

## **Developing your 'quiet' safety leaders**

*By David J. Sarkus, MS, CSP, Technical Editor, david@davidsarkus.com  
June 1, 2000*

*You won't get very far without allies & role models*

Jake and John are near the cooler talking "water cooler stuff." Soon they'll be going into a nearby conference room to sit through another round of annual hazard communication training.

"You know we're going to be called on to talk about safety in our department," says Jake.

"Yeah, why do we always get called on?" asks John.

"I don't mind the attention," says Jake. "I care about safety. And you do, too. It's just that I don't always feel like getting involved."

"Me, too," says John. "I don't know why some of those other guys don't contribute more."

Many employees and supervisors can relate to Jake and John. They don't mind the spotlight. In fact, you see these "visible leaders" everywhere — on safety committees, new design teams, or as observers in behavioral safety processes.

That's because they're knowledgeable, respected, and don't shy away from communicating with coworkers. They might not be the first volunteers to jump into a new project, but you'll often find "visible leaders" directing or facilitating the action. They're motivated to bring about positive results.

Leadership roles in safety certainly are not limited to the visible types who direct the action. Let's look at the contributions of "quiet leaders." Here are four types of quiet leaders that you might want to recognize and support so that they can feel comfortable in assuming their own vital place within your organization.

### **The advocate**

Advocates are quiet allies for safety progress. They don't want to detract from what the organization believes will work. They won't always challenge something new that comes along.

Instead, advocates by nature stand behind what their formal leaders believe in and want to see work. Advocates say, "Let's go — let's try it and get started."

They might not readily verbalize their support, but their actions speak louder than words. And they often stand courageous among their peers.

In your workplace, do you know who your safety advocates are?

### **The helper**

You've seen this type of worker time and again. They quietly and diligently proceed on their own path of excellence. They might be the skilled machinist, electrician, or other specialist.

Helpers don't like to give advice without someone asking, but if asked, they'll quietly show the way. In a similar fashion, helpers take direction quite well, and tend to be humble. These folks will model the way and make the groups' expectations much clearer. They help to create a positive, yet quiet, form of peer pressure that often gets the point across without a lot of discussion.

How many safety helpers can you count on?

### **The colleague**

This is your true team player. The person who enjoys being part of a team or something larger than himself. Colleagues don't mind standing in the back, and they don't have to stand out. They like receiving social support and bringing others closer together whenever they can.

Colleagues are often adept at playing the role of "peacemaker," working toward resolving conflict when it's evident that friendships are failing. A colleague is also a good listener. You'll find that colleagues stick as close as any brother or sister, especially when things get tough.

Who are your colleagues for safety?

## **The confidant**

Michael Jordan, the former basketball great with the Chicago Bulls, played a number of roles in his "organization." Obviously, he was the team's visible leader. He was also a tremendous advocate, a loyal follower of head coach Phil Jackson during the championship years. There was an emotional bond between Jordan and Jackson, a bond that ran deep.

That bond allowed Jordan to play another type of leadership role — the confidant. Jackson and Jordan entrusted each other with various thoughts and feelings with unyielding confidence. At some level, Michael was an effective conduit for information both to and from the team, information and communications that Coach Jackson knew he couldn't handle directly. Each kept the other informed, yet most of their exchanges were done for the benefit of the team.

Who are your safety confidants?

## **Ongoing support**

Quiet leaders, like the four types described here, are exemplary followers. It might seem strange to consider followers as leaders, but the work of Robert Kelley, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, supports this idea. Kelley says "follower-ship [is] the flip side of leadership... (involving) people who know what to do without being told — the people who act with intelligence, independence, courage, and a strong sense of ethics." In a very real sense, they are leading the way.

There are times when we can have too many visible leaders, but we can never have too many quiet ones. Just remember that quiet leaders need to be nurtured. Assure them of their value. Show them that they truly do play an important role in your organization. Draw them out for involvement; find places for them on housekeeping details, safety inspections, committee work, and behavioral safety efforts.

Your support for quiet leaders shouldn't be sporadic. Encourage their roles as advocates, helpers, colleagues, and confidants whenever the opportunity arises.

And remember, sometimes the quiet leader steps out and becomes more visible and vocal. Almost every great leader was once a great follower. Even Michael Jordan didn't come to the Bulls and take charge right away.