

What is the Role of Leadership in Developing a Safety Culture and High Reliability?

INTRODUCTION

The call to improve U.S. Healthcare began in 1999 with the Institute of Medicine's *To Err is Human* and continues today with Joint Commission's assertion that the next stop on the quality journey is creating High Reliability Organizations.

As healthcare looks to other industries to learn how to enhance safety cultures and develop the practices of High Reliability Organizations (HROs), the importance of psychological safety and ethical leadership is evident.

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is a shared belief that a work group is safe for interpersonal risk taking. It is critical to team learning and organizational performance.¹ Staff feel psychologically safe if they trust teammates enough to take interpersonal risks such as disclosing mistakes, admitting to gaps in knowledge or skill, raising concerns and questioning practices.

Psychological safety enables honest dialogue in which processes, problems and opportunities are approached with the collective knowledge, experience and expertise of the entire team. Through these rich and transparent exchanges, teams achieve more, faster.

What is Ethical Leadership?

Ethical leadership is defined as the “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communications, reinforcement, and decision-making.”²

In an operational sense, ethical leaders are desirable role models who explicitly communicate their values to followers through conversations, stories, behaviors, interactions, decision-making, performance feedback, rewards, discipline, goal-setting, and goal-achievement in such a way that followers see the leader as fair, trustworthy, and genuine in his concern for and interactions with others in both his personal and professional lives.

How Does Ethical Leadership Promote a Safety Culture?

Ethical leadership creates a culture of trust in which staff feel comfortable reporting errors and engaging in honest dialog to improve processes. Ethical leadership values error and inquiry as precious tools for learning and improving. **This well-defined leadership style plays a significant role in developing both a safety culture and high reliability.**

Safety cultures are characterized by three important elements; trust, reporting, and improvement.³



Trust facilitates effective reporting of errors and near misses. And is essential in creating open, honest dialog necessary for meaningful process improvement. **While trust is widely recognized as a driver of exceptional performance, instilling genuine trust throughout an organization is complex and challenging.**

Cultures with high levels of trust are better positioned than those focusing solely on process improvement. Reliable performance demands that organizations excel at both relationships and processes. High reliability cultures are characterized by rich relationships in which individuals feel psychologically safe to interact honestly even when there is a personal risk associated with the transparency.

It is in the context of trusting relationships that information sharing occurs which allows individuals to comprehend complex situations requiring the team's pooled knowledge.^{4,5} This is a significant factor in developing a team's ability to manage accelerating, risky situations.

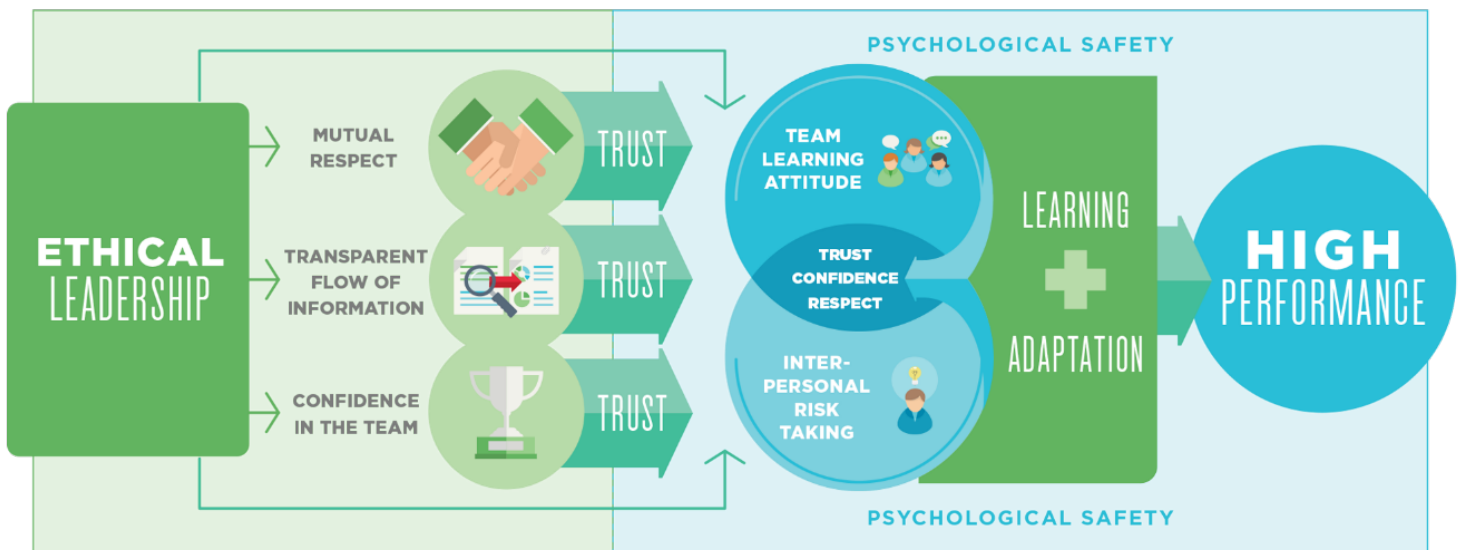
Trust and psychological safety are critical to creating the safety culture described by James Reason and Alan Hobbs and advocated by the Joint Commission in its high reliability publications and the Hospital Accreditation Manual's Safety Structure Chapter.^{3, 6, 7} Additionally, the importance of psychologically safe work environments in patient safety is well described in *Through the Eyes of the Workforce; Creating Joy, Meaning,*

“All in all, trust emerges as a most valuable and still highly underrated concept for the optimization of safety performance in High Reliability Organizations.”⁴

Ethical Leadership’s ability to dramatically improve trust and teamwork make it a significant resource for developing high reliability.

In addition to it’s direct impact on trust Ethical leadership enhances three additional factors that promote trust.

- Mutual Respect
- Transparent Flow of Information
- Team Confidence



When cultures are rich in trust, individuals are more willing to take interpersonal risks. A team learning attitude develops,¹ creating the intellectual agility that drives safety and high reliability.

What are the Benefits of Ethical Leadership?

The benefits of ethical leadership are well documented and have a direct impact on organizational performance through improvements in employee engagement, employee commitment, error reporting, innovation and learning behaviors. Research shows that ethical leadership is an “effective predictor of job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior.”^{2,9,10}

Ethical leaders are seen as more effective leaders by followers. And have a powerful influence over followers’ ethical behaviors because most employees look to significant others for ethical guidance.^{2,12,13}

Most impressive is ethical leaders’ ability to enhance employees’ intrinsic motivation and job performance.¹¹

The implications for improved retention and the resulting positive impact on cost (agency staff, recruitment, and on-boarding cost) are significant. Studies also demonstrate that reduced turnover of clinical staff results in greater patient safety and more effective implementation of organizational initiatives.

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IMPROVES...

- Employee Engagement
- Employee Commitment
- Error Reporting
- Learning and Innovation
- Job Satisfaction
- Voice Behavior
- Staff's Intrinsic Motivation and Performance
- Organizational Citizenship Behavior
- Leader Effectiveness

In order for the positive and transformative effects of ethical leadership to be realized, leaders must be seen as desirable role models in both their personal and professional lives.^{9, 15} **It is through staff members' discriminating eyes that ethical leaders become more effective and are able to transform cultures and behaviors in order to enhance organizational performance.**

It is important to understand that simply being an honest person guided by values is not enough to produce the benefits of ethical leadership.^{9, 10, 14}

Specific characteristics and behaviors trigger the perception of ethical leadership in staff's eyes. These behaviors include moral values, beliefs, and vision reflected in decision making and conduct; clear performance standards reflected in rewards and discipline; transparent, trusting, open communication that sets clear role expectations and extends a voice to followers; concern for others including respectful interactions; and developing followers by increasing job significance and autonomy.¹⁰

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES...

- Communicating a clear ethical agenda tied to performance
- Decision making anchored in values
- Clear performance standards reflected in rewards and discipline
- Routine, transparent communication
- Clear role expectations
- Extending a safe voice to followers
- Respectful interactions with all stakeholders
- Developing staff through autonomy and increased responsibility

Developing ethical leadership practices is a powerful strategy for improving performance, safety and reliability. An effective leadership development program should include four critical elements.

1. A reliable metric and benchmark for assessing ethical leadership practices on both the organizational and individual leader level.
2. A framework for hiring ethical leaders.
3. A leadership program to develop ethical leadership knowledge and skills.
4. A method to actively manage the performance of ethical leadership practices.



Interactive Quality's® Ethic Wise™ Leadership Development Program is a comprehensive initiative designed to address the four critical elements necessary to operationalize ethical leadership practices. IQ's Ethic Wise™ program assists organizations in enhancing hiring processes, assessing and benchmarking ethical leadership practices, developing ethical leadership skills, creating individual ethical leadership action plans, and defining performance management of ethical leadership in action.

Contact us to learn more about IQ's Ethic Wise leadership program at info@InteractiveQuality.net

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