

Gandhi and Safety Leadership

A recent work trip to India got me thinking about the leadership qualities of the great Mahatma Gandhi and led me to reflect on the lessons that could be transferred to the world of work and more specifically the safety leadership required to achieve improvements in safety culture. Many will know that the term Mahatma bestowed upon Gandhi translates as “*Great Soul*”, which is certainly apt for he was a remarkable man. It is one thing for a leader to drive his people towards a goal with the aid of military force, as has generally been the traditional approach throughout history but to go against that and persuade the people to rely solely on non-violent, respectful resistance requires something else. Leadership is so important because of its clear link with culture; it is leaders, those with the greatest influence, that share their attitudes, values and beliefs (culture) with others. Any change in culture must originate with the leaders, whatever the setting:

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”

Gandhi’s philosophy of *Satyagraha* (literally: *holding onto truth*) was an unlikely concept. In much the same way, for many people, putting safety ahead of production in a business setting may initially seem odd. Yet, as with Gandhi, it is about having faith in a cause and staying true to that cause. *Satyagraha* has been interpreted as *passive resistance* but perhaps more appropriately as *steely determination*. Gandhi recognised that with a clear goal that had strong emotional appeal along with truly determined resolve anything could be achieved. Determination is something that certainly helped Gandhi achieve his goal and is an attribute that all safety leaders need by the bucket-load! In safety the goal is that nobody gets harmed – this shouldn’t be too difficult to get agreement on, provided we make that emotional link for all involved. We need every member of the team, from top to bottom, to recognise the impact that poor safety could have on themselves, their families or their business. This does not mean constantly telling people how they could get hurt or their business reputation could be damaged but enabling them to think for themselves so that they can envision the potential consequences, they tell themselves! This goes hand in hand with helping people to get away from the idea that accidents only happen to other people.

One of the reasons that so many people followed Gandhi’s lead was because he lived by what he said. He won their trust through demonstrating remarkable integrity. As he said: “*To believe in something and not to live it is dishonest*”. In the workplace leaders have no leeway when it comes to safety behaviours, they are constantly under scrutiny and their actions examined. Any short cut, inappropriate comment or unsafe behaviour, however minor may be seized upon and used to discredit the message. Leaders must practise what they preach. People will only, willingly, follow leaders that demonstrate integrity and honesty of purpose through their actions.



Gandhi recognised the importance of communication and the sharing of a clear vision. It is not only the clear content of that vision that must resonate with followers but also having an ability to articulate it, giving it proper structure and ensuring clarity for all. This might mean changing the specific content and style of the message depending on the audience. Ideas need good packaging that is representative of the vision in order to sell it. Most important of all is a passion for the subject. It is said that Gandhi was not a great public orator but he

spoke from the heart with real conviction because he truly believed his own message. As a result, people listened. By taking this approach your true values will be clearly communicated to all.

Gandhi was a great believer in self examination. In the workplace this means leaders reflecting on their own failings and asking themselves what part they had to play in the run-up to any incident before they go in search of the mistakes of others. Every incident investigation should start with the actions of the management team. Gandhi demonstrated that great leaders have a self correcting nature. They are their own greatest critics.



All groups crave strong leadership; it is a key element of the human condition. Great leaders put themselves out there, leading from the front, prepared to stand up to powerful opposing forces. Just as Gandhi stood up to the colonial British in South Africa and India along with those who would argue for a more forceful approach, so must the safety leader be prepared to stand up to those powerful forces in the corporate world that would put productivity ahead of safety as well as the well-poisoners in the workplace who are always trying to undermine the efforts of the safety champion. The best way to do this is to be out among the people on the shop floor regularly lending a hand, getting involved and engaging with them so as to allow the team to see you following your own standards as well as enabling you to be able to regularly *feel the pulse*.

Finally in this analogy, Gandhi showed that it is not necessary for a great leader to seek to continuously grow their own power, rather to develop *social power*, empowering the people to feel good about themselves and take matters into their own hands in pursuit of that worthy, common goal.

