# 2.3 Assess the impact of leadership behaviours on the development of proactive safety culture.

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## Introduction

Leadership is one of the most influential factors in developing and sustaining a proactive safety culture. While policies, procedures, and technology provide the framework for managing risks, it is the behaviour of leaders that shapes employees' attitudes, beliefs, and actions towards health, safety, environment, and sustainability (OHSES).

A proactive safety culture goes beyond compliance with rules. It is characterised by anticipating hazards, preventing incidents before they occur, encouraging employee participation, promoting learning from mistakes, and continuously improving safety performance. Such a culture cannot be achieved through rules alone; it requires visible, authentic, and committed leadership at every organisational level.

**This section assesses the impact of leadership behaviours on the development of a proactive safety culture by examining:**

1. Visible and authentic leadership practices.
2. Leadership styles influencing culture development.

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## Understanding Proactive Safety Culture

A proactive safety culture is one in which everyone—from the Board of Directors to frontline employees—actively works to identify, assess, and control risks before accidents happen.

**Characteristics include:**

- Leadership commitment.
- Employee engagement.
- Open communication.
- Continuous learning.
- Hazard reporting.
- Shared responsibility.
- Trust and accountability.
- Continuous improvement.

**Unlike a reactive culture, where organisations respond only after incidents occur, a proactive culture focuses on prevention and resilience.**

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## 1. Visible and Authentic Leadership Practices

### What is Visible Leadership?

Visible leadership means that leaders are actively involved in promoting health and safety rather than managing it from behind office doors.

Employees should regularly see leaders:

- Visiting workplaces.
- Participating in safety meetings.
- Conducting safety walks.
- Discussing hazards.
- Listening to employees.
- Recognising safe behaviours.
- Supporting improvement initiatives.

Visible leadership demonstrates that safety is genuinely valued.

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## What is Authentic Leadership?

Authentic leadership refers to leaders who consistently demonstrate honesty, integrity, transparency, and accountability.

**Authentic leaders:**

- Practise what they preach.
- Admit mistakes.
- Encourage open discussion.
- Treat employees fairly.
- Build trust.
- Keep safety commitments.

Employees are more likely to trust leaders whose actions consistently match their words.

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## 1. Leading by Example

Employees often imitate management behaviour.
**For example:**
If a manager always wears personal protective equipment (PPE), employees are more likely to do the same.
If managers ignore safety rules, employees may conclude that compliance is optional.

## 2. Safety Walks (Management by Walking Around)

Regular workplace visits allow leaders to:

- Observe work practices.
- Identify hazards.
- Speak directly with employees.
- Understand operational challenges.
- Demonstrate genuine concern for safety.

These visits should focus on learning rather than fault-finding.

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**3. Active Listening**

Leaders should encourage employees to:

- Report hazards.
- Raise concerns.
- Suggest improvements.
- Share lessons learned.

Listening creates trust and strengthens employee engagement.

**4. Recognition of Safe Behaviour**

Recognising positive behaviours encourages employees to continue working safely.

Recognition may include:

- Verbal appreciation.
- Awards.
- Safety recognition programmes.
- Performance feedback.

Positive reinforcement often produces more sustainable behavioural change than punishment.

## 5. Accountability

**Visible leadership also requires leaders to:**

- Address unsafe behaviours.
- Allocate adequate resources.
- Follow through on corrective actions.
- Monitor improvement activities.



**Accountability ensures that safety commitments translate into action.**

**Impact on Proactive Safety Culture**

**Visible and authentic leadership:**

- Builds employee trust.
- Encourages reporting.
- Improves morale.
- Increases participation.
- Strengthens organisational learning.
- Reduces unsafe behaviours.
- Supports continuous improvement.

**Employees are far more likely to embrace safety when they observe leaders consistently demonstrating safe behaviours.**

# Critical Evaluation

**Strengths**

- Improves leadership credibility.
- Builds trust throughout the organisation.
- Encourages open communication.
- Enhances employee engagement.
- Reinforces organisational values.

**Limitations**

- Visible leadership without genuine commitment may be viewed as symbolic.
- Inconsistent behaviour by senior leaders can quickly undermine trust.
- Leadership visibility alone cannot compensate for poor management systems or inadequate resources.

Visible leadership must therefore be supported by authentic decision-making and consistent organisational actions.



# 2. Leadership Styles Influencing Culture Development

Different leadership styles significantly influence how safety culture develops. While no single style is appropriate for every situation, some styles are more effective in creating a proactive safety culture than others.

**Transformational Leadership**
**Definition**
Transformational leaders inspire employees to achieve higher levels of performance by creating a shared vision, motivating others, and encouraging innovation.
**Characteristics include:**

- Inspiring vision.
- Motivation.
- Coaching and mentoring.
- Employee empowerment.
- Continuous improvement.
- Innovation.

# Impact on Safety Culture

**Transformational leadership promotes:**

- Employee ownership of safety.
- Hazard reporting.
- Learning from incidents.
- Strong safety values.
- Continuous improvement.

It is widely regarded as one of the most effective leadership styles for developing proactive safety cultures.

# Transactional Leadership

**Definition**

**Transactional leaders focus on:**

- Rules.
- Procedures.
- Compliance.
- Monitoring.
- Rewards and discipline.

Employees are rewarded for compliance and corrected when standards are not met.



**Impact on Safety Culture**

**Advantages:**

- Ensures procedural compliance.
- Useful in high-risk environments.
- Provides clear expectations.

# Transactional Leadership

**Limitations:**

- Encourages compliance rather than commitment.
- Employees may follow rules only when supervised.
- Limited innovation and engagement.

Transactional leadership is effective for maintaining standards but less effective in creating proactive safety behaviours.



# Servant Leadership

**Definition**

Servant leaders prioritise the needs and wellbeing of employees.

**Characteristics include:**

- Empathy.
- Listening.
- Support.
- Collaboration.
- Personal development.



**Impact on Safety Culture**

Employees feel valued and respected, resulting in:

- Greater trust.
- Increased reporting.
- Higher morale.
- Stronger teamwork.
- Better employee wellbeing.

Servant leadership encourages a psychologically safe workplace where employees are comfortable raising concerns.

# Democratic (Participative) Leadership

**Definition**

Democratic leaders involve employees in decision-making.

Examples include:

- Safety committees.
- Consultation meetings.
- Employee workshops.
- Joint problem-solving.



**Impact on Safety Culture**

**Participation increases:**

- Employee ownership.
- Commitment.
- Innovation.
- Acceptance of change.

However, decision-making may take longer.

# Autocratic Leadership

**Definition**

Autocratic leaders make decisions independently with limited employee involvement.

This style may be necessary during emergencies where rapid decisions are required.



**Limitations**

Overreliance on autocratic leadership may:

- Reduce trust.
- Discourage reporting.
- Limit employee engagement.
- Create fear-based compliance.

It is generally less suitable for developing proactive safety cultures.

# Comparative Analysis of Leadership Styles

| Leadership Style | Main Characteristics | Impact on Proactive Safety Culture | Strengths | Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Transformational** | Inspires, motivates, empowers | Very High | Encourages innovation, ownership, and continuous improvement | Requires highly capable leaders |
| **Transactional** | Compliance, monitoring, rewards | Moderate | Maintains standards and regulatory compliance | May create rule-following without commitment |
| **Servant** | Supports, listens, develops people | High | Builds trust, engagement, and psychological safety | Decision-making may be slower |
| **Democratic** | Participation and consultation | High | Encourages ownership and collaborative problem-solving | Time-consuming in complex organisations |
| **Autocratic** | Centralised decision-making | Low (except emergencies) | Fast decisions during crises | Can reduce trust and employee involvement |

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## Critical Evaluation

### Strengths of Effective Leadership Styles

- Develop employee ownership.
- Improve reporting culture.
- Strengthen trust.
- Encourage innovation.
- Promote organisational learning.
- Improve long-term safety performance.

### Limitations

- No single leadership style suits every situation.
- Leadership effectiveness depends on organisational context.
- Poor leadership consistency weakens culture.
- Leadership development requires ongoing investment.

The most successful organisations combine different leadership styles depending on operational needs while maintaining a consistent commitment to safety.

## Practical Scenario

A multinational engineering company experiences repeated near-miss incidents despite having comprehensive safety procedures. Employee surveys reveal that workers are reluctant to report hazards because managers focus primarily on production targets and rarely visit operational areas.

To address this, the executive team adopts a transformational leadership approach supported by visible leadership practices. Senior managers conduct weekly safety walks, engage directly with employees, recognise proactive safety behaviours, and encourage open reporting without blame. Safety committees involving frontline workers are also established to support participative decision-making.

Over the next 18 months, near-miss reporting increases, employee trust improves, corrective actions are implemented more quickly, and incident rates decline. These improvements demonstrate how authentic and visible leadership can transform a compliance-driven organisation into one with a proactive safety culture.

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## Key Takeaways

- Leadership behaviour is one of the strongest influences on the development of a proactive safety culture because employees model the attitudes and actions demonstrated by leaders.
- Visible and authentic leadership—through leading by example, safety walks, active listening, recognising safe behaviour, and accountability—builds trust, encourages participation, and reinforces organisational commitment to safety.
- Different leadership styles influence safety culture in different ways. Transformational, servant, and democratic leadership generally promote stronger engagement and proactive behaviours, while transactional leadership supports compliance and autocratic leadership is mainly effective in emergency situations.
- A proactive safety culture develops when leadership consistently aligns words with actions, fosters open communication, empowers employees, and supports continual learning rather than simply enforcing rules.
- Sustainable improvements in safety performance require consistent leadership commitment, supported by effective management systems, employee involvement, and continuous reinforcement of positive safety values and behaviours.

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# Thank you