

Gaslit: Safety Leadership Should Not Be Confusing or Misleading

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For many years, a particular occurrence in my work always bothered me. I take no issue with challenges. If there is a hurdle to overcome, I can work at it until it is resolved. For example, if I need to pass a course, earn a degree, earn a certification, get through chemotherapy or hike 20 miles, I can identify the challenge and work at it until it is overcome. However, there have also been quite different situations where, regardless of what I did or did not do, I was told I failed. There were no expectations set, no directions given, and no status checks; I was simply told, regardless of what I did or what I changed, that I was a failure. I internalized these times and really took them to heart. I wondered what I had done wrong. Even as I was being called a failure and threatened with termination, I was being simultaneously validated by other agencies outside my workplace. Until last week, this bothered me. Then, I heard a friend speak of “gaslighting,” a tactic used by people seeking to break down another’s confidence and/or sense of self to increase their sense of power, even despite facts, by getting other people to question their own reality. Had I heard this word roughly 20 years prior, it could have saved me many hours of wondering what I had done wrong. However, now knowing there is a word for this tactic, I can certainly say it has absolutely no place in safety leadership.

What is “Gaslighting?”

According to Dr. Stephanie Sarkis, (Sarkis, 2017) “gaslighting” can be identified by 11 signs:

1. People tell blatant lies.
2. People deny ever having said something, even when proof is evident.
3. People use something near or dear to others as ammunition against them.
4. People consistently degrade others to wear them down over time.
5. People’s actions do not match their words.
6. People use positive reinforcement to confuse others.
7. People seek to confuse others to weaken them.
8. People accuse others of something the accuser did.
9. People try to turn others against each other.
10. People tell another they are crazy or don’t understand.
11. People tells others “everyone else is lying to them.”

Having now learned of this tactic, I could not help but notice how prevalent it had been in my life. Going back to childhood, it was used by the schoolhouse bullies with, “You’re just not cool like us; there’s no reason or method to it, *you just don’t get it ... and everyone else thinks so, too.*” Having written off schoolyard taunts around elementary school, gaslighting became an elevated form when I was a musician with, “You’re not cool, everyone else thinks so, and ... *you’re a terrible musician and, if anyone says otherwise, they’re lying to you.*” Gaslighters were getting good at their art by this point and, being only 18 did not help much. I learned to disregard them. However, the tactic was really elevated when I went to Air Force basic training. From my readings of countless

military memoirs, this is not only normal but totally encouraged to break people down. This nugget comes to mind:

"Worden, you are a failure. You will never be successful. Everyone here knows it. It does not matter that you have passed every evaluation. Everyone here is lying to you if they say you are doing well. You are a loser. Furthermore, I see you are wearing a wedding ring ... well, does your wife know what a loser you are? I bet she wishes she never married you. The other troops think you're a failure"

Had I not read plenty and been advised by many that this was going to happen, I might have paid it mind. But, knowing this was going to happen and that it was only going to last a matter of weeks, it did not register much. However, going into civilian safety work, the gaslighting really started to become a bother.

Gaslighting and Safety

Safety is a matter of hazard identification, assessment and control. Hazards either exist or they do not. Risk is a function of frequency and severity. With the subjectivity involved in a risk assessment, many have used gaslighting over the years to influence their perspective of risk or, at times, to justify a lower risk assessment. These bits come to mind:

"Look, Cory, you need to stop writing reports saying you recommend [enter hazard control here]. I know you think it is a high risk, but you just do not understand how the business works. Everyone else knows you are wrong. You think that you know something because you have a [certification the other person did not have] but you do not get it. The Safety Committee puts up with you because they have to, but you just annoy them. If you think you are doing a good job, you're just lying to yourself...."

Later, after an incident involving that very hazard

"Look, Cory, I don't know why you wrote this investigation report. Your job expectations are not to investigate incidents. Your lane is not to tell us where improvements are needed. Normally, you do a fairly good job, but you have overstepped here. You think you remember me saying we did not need a hazard control there but, your memory must be wrong. Just because you got a [certification the other person did not have] doesn't mean you know anything...."

Later, speaking to employees about the same....

"Look, I know this incident happened, but this just isn't a high risk. If you think that, you are just being paranoid. I know you do this job every day and you do a good job, but you are being paranoid. All the other managers think so. If you do not do this task, you are going to get written up. You just do not get how the business works. If you get fired, your family will leave you...."

Ultimately, situations like these transpired into long-term situations where everything became a gaslight. I might be told to work on a project but, after spending time of it, be asked why I was wasting time on it and that I had not been asked to. I might be accused of not doing something but, after being presented evidence of its completion, be told that it was the wrong assignment. After producing an email detailing the assignment from that same person, be told that I didn't understand what they meant. Later, I was given a 20-page report detailing everything I had said or done during meetings just to show that I was being audited. I was told I was responsible – by way of my performance review – for other people's metrics that I had no possible control over. At one point, I was called into a meeting to explain why I had deactivated my personal Facebook page; they wrote that my deactivating my personal Facebook page was a suicide threat. This would go on and on, for meeting after meeting, until I eventually became so burned out that I left the organization. Even knowing that my work had been validated by countless third parties and the leading and lagging indicators were valid and reliable – or perhaps, because of those things – I was being made to feel like I was a failure and deserved to be fired. A case was being made. I could not see it until I was literally sick from it.

While these types of situations are negative enough that they can affect someone's livelihood, the tragic part is when they affect someone's safety. As in the above example where someone will try to gaslight others into an unsafe task, it is extremely important that safety is taught so that each employee, regardless of organizational placement, understands how to identify, assess and control hazards. Gaslighting is unfortunately a part of our lives. I did not have a name for it until last week and generally referred to it as other people being devious, unethical, uncompassionate and without empathy, but it turns out there is an actual psychological term for it. How sad.

Preventing and Avoiding Gaslighting

Knowing what gaslighting is, it is hugely important that we each avoid it and prevent doing it ourselves. We can watch for Dr. Sarkis's 11 signs of gaslighting. We can ensure we do not do it ourselves and watch for others who may try to gaslight us. Self-confidence is important. But, when I say, "self-confidence," I do not mean a false sense of confidence brought on by a nice outfit. I mean self-confidence, self-validation and self-reliance brought on by knowing job expectations; knowing that each has been accomplished; having evidence, data, metrics and communications of it; and knowing that due diligence is and has been paid to each task. If good things happen along the way, such as awards, do not believe the hype. That does not mean the work is done or what

good fortune cannot rise and fall just the same. Awards are fantastic but they often also mean there is further to fall. I personally try to keep one foot in front of the other and accomplish something each day, even something small. If these steps amount to a great journey and there are accolades involved, that just means the accomplishments were valid and reliable. The next step is always ahead. If this is done, potential gaslighters will have a tough time finding anything to gaslight. This will also help prevent each of us from inadvertently becoming so prideful to gaslight another.

Ultimately, safety is about helping each other. Gaslighting means a lack of empathy, compassion and ethics. Gaslighting and safety do not go together. Gaslighting creates confusion and misleads others, usually to benefit the gaslighter. This does not serve safety and, while usually not illegal, it is often unethical. Sadly, it is obviously reality and we need to be aware of it.

References

Sarkis, S. (2017). 11 warning signs of gaslighting. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved on March 1, 2021 from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/here-there-and-everywhere/201701/11-warning-signs-gaslighting>

About the Author



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