MCX

CMAA
Construction Management
Association of America

Member Communication Experience

Any views and opinions expressed in this article may or may not reflect the views and opinions of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA). By publishing this piece, CMAA is not expressing endorsement of the individual, the article, or their association, organization, or company.

NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support: The Leaders' Role

Key Points

- Leaders have a critical role in creating a safety culture.
- Numerous benefits can be gained through caring leadership.
- Leaders can demonstrate caring behavior in many ways.
- A positive work environment is an important aspect of safety leadership.
- Many leadership challenges are involved in building a culture of care and support.
- Leaders can use techniques to overcome the challenges of demonstrating a culture of care and support.

Introduction

In a safety culture and, more specifically, a safety climate, the behavior of leadership is critically important. Leaders play a key role in establishing and promoting such a climate. Caring behavior involves actively listening, empathizing, supporting, recognizing, and appreciating workers. Leaders who embody a caring approach create positive work environments, enhance worker well-being, and improve overall organizational performance. This Executive Insight highlights the benefits of caring behavior, ways that leaders can demonstrate care, methods for creating a positive work environment, and approaches to overcome challenges in building a culture of care and support.

The Role of Leaders in Creating a Culture of Care and Support

Leaders serve as role models and influencers within organizations. Their actions and behaviors set the tone for the entire workforce. By embodying caring behavior, leaders create a ripple effect—a positive impact—on worker morale, engagement, and productivity. Leaders who consistently display care and support establish a foundation for a culture of care throughout the organization.

Authenticity is crucial. Workers can discern the difference between perfunctory care and genuine interest in their well-being. Genuine care extends beyond traditional management activities. The leader who genuinely cares is actively involved in listening, empathizing, and demonstrating an interest in workers' lives outside work. This genuine care fosters trust, which is fundamental in any productive relationship. It also helps to

create a safe space, an environment in which workers openly share their thoughts, ideas, challenges, and concerns.

Benefits of a Caring Behavior in Leadership

Caring behavior in leadership yields several benefits for both individuals and the organization. These benefits include:

- Increased worker engagement and satisfaction.
- Improved retention and loyalty.
- Enhanced trust and psychological safety.
- Higher levels of collaboration and teamwork.
- Reduced stress and improved well-being.
- Significant improvement in safety outcomes.
- Higher productivity and performance.

Ways Leaders Demonstrate Caring Behavior

Leaders can demonstrate caring behavior toward those they supervise in various ways:

- **Leading by example:** Leaders need to “practice what they preach.” Their actions reflect the safety culture they aim to create. By following safety procedures and protocols leaders demonstrate the importance of safety to their workers and influence them to follow suit. “Do as I say, not as I do” does not work.
- **Supportive communication:** Good leaders maintain open lines of communication. They talk about safety issues with the workers, both in terms of potential hazards and steps the organization is taking to mitigate them. Open dialogue about safety promotes awareness. It also gives workers the opportunity to provide feedback and voice their concerns.
- **Active listening and empathy:** Leaders must actively listen to workers' concerns, thoughts, and ideas without judgment. Leaders show empathy by acknowledging their workers' feelings, offering support, and addressing any issues that may be causing distress. Demonstrating empathy by understanding and acknowledging worker perspectives fosters a sense of care and support. This emotional support from leaders builds a strong bond and encourages workers to be more engaged and committed to their work.
- **Recognition and appreciation:** Recognizing and appreciating workers' efforts, achievements, and contributions reinforce a culture of care and support. Strong leaders publicly acknowledge and celebrate workers' successes.
- **Work-life balance:** In a culture of caring, leaders recognize the importance of work-life balance and strive to create an environment that supports it. They respect workers' time outside of work. They understand workers have responsibilities and interests beyond their jobs. Demonstrating respect for work-life balance shows that leaders care about their workers as people, not just as workers.

Creating a Positive Work Environment

To foster a culture of care and support leaders must create a positive work environment, one that nurtures well-being and collaboration. Key elements include:

- **Trust and psychological safety:** Successful leaders cultivate trust by fostering a safe and inclusive environment where workers feel comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of retribution. They also take steps to ensure their workers' physical safety and their mental and emotional well-being. They foster open dialogue, value diversity, and work against discrimination and harassment in all forms.
- **Training and development:** Leaders support a strong safety culture by having sufficient resources on hand. Continuous learning also represents support. Leaders must ensure that their team has access to necessary safety equipment, information, and training to perform their duties safely. Providing training and development demonstrates a commitment to safety and the well-being of all workers.
- **Creating safe and equitable environments:** Leaders who genuinely care about their workers uphold standards of fairness and justice, ensuring that all workers have equal access to opportunities and resources.
- **Setting clear expectations:** Leaders set a precedent by clearly outlining their expectations for safety in the workplace. Defining safe and unsafe behaviors, establishing safety procedures and protocols, and providing workers with resources and training help to ensure workers can meet expectations.
- **Rewarding safe behavior:** Leaders encourage adherence to safety protocols by rewarding safe behavior. Positive feedback, recognition, and even tangible rewards are methods for achieving safe behavior. Highlighting workers who prioritize safety reinforces the importance of these behaviors to the entire workforce.
- **Fostering worker engagement:** Engaged workers will more readily take ownership of their safety and the safety of their colleagues. Leaders foster engagement by involving workers in safety planning, decision making, and by demonstrating worker input is valued and acted upon.
- **Being responsive to issues:** When workers raise safety concerns, leaders must respond quickly and appropriately. This demonstrates safety is taken seriously. It helps prevent minor issues from becoming major problems. Decisive responses also encourage workers to report potential hazards or safety concerns in the future.
- **Promoting a blame-free culture:** Leaders encourage workers to report incidents, mistakes, and near misses without fear of reprisal. Good leadership never looks for “who is to blame?” or “who is at fault?” Instead, they look for organizational and procedural improvements. This helps organizations learn from these situations and prevent future incidents.

Overcoming Challenges in Building a Culture of Care and Support

The benefits are clear. Barriers exist, however, to implementing a culture of care. To break down the barriers, leaders communicate the importance of care. They model caring behavior, provide training as needed, and proactively address resistance or negativity. They hold themselves and others accountable for maintaining and sustaining this culture. Challenges and techniques to overcome them are described below:

- **Resistance to change:** Some workers or leaders may resist the shift toward a caring culture due to ingrained habits or skepticism. Addressing concerns, providing education, and leading by example can help overcome resistance.

- **Time constraints:** Leaders may face time constraints in demonstrating care and support. Prioritizing worker well-being, delegating responsibilities, and establishing efficient processes helps leaders manage their time effectively.
- **Lack of awareness and training:** Leaders may lack awareness or training on how to demonstrate caring behavior. Providing leadership development programs, coaching, and resources can equip leaders with the necessary skills to foster a culture of care and support.
- **The role of organizational policies:** Organizational policies play a significant role in shaping a caring culture. Leaders must ensure organizational policies support a culture of caring. They must communicate these policies clearly and apply them consistently.

Conclusion

Leaders who genuinely demonstrate a deep "caring behavior" for those they supervise play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of care and support throughout an organization. Listening, supportive communication, recognition, and well-being initiatives help leaders create positive work environments that enhance worker well-being and improve overall organizational performance. Overcoming challenges and cultivating a culture of care and support require commitment, awareness, and ongoing efforts from leaders at all levels. Embracing caring behavior in leadership creates a foundation for a thriving and engaged workforce.

About the Author

Craig Martin was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. Craig is the retired president and CEO of Jacobs, one of the world's largest providers of construction services. He has contributed significantly throughout his career in creating positive safety cultures, creating the BeyondZero® corporate safety campaign that reshaped organizational culture. For his efforts and the resulting success of the program, the National Safety Council magazine, *Safety + Health*®, named him as one of 10 "CEOs Who Get It." Craig also helped form the Incident & Injury Free (IIF) Executive Forum, a twice yearly gathering of industry senior executives who meet to share strategies on safety.

Although the author and NAC have made every effort to ensure accuracy and completeness of the advice or information presented within, NAC and the author assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, omissions or inconsistencies it may contain, or for any results obtained from the use of this information. The information is provided on an "as is" basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness, and without any warranties of any kind whatsoever, express or implied. Reliance on any information provided by NAC or the author is solely at your own risk.