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# Transformational leadership, occupational safety, and remote workers: A path forward.

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# Williams- Capstone Final

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# Transformational Leadership, Occupational Safety, and Remote Workers: A Path Forward

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This project would not have been possible without the tireless support of many people. I thank my work colleagues for giving me the initial idea to research safety and remote workers. I thank my classmates and my professors; their contributions have been invaluable throughout the program and have made me a better leader. Finally, I thank my wife and my daughter, who made sure I was entertained, fed, and loved throughout this entire process.

**Abstract**

While the relationship between leadership and workplace safety has been well studied, the relationship between specific leadership styles and safety outcomes is not always clear. Various terminologies complicate clarifying links between leadership style and workplace safety, as well as the multiple factors that go into workplace safety other than leadership. This relationship becomes even more complicated with the advent of mobile technology that distributes workers both in traditional work settings and remote locations. As remote workers continue to grow as a population, it will be critical for safety leaders to come up with solutions that can serve multiple employee populations both in conventional and distributed locations. This paper seeks to investigate the current literature on leadership style and safety and examine how these findings might be applied to build a practical safety framework for remote workers.

*Keywords:* occupational safety, transformational leadership, distributed workers, remote workers, workplace safety,

## Introduction

Since my first class in the leadership program, I have been interested in transformational leadership. This leadership style speaks to my values of serving others and looking for ways to transform and inspire organizations. Safety has one of the most significant impacts on employee well-being in the workplace, and I became interested in the link between transformational leadership and how that impacts workplace safety. I have had the opportunity to play a part in multiple safety initiatives at work, so that has further sparked my interest in how leadership behaviors can encourage safer workplaces.

While progress has been made in occupational safety in the past one hundred years, the relationship between transformational leadership and workplace safety has only recently been studied (Hoffmann, Burke, & Zohar, 2017). While leadership style matters in safety culture (safety culture is defined as an environment where the organization actively seeks employee safety and cares about their well-being), it is not always clear which specific leadership behaviors correlate with safer workplaces (Lundell & Marcham, 2018). This capstone seeks to define the relationship between transformational leadership and safety, as well as show how it might be applied to the safety issues that affect remote workers.

### Safety Leadership and Remote Workers

While the relationship between safety and transformational leadership has been well studied, it is unclear how this relationship might be complicated by the safety needs of remote workers (Hoffmann et al., 2017). With the addition of remote technologies that allow workers to complete tasks remotely, it is less well known how leadership styles impact remote workers. This confusion is because most leadership studies have been done in traditional environments where

leaders and followers are meeting face-to-face in daily interactions (Nanyani, Nielsen, Daniels, Donaldson-Feilder, & Lewis, 2018).

In order to understand the implications of safety leadership for remote workers, one must first understand the current research on transformational leadership and safety, as well as the limitations of this approach when applied to remote workers. This paper also explores opportunities for future research into how these leadership issues and solutions would best apply to remote workers in the future.

**The Many Names of Safety Leadership**

While there are links between transformational leadership and safety, multiple naming conventions complicate identifying the relationship (Clarke, 2013) There are multiple leadership styles that are linked with safety, but which can also confuse terminology and implementation of safety leadership. This not only complicates the research on safety leadership, but it also complicates how the results may be applied practically in organizations (Muchiri, McMurray, Nkoma, & Pham, 2019).

Servant leadership is a style of transformational leadership that is a valid approach to safety due to its focus on the leader serving followers (Cooper, 2015). A specific subset of transformational leadership called safety-specific transformational leadership has also been coined (Vries, Koster, & Stam, 2016). In a third style, authentic leadership has been connected to safety outcomes (Maximo, Stander, & Coxen, 2019). Finally, there is the concept of safety leadership itself, which borrows heavily from the transformational leadership style, yet has its naming convention (Daniel, 2015). While each of these terms offers a helpful window into safety leadership, theses various approaches are not always correlated to specific behaviors that leaders can utilize.

**Leadership Level Impacts Safety Efficacy**

While the relationship between leadership and safety has been established, it is not clear to what degree an executive-level leader has on safety versus front line supervisor. A recent study showed that rather than directly affecting safety, CEO's had an indirect influence on organizational safety by exerting influence through a top management team (Tucker, Ogunfowora, & Ehr, 2016, p. 1234). The direct and indirect effects of safety leadership need to be better understood so that the organization can focus resources on getting the most effective safety response.

There is evidence that direct supervisors and co-workers may have a more significant impact on employee safety behavior than a transformational executive leader (Schwatka & Rosencrance, 2016). This suggests that it is critical that leaders are specific about the safety needs of the organization and that employees are well supported to enact safety procedures autonomously. A transformational vision can be compelling for an organization, but in the end, front line employees are the ones that will have to integrate that vision into their daily work (Schwatka & Rosencrance, 2016). A safety leader needs to understand the core mechanics of how their vision is translated into the daily needs of their organization. Failure to do this can lead to a vision/application mismatch where the safety vision does not fit the organization well (Tucker, Ogunfowora, & Ehr, 2016). This mismatch can be increasingly problematic at a CEO level, as the CEO primarily exerts safety leadership through an executive team. If the CEO does not have a clear plan that is well articulated to the executive team, then confusion can spread throughout the organization (Tucker et al., 2016).

**Transformational Leadership and Safety**

Transformational leadership is a leadership style that has been linked with workplace safety (Willis, Clarke, & O'Connor, 2017). Bass's historical exploration of the transformational leadership style illustrated that a transformational leader encourages creative solutions to problems, keeps lines of communication open, provides the inspirational vision for the organization, and inspires followers through the cultivation of trust and respect (Bass, 1985). While Bass' components offer a helpful big picture view of transformational leadership, their subsequent behaviors also need to be elucidated to clarify their relationship to effective safety leadership.

Bass' four components of transformational leadership are applicable to leaders who are trying to build a more robust safety culture. A transformational safety leader seeks creative solutions to safety problems by communicating with employees and soliciting creative solutions to safety problems (Mullins, Blair, & Dunlap, 2019). Keeping lines of communication open is vital for active safety, and the leader needs to ensure that employees can talk about safety issues in a protected and transparent manner (Farr, Laird, Lamm, & Bensemann, 2019).

A safety leader must be knowledgeable about processes in order to enact a safety plan that is both inspiring and actionable (Muchiri et al., 2019). The final component of Bass' framework is the most critical for a safety leader to observe. The safety leader must be a living example of safety and instill trust in followers for a safety culture to take root. Followers will not act on that which they do not believe in (Zohar, Polachek, & Gardner, 2017). Viewing these four core leadership components through a safety lens helps to clarify their relationship to a better safety climate, with a final factor that relates to the criticality of psychological safety and employee safety.

### Idealized Influence of Leaders

The safety leader must act as an ideal role model of safety within their organizational culture. If leaders speak to a need for safety, but employees see them as approving unsafe processes or performing unsafe tasks, this is a critical blow to safety culture. If a leader is perceived to underreport and enforce safety guidelines, this also influences their subordinates' underreporting and underenforcing safety issues, which makes for a failing safety climate (Probst, 2015).

This idealized influence of the leader is vital to building a long-term safety culture because it helps to reinforce extant safety culture, it aids in capturing new employees and socializing them into the safety expectations of the culture. The observational model of learning posits that people learn first through attention on the required behavior, retaining information on how the task was performed, being able to reproduce said behavior correctly, and finally being motivated to reproduce the behavior again (O'Kelley, 2019, p. 39). The leader has to role model the example in word and deed so that others in the organization can also model safety behavior and teach others to do the same.

### Inspirational Motivation and the Ability to Instill Confidence

The safety leader must articulate a compelling safety vision, communicate clear expectations, and demonstrate a clear commitment to the safety program. A fundamental behavior in this component is that the leader requires communication skills that are centered around humility and clarity.

Leaders that are humble in their communications are defined by the ability to admit mistakes, the ability to recognize other's contributions, and the ability to be teachable, to seek feedback and continuously learn (Walters & Diab, 2016, p. 8). These communication behaviors

help to increase followership engagement, which in turn helps to motivate followers to engage with safety culture. This engagement contributes to the overall safety climate as more and more people engage across the organization (Walters & Diab, 2016).

A communication style that fosters trust is also critical to safety leadership. Followers must trust that the leader will listen to their safety concerns, solicit followers' ideas, and communicate in an honest and forthright manner. Employees that do not believe that the leader has their best interests at heart, and do not trust the leader to follow through on safety issues, are less likely to communicate and follow through on safety issues themselves (DeRenzo, 2015).

Authenticity in communication is foundational to the leader building trust. If a leader is perceived as being inauthentic or dishonest regarding safety communication, it hinders followers' ability to motivate and follow through with a safety program. Authentic safety leadership is defined by the leader genuinely believing in the safety culture of the organization and taking the necessary steps to promote and sustain that culture (Maximo et al., 2019).

**Intellectual Stimulation and Creativity**

The safety leader cannot bring about a productive safety climate on their own. They must autonomize their followers and welcome creative and democratic solutions to ongoing safety problems within the organization (Muchiri et al., 2019). This practice creates a distributed network of people that are dedicated to safety in the organization. The more the safety leader works on creating an inclusive and decentralized network of employees, the more impact that network will have on safety outcomes (Muchiri et al., 2019).

The safety leader also encourages stimulation and creativity by lowering barriers to acting on safety issues (Uhr, 2017). An empowered and decentralized employee population ensures that safety issues can be quickly identified by employees regardless of their position in

the organization (Muchiri, McMurray, Nkoma, & Pham, 2019). The safety leader must include front line employees in the resolution of safety issues as they are the most likely to encounter safety issues in their day to day work. If the leader can remove barriers and hierarchies that impede responses to safety issues, this can assist employees in engaging with safety outcomes (Schwatka & Rosencrance, 2016, p. 403).

**Individualized Consideration of Group Members**

The safety leader realizes that safety in an organization is not a generalized solution but a specific one. Considering that an organization can have multiple environments like labs, plants, and warehouses, the safety leader must reflect on the individual safety needs of the employees that work in these spaces (Martinez-Corcoles, 2018). Remote and mobile employees are also a growing population that requires consideration as they can work in multiple locations with different safety needs. New employees are also a vital population to capture as they need to be familiarized with safety expectations (O'Kelley, 2019).

Each of these individualized areas calls for customized responses in how safety issues are delegated and resolved. An urgent emergency will need a different leadership approach versus the more long-term view of improving safety processes. It must be a management system that tracks the resolution of short-term safety problems versus more complex organizational long-term problems (Vries et al., 2016).

**The Importance of Psychological Safety and Modeling Safety Behavior**

Beyond the core transformational leadership behaviors, it is critical for leaders to create a climate of psychological safety in the workplace. Employees that feel cared for are more likely to care about their co-workers and workplace (Page, Boysen, & Arya, 2019). This climate applies to safety in the sense that employees are likely to imitate the safety behavior of their colleagues

(Schwatka & Rosencrance, 2016). This also applies to a supervisory level where a supervisor's behavior around safety can directly impact follower's safety behavior, including accident reporting and injury reporting (Probst, 2015). Modeling behavior also plays a vital role in how new employees integrate into the safety culture of an organization. New employees are likely to mimic the safety behaviors of their closest co-workers and supervisors, so executive leadership must create a robust safety culture that runs from front line employees to senior management (O'Kelley, 2019).

**Transformational Leadership Is Not A Safety Panacea**

It is vital to remember that leadership is one factor of a productive safety culture. While the literature shows that safety climate is primarily related to safety management, organizational safety is hindered by the limitations of transformational leadership (Lee, Yueng-hsiang, Cheung, Zhuo, & Shaw, 2019, p. 71).

The first limitation is that idealized or transformational leadership can act as a barrier to effective safety leadership, depending on the safety issue at hand. A new crisis calls for a leader to quickly and effectively mobilize a variety of resources to the problem at hand (Lee, Yueng-hsiang, Cheung, Zhuo, & Shaw, 2019). If the crisis is large enough, it may call for multiple leaders from different organizations to work together, and differing leadership ideals may act as a barrier instead of a factor that promotes collaboration (Uhr, 2017). The literature is unclear as to how best to ameliorate the effects of different leadership styles when collaboration is necessary on large scale safety issues. However, leaders can get lost in the theory of a leadership style versus the practical needs of an organization in a safety emergency. (Uhr, 2017, p. 302).

The second limitation is that the transformational leadership style is not always appropriate for types of organizational safety issues. In high trauma or acute contexts, it is more

effective to have leadership that is transactional and direct so that the emergent safety issues can be quickly addressed (Martinez-Corcoles, 2018). This relationship is apparent in the case of a burning building where the fire needs to be addressed quickly, and there is no time to come up with a democratic transformational solution as prescribed by transformational leadership. It may be that there are also particular safety climates where transformational leadership is superior to transactional forms of leadership.

A third limitation is that most leadership styles, including transformational, rely on face to face interactions with followers (Nanyani, Nielsen, Daniels, Donaldson-Feilder, & Lewis, 2018). With the advent of the internet, it is becoming more common to have a remote and distributed workforce that also has safety needs (Crawford, MacCalman, & Jackson, 2011). These distributed employees come with a whole different set of safety issues and concerns than traditional employees. While transformational leadership was found to still be helpful for these remote employee populations, it is not well known how specifically to increase safety outcomes for distributed workers. A better governance model needs to be researched so as also to serve this growing population of employees. (Nanyani et al., 2018).

A final limitation is that despite all the theoretical implications of transformational leadership and safety, it is still not clear how leaders can best implement these implications in their day to day behavior (Gravina, Cummins, & Austin, 2017). Transformational leadership is effective at establishing large scale vision, but it can be challenging to implement on a day to day level. Considering the variety of organizations, and the various safety challenges in each organization, it is helpful for safety leaders to be well versed in the behavioral science that underpins sound safety practice (Gravina, Cummins, & Austin, 2017).

## Methodology

In order to understand the relationship between transformational leadership, occupational safety, and remote workers, this paper relies on data from two studies on virtual teams and transformational leadership as well as four surveys conducted on remote workers about their well-being and occupational health.

### Case Studies

The first study used a sample size of 300 students, of which 46 volunteered to be a leader, and the remaining students were assigned as team members to either a face to face leader or a remote leader (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). There were two significant findings from the study. The first finding was that transformational leader behavior could change depending on whether the medium is in a face to face or remote context (Purvanova & Bono, 2009, p. 352). This finding relates to the concept that a leader's safety effectiveness might be reduced if they are not in the same physical location as their employees because leadership behaviors can change in remote versus face to face contexts. However, this issue is mitigated by the second finding in the study that transformational leadership had a more substantial effect on virtual teams' performance than face to face teams (Purvanova & Bono, 2009, p. 352).

This study has implications for remote safety leadership because it shows that transformational leadership behaviors may have an advantage with remote workers. This advantage is most likely because of transformational leadership behaviors like individual consideration focus on the individual needs, and communicational ambiguity that characterize remote workers and assist with them (Purvanova & Bono, 2009).

These results are echoed in a second case study that looked at leaders that managed virtual teams in an organization that was distributed across four different time zones in the

United States (Freeman, 2017, p. 51). A survey was conducted where ten leaders responded to survey questions centered around what behaviors led to high performing virtual teams(Freeman, 2017, p. 51). A significant theme from respondents' answers was that transformational leadership behavior played a key role in virtual teams' success (Freeman, 2017, p. 73). The specific behaviors were that the transformational leader encouraged open and safe communication and stressed that followers also develop practical self-management skills (Freeman, 2017, p. 73).

These results further solidify the finding that transformational leadership is not only useful in face-to-face environments but also remote and virtual environments. Leaders can utilize transformational leadership behaviors to openly communicate and track safety issues that remote workers are experiencing.

**Surveys on Remote Workers**

Surveys give insight into how transformational leaders can focus on remote workers' specific safety needs. The first survey was conducted on approximately 2000 work councils in Germany and focused on issues around remote work and occupational safety (Ahlers, 2016). A major theme that came out of the responses was that 65 percent of councils reported that remote workers experienced psycho-social distress (Ahlers, 2016, p. 95). This kind of distress includes a lack of support from colleagues and managers, ineffective communication, and lack of control over work/life balance (Ahlers, 2016, p. 95).

Another major theme within the responses was that remote workers, even though they are regularly employed staff, were not being covered under ergonomic occupational health standards. This issue is due to distance from occupational health employees and no overarching occupational legislation protecting remote workers when they are in remote locations (Ahlers, 2016, p. 92). When asked for the most critical themes to focus on for the German workforce in

the future, 58 percent of work councils responded that organizations need to adapt occupational health protection to new digital technologies as the number of remote workers is increasing (Ahlers, 2016, p. 96).

These themes also show up in a survey that was conducted on 42 health professionals in Australia (Ducat, Martin, Kumar, Burge, & Abernathy, 2016). Respondents stated that having an engaged supervisor that they could collaborate with remotely, helped to reduce feelings of professional isolation, which can be a contributor to psycho-social distress (Ducat et al., 2016, p. 31). Respondents also stated that remote technology, like email and videoconferencing, could either facilitate or act as a barrier to effective work (Ducat et al., 2016, p. 32). Like the German survey, this implies that Australian health workers do not always have access to safe or accessible technology in order to effectively do their jobs remotely.

The third survey of 897 remote workers in the United Kingdom found that 37 percent of the workers experienced recent back pain once they began work from home. Ergonomics was cited as a frequent problem for remote workers in the survey, with 30 percent of workers not having dedicated office space at home (Professional Safety, 2019).

Ergonomic problems are also correlated in a 2011 review of studies on occupational health and remote workers in the United Kingdom and Ireland, where high percentages of musculoskeletal symptoms appeared in all the studies reviewed (Crawford, MacCalman, & Jackson, 2011). Ergonomic issues also are related to psycho-social distress because being in chronic pain from repetitive stress injuries can contribute to long term work stress and an inability to work (Ahlers, 2016).

## A Framework for Safety Leadership and Remote Workers

While no explicit model exists that directly links transformational leadership, occupational safety, and remote workers, the data collected offers guidance towards a framework for leaders when focusing on occupational health and remote workers. Based on Nanyani et al.'s review of the safety and distributed workers, it is helpful to organize the relationship between safety leadership and remote employees into three categories (Nanyani et al., 2018).

The first category is resources that assist with occupational safety, like video conferencing and ergonomic equipment. The second category is a transformational leadership style that can directly impact distributed workers. The third is safety climate, or how distributed employees perceive and engage with the safety culture of the organization (Nanyani et al., 2018). There is also a fourth category that is described as legislative, which is super-ordinate to the other three in the sense that major legal reform will have to be undertaken to codify occupational safety for remote workers. There is only so much a remote worker or leader can do without there also being institutional societal support for better remote worker safety.

## Leadership and Co-workers

The current literature on leadership and safety predominantly deals with leadership styles where interaction is face to face (Nanyani et al., 2018). This context is a complicating factor when establishing how a leader might best impact the safety of a remote team. Both front line supervisors and executive leadership can have positive impacts on workplace safety, but these impacts have been studied in fixed locales that do not involve remote workers (Probst, 2015). The literature suggests that remote workers may need a different communication protocol from leadership to ensure that they remain engaged and informed on occupational safety (Crawford et al., 2011). Leaders should rely on transformational leadership behaviors with remote employees

as remote employees may need an ongoing dialogue with leadership in order to combat issues of isolation and other psycho-social risk factors (Freeman, 2017).

Based on the survey results, the social isolation of remote workers is another factor that leaders must consider as it comes up as a salient theme (Ahlers, 2016). Since co-workers can have a significant effect on how an employee perceives and engages with workplace safety, remote workers often miss out on this critical component of workplace safety (Schwatka & Rosencrance, 2016). Remote workers also miss out on the chance to regularly socialize with other colleagues as they would in a traditional work environment, and this can lead to increased stress or problems with work/life balance (Ahlers, 2016).

Like the communication protocol mentioned above, leaders will need to proactively plan for regular socialization opportunities between conventional and remote team members. When an employee is not located in the regular hub of daily activity in an organization, it is easy to forget their needs (Ducat et al., 2016).

**Safety Climate**

Safety climate describes the overall safety culture of an organization and how employees experience and perceive that culture (Lee et al., 2019). This issue is another avenue of concern with remote workers because they are not experiencing the same safety climate compared to their colleagues that work onsite (Ahlers, 2016). These health problems can include repetitive stress injuries from increased drive times if the remote worker is utilizing a vehicle and stress injuries due to the increased use of remote technologies like phones and computers (Crawford et al., 2011). Effective safety leadership would recognize that remote workers will have their unique safety concerns and would seek to capture these trends within the climate of the organization.

### Legislation

Survey data indicates that there is a troubling trend where remote employees are not afforded the same occupational safety oversight as their onsite counterparts (Ahlers, 2016). The high rate of the repetitive stress injuries reported in the United Kingdom and Ireland survey shows that the governance for remote worker's occupational health needs to be increased (Crawford et al., 2011). As remote workers work in flexible locations like their home office, a coffee shop, or other locations, there is a lack of how best to operationalize occupational safety in these areas. These locations present a challenge for both organizations and legislators to come up with a useful governance model. However, the need for good governance only increases as the number of remote workers grows each year (Freeman, 2017).

## Limitations

The two case studies utilized in this research focused primarily on the relationship between transformational leadership and team success. One was done in an academic setting, so the study could benefit from an additional organizational context (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). The other case study was done within a corporate context but only had a sample size of ten respondents (Freeman, 2017). A more extensive study would need to be enacted to further corroborate the connection between transformational leadership and outcomes with remote workers.

The surveys referenced in this paper are not comprehensive or wholly longitudinal. While 897 remote workers are a large sample, it pales in comparison to many remote workers in countries around the world (Professional Safety, 2019). The survey conducted on the 42 remote Australian health workers also does not present an extensive data set to draw from (Ducat et al., 2016). The systematic review of remote workers and occupational safety data presents a strong

case of the commonality of ergonomic issues, social isolation, and long work hours on employees. However, the review was conducted in 2011 and is almost ten years old (Crawford et al., 2011).

### Avenues for Future Research

With the increased presence of videoconferencing and other remote technologies, there is an excellent opportunity to research how these tools might be utilized by leaders and employees to mitigate remote worker safety effectively. There is the opportunity to research how leadership style and competencies might be impacted when delivered in virtual and remote mediums.

As the population of remote workers continues to increase, there is also the opportunity to conduct more comprehensive studies that could continue to explore the safety experiences of remote workers and how leaders might best serve them as an employee population.

Lastly, there is ample opportunity to study the legal impact of occupational safety and remote workspaces. Currently, a lot of occupational safety legislation does not take remote workspace into any kind of consideration. There is a lot of effort put into protecting employees who work onsite, but those same measures are not enacted for remote workers that work in third spaces like home offices and coffee shops (Ahlers, 2016). Enacting better legislation could help both leaders and remote workers better identify and resolve issues in these areas.

## Conclusion

Transformational leadership can be an effective leadership style for improving occupational safety (Clarke, 2013). Historically, the research on this relationship has been carried out within traditional workspaces in a face-to-face context (Nanyani et al., 2018). With the arrival of communication technologies like videoconferencing and email, there is a growing

population of workers that do not report into a traditional worksite. Often, they work from a third space like a home office, library, or other location (Freeman, 2017).

These workers have a specific set of issues with occupational safety that may not affect their onsite counterparts in the same way. Leaders need to focus on transformational leadership behaviors that focus on engaged communication with remote employees, as they do not have the same access to onsite social capital as their onsite counterparts (Ahlers, 2016). Leaders also need to take on individualized consideration when it comes to the ergonomic needs of remote workers (Crawford et al., 2011). With lax legislation around third place workspaces and the tendency for remote workers to be out of daily face to face interaction, leaders must make sure that they are staying engaged with remote workers and addressing safety issues as they arise.

Lastly, there should be a concerted effort by organizations and employees to encourage legislators to reexamine occupational safety law when it comes to remote employees working in third spaces. The absence of such legislation creates a troubling gray area where safety issues can propagate and go unresolved. As the number of remote employees is going to continue to grow, this is a growing safety problem that needs to be addressed.

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