Strengthening Safety Leadership

Almost 7 million EU workers experience an accident every year, costing families, employers, governments and societies a staggering €55bn or more. The solution to the problem is not more management and process – it is leadership and culture.

Effective safety leadership is known to strengthen safety culture and deliver financial benefits. It positively impacts employees' safety behaviour and attitudes, reduces injury rates, reduces insurance premiums, and increases productivity by eliminating production bottlenecks. Organisations that are good at managing safety also tend to manage operations well – in other words, operational and safety excellence go hand-in-hand.

Safety leadership is characterised as "the process of defining the desired state – setting up the team to succeed, and engaging in the discretionary efforts that drive the safety value". In practice, this results in executive leadership teams deciding what safety excellence means, and what it looks and feels like; developing, resourcing and implementing end-to-end plans to achieve success; and all leaders consistently displaying their commitment to achieving safety excellence.

Ineffective safety leadership is known to be a major contributor to workplace incidents. Primarily, ineffective safety leadership stems from confusion about the organisations' safety management systems and associated policies. This means leaders do not know their responsibilities, or how much authority they have to fix things. To overcome such problems, it makes sense to clarify and define the desired safety leadership behaviours, and develop a 'Competency Matrix' linked to the elements in the safety management system. Following-up with high quality education ensures all leaders are informed about the organisations safety management expectations. Providing leadership training workshops also helps leaders to competently demonstrate the desired behaviours, and ongoing organisational support enables each leader's success.

Leadership approaches

Although different people tend to prefer one leadership approach over others, these should be adapted to suit the demands of the situation, the requirements of the people involved, and the challenges facing the organisation. There is, therefore, a time and place for leaders to use different approaches, with none being good or bad. It's how they are used that determines success or failure: Good leadership is much more about meeting follower's needs to ensure their success, than satisfying the leader's needs. The main leadership approaches are transformational, transactional and servant.

Transformational leaders shape the culture of an organisation by visualising, describing, and directing people's efforts. They know where they want to get to and can describe a compelling vision of the future that motivates others to action. They describe the conditions necessary for success and encourage employee participation to achieve collective goals. Using positive language to sell the benefits, they try to connect their follower's sense of identity with the organisation's vision to provide real hope for a better future by promoting a 'can-do' attitude. Challenging and questioning prevailing assumptions, they constantly seek to drive change and move people beyond their own limitations. When talking to others, they include at least one question that causes people to think about safety in a new way (e.g. why is safety important to you?). This style of leadership is about driving change.

Transactional leaders embed the culture into the organisation by clarifying relationships between performance requirements and desired outcomes. They consider followers to be fully responsible for their work, and use performance monitoring with consequence management (e.g. praise, coaching, providing support, etc.) to reinforce people's behaviour. This style of leadership is about helping to ensure compliance to safety rules and regulations.

Servant leaders sustain cultural change by building personal relationships and conveying support to individuals

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through open 2-way communication, coaching, and unleashing people's potential. In turn, this helps to create a supportive environment which increases employee engagement that in turn positively affects team performance. This style of leadership is about setting people up for success by facilitating employee needs.

Evidence-based research shows that transformational and transactional safety leadership styles moderately influence employee engagement and people's safety behaviour, which in turn reduces incident rates. Servant leadership, on the other hand, creates a supportive environment, which exerts a much stronger positive influence on employee engagement, safety behaviour, and incident reduction.

Reducing known hazards
Unfortunately, the presence of known, uncontrolled physical hazards and risks suppresses the impact of all three safety leadership approaches. They neutralise supportive environments, decrease employee engagement, and increase unsafe behaviour, resulting in higher incident rates. This is best explained by employee scepticism about leadership's true commitment

to safety. When known uncontrolled hazards and risks are present, employees struggle to believe leadership is sincere. People then withdraw from the safety process and behave more unsafely. If leadership is to make a difference, therefore, it is vital that known hazards and risks be eliminated or reduced to as low as reasonably practicable (ALARP). Facilitating this means providing a supportive environment and sufficient resources for individual leaders to ensure they have the means to maximise the impact of their efforts.

Known hazards and risks left in an uncontrolled state are often the result of the 'last mile' problem, where intentions are not converted into action due to time and/or budget issues, a lack of an efficient system for addressing them, and/or an unwillingness to put effort into resolving them. An effective leader will constantly challenge the 'status quo' and ask basic questions about what is stopping the issue(s) from being resolved, and driving any corrective actions. He/she will also keep people informed about the proposed solution(s), progress on completion, and the results of any evaluations once implemented.

Conclusion
In summary, effective safety leadership adds to the bottom-line in so many ways that organisations would be foolish not to implement an efficient safety leadership initiative. Successful safety leadership strategies deployed by BSMS that have reduced incidents by an average 35% include executive leadership coaching, workshops, training and cloud-based leadership software. Reducing high risk levels presented by known hazards also leads to much higher compliance with safety, and significantly boosts the impact of leadership on performance. In turn, employers, governments and societies can reap the benefits of lower incident rates and an improved safety culture, as well as achieving spill-over benefits in quality, productivity, asset integrity, and cost-savings.

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