



Walking the talk

*on courageous
safety leadership*

by Don Ritz,
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Barrick Gold VP of Safety and Health Don Ritz (left) with Sergio Santandar at 5400 metres at the new Pascua Lama Project in northern Chile. Don visited the site during a tour of all Barrick's locations to present safety awards to individuals and sites for their accomplishments.

It's been more than 20 years and a few jobs ago, but I still remember the day that two of my employees were burned in a petrochemical process incident. It was a critical turning point in my thinking about safety. I realized that, as an operations manager, I had preached safety on the job but didn't always live it, especially off the job.

In that moment, I finally understood the wisdom my father had always tried to impart to me. My dad, who owned and operated a construction company focusing on concrete work, always said to me, "Never ask anyone to do anything you wouldn't do yourself. Everyone is watching what you do, so do it right." I realized it is my behaviour that tells people what I really believe, not my words.

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Like many people, I once believed that some "accidents" are inevitable, and it was impossible to go more than one or two million hours without a safety incident. But, in 1996, that belief was challenged when I attended the Business Roundtable in the USA. A company called S&B Engineering and Constructors received a safety award for going an astounding 17 million hours without a lost-time incident!

Wondering how this was possible, I contacted the company. They invited me to Houston to discuss their achievement, on the condition that I visit one of their project sites first. Four of us from Alberta, representing owners, contractors and labour, took them up on their offer and visited one of their sites in Odessa, Texas. I was truly amazed when I walked on that site. No one even had to tell us that safety was first and foremost. You could tell by the appearance, the caring, the interactions and

*Photos at right:
Don Ritz travels to
Barrick's operations
around the globe to
meet employees and
promote courageous
safety leadership.*



communication that safety was firmly ingrained in the culture there.

The next day, we travelled to Houston for a meeting with (I expected) their head of safety. When we walked into the conference room, there were seven people around the table — the entire executive team! Not only did they greet us, they spent six hours with us explaining their approach. How many of us could get our entire executive team to meet with four visitors and spend six hours talking about safety? We also learned that their incident investigation team for every incident was their executive team. Clearly, their actions spoke louder than any words about their commitment to safety. I began to see the goal of zero incidents is indeed possible, and that committed leadership that really walks the talk is the key driver for achieving it.

Interestingly, this company was showcased in the first issue April 2008 of *Compass*, and with valid reason. The safety leadership they demonstrate through their behaviours is a role model for us all. It has strongly influenced my approach to safety ever since, most recently as the leader of the Courageous Safety Leadership efforts at Barrick Gold Corporation.

In July of this year, I presented our Courageous Safety Leadership message to a “Safety in Deep Mining Conference” in Johannesburg, South Africa. The South African mining industry certainly has some particular safety issues. If they apply the right amount of effort, discipline and leadership, I believe they can turn it around, but the leadership efforts will need to be focused and on-going. Unfortunately, some people still have the attitude that the special risks inherent in deep mining and in developing countries make a certain level of injuries or even deaths inevitable, but I absolutely cannot accept this. There are inherent risks in every industry, including deep mining. It is not the depth of the ore but the height of the leadership that counts. My company operates mine

sites in various geographies and climates, including extreme temperatures from +55 to -55 Celsius, in wind conditions exceeding 200 kilometers an hour, and at altitudes from 5,400 meters above sea level to more than a kilometre underground. Regardless of the conditions, our behaviour, guidance and expectations have to be consistent to ensure that every worker goes home safe and healthy every day.

As managers in organizations, we often have high expectations for changes we want to make to get to this zero state, but most of us are not willing to take it seriously enough to make all the changes in ourselves first. Ask yourself, “If everyone in my organization behaved exactly as I do, how safe would my organization be?”

Jim Clemmer, the noted author on leadership, has graphed a “Commitment Continuum” which begins with lip service on the far left of the chart, progressing to involved leadership and true integration of the message on the far right. Leadership, he contends, is a process that must lead by example through management’s up close and personal involvement. Only when managers reach the point of involved leadership does it become part of the culture (the way we really do things around here) and make lasting change.

You cannot build a team or organization that believes in different things from you. You can’t make them into something you’re not. Leadership isn’t just a job; it is a commitment to other people’s excellence. As an illustration, I think of the movie, “Remember the Titans.” One of the highlights of that film for me was the heated exchange between the white captain and one of the black players, who had experienced firsthand the captain’s lack of acceptance and support. When the captain confronted the player for deliberately missing a play, the player retorted “attitude reflect leadership, captain.” We must remember that, unfortunately, too many managers and supervisors who are responsible for developing others haven’t learned the basics of good leadership and development, even for themselves. They are trying to build organizations or provide



services based on a different value system. It doesn't work. Employees quickly observe the disconnect between words and deeds.

To succeed as safety leaders, courageous safety leadership has to become deeply personal. We cannot expect others to change if we are not prepared to change and model the right behaviours ourselves, whether on or off the job. It means having the courage to confront attitudes and those above us in organizational hierarchies. Sometimes we must have the courage to do what is right regardless of the consequences to ourselves.

To understand the impact of safety failures, I have spent a lot of time talking to affected families about the impact on their lives. Some have allowed us to capture their personal stories of anguish on video, and we share this with employees during our safety training programs so they see how safety incidents have far-reaching consequences for people and their families. I have even invited these family members in to address our executives so our leaders understand the devastation caused when we fail to establish safe conditions on our work sites.

One of these people is Marjorie Scott, whose son, Keith, was killed in an industrial incident a number of years ago. "Keith's life is like a rock landing in water," she told us. "He went down, hit the bottom and never came up. Then a rippling effect occurred. The ripples went out and touched the shores. Those who were closest felt them the most!"

When you understand the personal cost of safety incidents at an emotional level, how can you not be personally committed to ensuring zero incidents?

In recent years, I have had the privilege to visit numerous world-class safety successes. When I analyze their success, I see it is directly attributable to three things: personally committed leadership, a belief system that asserts a state of

"zero incidents" is achievable, and a well disciplined approach to risk management at the field level. These organizations clearly communicate the vision of zero incidents. Moreover, the leaders demonstrate their commitment through their own behaviour on and off the job, so employees know it is authentic and not just lip service. The leaders are visible proponents of safety — people hear and see their leaders living safe practices every day.

For me, being a courageous safety leader means caring about people and getting personally involved in the safety mission through "visible felt leadership." You cannot succeed by sending safety messages from your office. You must be in the field, interacting with people, walking around, coaching, checking compliance, and asking questions. Your words and actions must communicate the sense of urgency around safety, as well as the vulnerability that exists around the work being done. Keep stressing the vision with a focus on caring for people – employees, contractors, suppliers, etc. – not statistics. Go out of your way to acknowledge good safety performance. Respond to any safety incident or near miss with a "what can we learn" approach. Take immediate action to correct any substandard condition or behaviours, challenging negative attitudes or hierarchies if necessary. As people managers, leaders should assess safety activities as part of performance reviews and compensation, and promote only those individuals with proven safety performance.

Hold yourself and others to account for following through on safety-related commitments. Make safety discussions part of every meeting.

These are some of my experiences and learnings after many years in safety. I hope that sharing my journey will help you walk the talk as a courageous safety leader, working toward a vision of zero incidents in your organization.

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