organization

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to analyse the role of a leader in shaping the safety culture of an organization. The article identifies key leadership competencies that influence safety and presents effective strategies for building safety awareness among employees. The article also focuses on the importance of proactive leadership in risk management and implementing effective safety practices.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study is based on a literature review concerning safety management, an analysis of leadership theories, and case studies of organizations effectively implementing a safety culture. The article addresses issues related to leadership competencies, methods for building awareness of hazards, and the impact of leaders' attitudes on employee engagement in safety activities. The research problem is formulated as follows: How does a leader influence the shaping of a safety culture in an organization, and what leadership competencies are crucial for effective safety management? Corresponding to the research problem, a research hypothesis is posed, which assumes that an effective leader, possessing developed competencies in communication, engagement building, and risk management, significantly contributes to shaping a strong safety culture in the organization by promoting hazard awareness, implementing effective procedures, and engaging employees in preventive actions.

Findings: The analysis indicates that the role of a leader is crucial in shaping an organization's safety culture. Leaders who promote transparency, open communication, and engage employees in safety-related processes contribute to reducing operational risk and increasing awareness of hazards. Key competencies, such as building trust, making decisions under uncertainty, and effective communication, significantly impact the effectiveness of implemented safety strategies. The main challenges include employee resistance to change, lack of consistency in enforcing rules, and insufficient support from top management.

Practical implications: The study results provide practical recommendations for leaders seeking to build a strong safety culture within their organization. Key actions include

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implementing training programs, actively promoting safety values, and utilizing modern technologies to support risk management processes. The article also emphasizes the need for further research into the impact of different leadership styles on the effectiveness of safety-related actions and the role of innovative tools in enhancing employee awareness.

Originality/Value: *The article provides value through a comprehensive analysis of the leader's role in shaping the organization's safety culture. It emphasizes the importance of leadership competencies, such as communication, engagement building, and risk management, as key factors influencing safety. The innovative approach involves combining leadership theory with practical case studies, allowing for the development of effective safety management strategies. The article constitutes a valuable contribution for practitioners and researchers involved in organizational safety topics.*

Keywords: *Leadership, safety culture, risk management, leader competencies, employee engagement, organisational communication, safety strategies.*

JEL codes: *M12, M14, D81, L20.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

1. Introduction

Security in an organization constitutes one of the key pillars of its stability and operational efficiency. In the era of dynamic market changes, advancing automation, and increasing legal requirements, businesses are increasingly recognizing the need to implement effective security management systems. However, even the most advanced procedures and regulations will not yield the expected results without the proper engagement of the management team. It is the leaders who play a crucial role in shaping the culture of security, influencing attitudes, behaviours, and awareness among employees.

An effective leader not only ensures compliance with norms and procedures but primarily builds a work environment where safety becomes an integral part of the organization's daily operations. Their competencies, management style, and communication skills determine how employees perceive risk and respond to potential threats. The right leadership attitude can effectively reduce the number of incidents, increase team engagement, and influence the development of a positive atmosphere that fosters openness and cooperation.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of a leader in shaping a safety culture within an organization. Initially, the definition and significance of safety culture will be discussed, followed by an analysis of the key characteristics and competencies of a leader that influence safety management. Further sections will present effective methods for building safety awareness among employees and best

practices in this area. The article is based on an analysis of scientific literature and case studies to provide a comprehensive perspective on the topic.

2. Definition and Significance of Safety Culture in an Organisation

Safety culture in an organization refers to a set of values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape employees' approach to safety and occupational hygiene. It serves as the foundation for effective risk management and minimizes accidents and incidents in the workplace. An expanded definition of safety culture, highlighting the importance of safety awareness, defines it as the entirety of material and non-material achievements that serve to cultivate, recover (when lost), and enhance the safety level of specific subjects (Zduniak, 2012; Norena-Chavez and Thalassinou, 2022a; 2022b).

This concept is defined broadly to include both military and non-military aspects of autonomous defence for individual and group entities. It forms a triad composed of three interrelated dimensions.

- Mental-spiritual dimension (individual dimension),
- Organizational-legal dimension (social dimension),
- Material dimension (Piwowarski, 2014).

A strong safety culture promotes proactive behaviours, where every member of the organization feels responsible for their own safety and the safety of their colleagues. The literature emphasizes that the commitment of management and good relationships among employees are crucial for shaping such a culture (CIOP-PIB).

The safety culture serves individuals in achieving the following goals and needs:

- Effective control over emerging threats, aiming to achieve a state with a satisfactorily low level of threats;
- Recovery of security when it has been lost;
- Optimization, for a specific entity, of the level of comprehensive security.
- Promoting awareness on a social and personal scale of the need for self-improvement and tripartite development, along with motivating attitudes that result in individual and team actions (Piwowarski, 2016).

Leaders play a crucial role in shaping and maintaining a culture of safety. Their attitude, decisions, and communication style have a direct impact on how employees perceive and implement safety principles. Leaders act as "cultural interpreters" within the organization, capable of transforming abstract company values and missions into concrete, understandable actions (leanpassion.pl).

Among the key characteristics and competencies of a leader influencing safety are:

- **Communicativeness and Active Listening:** Clearly and understandably conveying information, as well as the ability to listen to employees, allows for effective management and building relationships within the team.
- **Empathy and Emotional Intelligence:** The ability to understand the emotions and needs of team members enables effective conflict management and builds an atmosphere of mutual trust.
- **Decisiveness and Stress Resilience:** The ability to make quick and accurate decisions in the face of challenges ensures the smooth operation of the team.
- **Creativity and Innovation:** Unconventional thinking and finding novel solutions to problems allows the team to better adapt to new challenges.
- **Ethics and Responsibility:** Acting in accordance with values and taking responsibility for decisions builds trust within the team (Projektgamma.pl).

Building security awareness among employees requires proactive actions from a leader. First and foremost, the leader should set an example for their subordinates, showing how to act in various situations related to security. Below, in the table, are actions that shape the culture of workplace safety.

Table 1. Actions Shaping Occupational Safety Culture

<p>Training and Education in the field of occupational health and safety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training in the field of occupational health and safety as required by labour law • Specialized training aligned with the needs of the workplace • Promoting proper and safe employee behaviours, for example: educational posters, workstation instructions • Educational programs and campaigns in the area of health protection, for example: health campaigns
<p>Accident prevention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting analyses of workplace accidents that have occurred on site • Reviewing accidents with facility management and employees • Identifying accident causes and implementing preventive actions
<p>Participation of employees and trade unions in occupational health and safety management.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting consultations in the field of occupational health and safety (OHS) • Utilizing the knowledge, skills, and experience of employees in the area of OHS, for example, in the analysis of occupational risk • Engaging employees and management in the development of internal company regulations governing OHS issues, for example: developing job instructions, training programs
<p>Encouraging safe practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rewarding employees who engage in activities promoting safe work practices • Organizing knowledge competitions in the field of

	occupational health and safety (OHS) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting proper employee behaviours
Engagement of the management team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper implementation of workstation instruction • Personal example, engagement in OSH matters, proper performance of OSH duties • Proper organization of the workstations of subordinate employees • Participation in activities and work related to OSH, for example, in analysing and assessing occupational risk, developing training programs • Taking OSH matters into account in daily work, for example, in budget planning, planning, and implementing organizational and technical changes
Intra-organisational communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informing employees about existing hazards, preventive measures in the workplace, for example during training sessions, occupational risk assessment cards • Issuing regulations governing health and safety matters. • Establishing clear procedures for emergency situations and threats. • Discussing the state of health and safety with employees and management, for example: participating in meetings, publishing newsletters, posting information on internal websites.

Source: J. Chmielewski, Kultura bezpieczeństwa i higieny pracy "Praca i Zdrowie" 2009 no. 10, p. 40.

Regular training sessions, workshops, and open discussions about potential threats and safety procedures are essential. It is also important to promote a culture where employees feel comfortable reporting potential threats or unsafe practices without fear of repercussions (Ejdys, 2010). Leaders should actively engage in these processes, demonstrating their commitment and emphasizing the importance of safety in daily work.

The role of leaders in shaping safety culture is invaluable. Through their actions, attitude, and communication skills, leaders have a direct impact on how safety issues are perceived and implemented within an organization. Investing in leadership development and promoting a proactive attitude towards safety yields benefits not only in reducing the number of accidents but also in building trust and engagement among employees.

3. The Leader in the Implementation and Improvement of Safety Management Systems

Implementing and improving safety management systems in an organization requires a comprehensive approach, where leaders play a crucial role (Trenkner, 2014). Their task is not only to enforce regulations and procedures but also to build

an organizational culture where safety is a priority. Leaders influence how threats are perceived, motivate employees to adhere to standards, and create conditions conducive to identifying and eliminating risks. In the context of safety management, a key element is developing a coherent strategy and policy that will serve as the foundation for preventive actions and crisis response. Leaders should define clear safety goals, considering both technical and behavioural aspects, and adapt them to the organization's specifics and environment.

One of the most important aspects of effectively implementing safety management systems is the role of leaders in communicating with and educating employees. These systems cannot function merely as a set of procedures - they must be a living element of the organization, and their effectiveness depends on team engagement.

Leaders should initiate training, promote open communication regarding hazard reporting, and reward positive attitudes related to safety compliance. It is also crucial to monitor implemented systems and regularly improve them through data analysis, audits, and consultations with employees at all organizational levels. Figure 1 shows the key characteristics of a leader.

Figure 1. Leader characteristics



Source: *Kultura organizacyjna w firmie – Przełożony – kierownik czy lider?*
<https://mieso.com.pl/aktualnosci/kultura-organizacyjna-w-firmie-przelezony-kierownik-czy-lider/>

An important aspect of safety management is also the leader's ability to identify and minimize risk. Every organization operates in a dynamic environment where unforeseen threats can suddenly emerge and require a quick response. Leaders should be prepared to make decisions in crisis situations and create procedures that enable efficient risk management (Świątek, 2016). In this context, collaboration with teams responsible for threat analysis, developing emergency scenarios, and testing the effectiveness of preventive actions is crucial.

The role of leaders in inspiring innovation in the field of security should not be overlooked either. Modern technologies, such as data analysis, artificial intelligence, or monitoring systems, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of risk management actions (Ciekankowski *et al.*, 2024). Leaders should be open to new solutions and actively seek ways to implement them within their organization.

The effectiveness of security management systems in an organization largely depends on leadership. Leaders shape security policies, influence employee attitudes, and make key decisions in crisis situations. Their role is not limited to enforcing regulations - it also includes educating, motivating the team, managing risk, and promoting innovation. Only through a consistent and conscious approach to security issues can an organization be created where minimizing risk and protecting employee health are integral parts of the business strategy.

4. Challenges and Best Practices in Leadership for Safety

Managing security in an organization is a complex process that requires not only knowledge of procedures and standards but also effective leadership. Leaders responsible for security face numerous challenges that can hinder the implementation of effective practices and the development of a lasting security culture.

One of the biggest problems is the lack of employee engagement, resulting from low awareness of threats or the perception of security as an unnecessary obligation. Many leaders also struggle with resistance to change, especially if new procedures involve additional responsibilities for employees. A common obstacle is also insufficient support from top management, which may view security issues as less important compared to financial or operational goals.

Among the challenges, difficulties in effective communication about hazards and procedures can also be listed. If safety information is conveyed in an unclear or inaccessible manner, employees may not understand its significance or feel the need to comply with it. Another issue can be the lack of sufficient resources, such as a budget for training, modern safety-supporting technologies, or an adequate number of risk management specialists. Finally, organizations often have to deal with unforeseen threats, such as economic crises, changes in regulations, or new risks

associated with globalization and digitization, which require leaders to be flexible and able to make quick decisions.

Despite these challenges, there are many examples of effective safety leadership that demonstrate how a leader's approach can yield tangible results. In organizations that achieve high safety standards, leaders play an active role in building a prevention culture by engaging employees in the process of identifying and eliminating hazards.

A good example is the strategy of open communication, where leaders encourage the reporting of any potential safety issues without fear of consequences. In companies that effectively manage risk, the principle of "visible leadership" is often applied, meaning that leaders regularly visit workplaces, discuss safety matters with employees, and actively participate in training sessions.

Examples of effective practices also include implementing reward systems for proactive security-related actions, which motivate employees to become more engaged. Many companies achieve success by investing in modern technologies, such as digital threat monitoring systems, predictive analytics, or virtual reality training, which allow for realistic simulations of emergency situations.

An important aspect of effective leadership is also the ability to build awareness among employees through regular informational campaigns, which not only educate but also emphasize the importance of security as a shared responsibility across the entire organization.

To effectively manage safety, leaders should employ several key strategies. First, it is essential to consistently build a safety culture by setting a personal example, meaning leaders must adhere to procedures and promote appropriate behaviours. It is also important to continually improve risk management systems, which requires regular data analysis, identification of new threats, and implementation of enhancements (Ciekanowski *et al.*, 2024; Tyagi *et al.*, 2023).

Another crucial aspect is investing in team competency development, which involves organizing training sessions, workshops, and mentoring programs that enhance employees' awareness and skills in safety.

Effective leadership in managing security also requires the ability to quickly respond to crises and make accurate decisions under time pressure (Chrzyszcz *et al.*, 2024). Modern organizations must operate in an environment of dynamic change, so flexibility and adaptability are crucial for effective risk management.

Ultimately, success in security depends on how leaders can engage the entire team in creating a work environment where everyone feels responsible for their own safety and that of others.

5. Summary

Effective management of security within an organization requires conscious and engaged leadership. Leaders play a crucial role in shaping a culture of security, implementing risk management systems, and responding to crisis situations. Their actions have a direct impact on employees' attitudes and behaviours, as well as the effectiveness of procedures and policies related to security.

Modern organizations, operating in a dynamically changing environment, must face numerous challenges such as resistance to change, lack of resources, or increasing complexity of threats. However, numerous examples of effective leadership in security demonstrate that the right strategy, appropriate communication, and active engagement of leaders can significantly improve safety standards in the workplace.

Literature analysis and case studies indicate that key success factors include open communication, investing in employee competency development, and consistently promoting safety values. Organizations where leaders set a personal example, implement innovative technologies, and motivate employees to take a proactive approach to risk achieve better results in reducing accidents and improving work environment quality. An essential element of effective leadership is also the ability to respond quickly to crisis situations and adapt strategies to changing conditions.

Despite numerous studies on security management and the role of leaders, there remains a need for further exploration of this issue. Primarily, it is valuable to deepen the analysis of the impact of different leadership styles on the effectiveness of security management and to investigate how digital technologies and artificial intelligence can support leaders in this process (Kopczeński *et al.*, 2024).

Empirical research is also necessary regarding the long-term effects of implementing security strategies in various sectors of the economy, which will allow for the identification of best practices and their adaptation to specific organizational conditions. Additionally, it is worth analysing which factors influence the level of employee engagement in security matters and which tools can effectively increase their awareness and motivation.

In summary, the effectiveness of safety management systems largely depends on the quality of leadership and leaders' approach to building an organizational culture based on prevention and responsibility. Understanding the mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of leaders' actions is crucial for further development of safety management theory and implementing practical solutions in organizations.

Further research in this area can provide valuable insights on how to manage risk more effectively and create a work environment that supports safety and employee well-being.

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