**Safety leadership training – Is everyone a leader?**

If you ask people, certainly everyone does not consider themselves leadership material. Most of us form our opinions of leaders from what we learn in history books, films, TV biographies, and popular culture.

And for most of us, we don’t measure up.

We weren’t the captains of our football teams. We weren’t class president. We never became military generals, politicians, spiritual gurus, community activists, heroic surgeons, legendary adventurers or corporate executives.

But we sell ourselves short.

**Emergent leaders**

History books are replete with unassuming, even shy characters who became iconic leaders. T.E. Lawrence shuffled maps for years in an Egyptian military outpost before unforeseen circumstances turned him into the leader of the Arab revolt against the Turks in World War I. Abe Lincoln, armed only with a grade school education, was a gawky rail splitter before becoming a lawyer and later one of the country’s greatest presidents. U.S. Grant was something of a washed-out drunk before proving himself a master military strategist. William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who blazed a trail through the south and demoralized southern culture, suffered anxiety attacks and a nervous breakdown early in the Civil War. Mohandas Gandhi was raised in the merchant caste in India and was a modest, soft-spoken, rail-thin lawyer in South Africa before leading the non-violent fight for India’s independence from Britain.

We don’t need to compare ourselves to these historic figures. We do need to accept that there are many levels, many dimensions, many manifestations of leadership.

**Titles don’t matter**

And in a workplace culture of safety, there are many opportunities to become a safety leader, a champion of safety causes. Your title, your position does not matter. What matters is that you realize a culture of safety cannot last without a small army of “ordinary” employees who are committed to preventing harm to co-workers and themselves , who seize oftentimes small opportunities to lead by example. To be role models. To create value for the safety culture through ideas, problem-solving, collaborating with others, and taking on voluntary responsibilities.

**Training can draw out leadership traits**

Leadership training can set you on your way. Don’t duck it. Don’t defeat yourself and say, “No, that’s not me.” We often are not in touch with ourselves and do not realize the ideas, drive and boldness that are waiting to emerge from with us until we are encouraged and motivated by a teacher, a mentor, a training class that shows us the many varieties and levels of leadership.

Leaders in safety cultures don’t often motivate others by dictating commands. They have the ability, which can be learned in training, to influence co-workers through their safe behaviors, safe attitudes and beliefs, which they may consider “just normal.” Co-workers will come to them for advice because these emergent leaders are often quiet and unassuming. They do not attempt to control or manage people. They are accessible. There is no ego. There is sincerity. They remember names and faces and bits of personal background of co-workers. And that leads to respect and credibility.

Go to a regional or national meeting of the Voluntary Protection Program Participants’ Association (VPPPA). You’ll see scores of “just normal” workers taking to the platform and publicly speaking for maybe the first time. Public speaking training can help. But it’s the enthusiasm for safety that these workers possess, and encouragement from their peers, that propel these individuals into positions of influence. And the levers of safety leadership are very often the ability to influence others, not by issuing orders, but by personal example and heartfelt sincerity. People respond to that kind of honesty and integrity. And then you find yourself one of your cultures leaders of safety. And that’s how cultures of safety sustain themselves over the long run – through emergent leaders.