Leadership and safety - still not connected

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Introduction

This paper examines the question: what is safety leadership *really*? Almost every organization claim that they have leadership programs in place but there are as many definitions of leadership as what there are consultants in this field.

Safety lends itself very well to this topic because it covers topics such as safety values, inspiration and encouragement. But a key behaviour of great leaders is that they 'experiment and take risks', that they challenge and change the status quo and that they enable others to act independently. But these are all incompatible with safety because we cannot allow risk-taking, we want people to support the status quo, not challenge it and we want them to act within our safety rules. This is what inspirational leadership is about.

This paper also discusses results of a safety leadership survey that was completed in Australia and duplicated internationally. It will show the views and stereotypes that industry leaders (managers and supervisors) have about safety, people and how to achieve safety improvements. The results are disturbing and pose serious questions about our capability as an industry to improve safety performance.

Leadership delusions about safety

Many, organizations and leaders are like the Titanic: our delusions let us enter dangerous waters at full speed, ignoring obvious signs of impending catastrophe.

Safety performance in many companies and even industries has stalled in the last decade. Accidents rates are at a "plateau" and yet, serious accidents and fatality rates are not. In more dramatic cases, such as in the BP Texas disaster, organizations that have "exemplary" safety statistics, suddenly have a catastrophic or multi-fatality event occurring.

The leaders in these organizations share at least one, more or all of seven delusions about managing a business, and mostly, these delusions are created by academics, consultants and authors of popular books about (safety) management.

It is a world of good news, a demand for "positive focus" on incredible safety performances by incredibly safe companies that must be emulated by all, and who

have an army of consultants or gurus who 'created' these successes. They are the high priests who created the delusions of safety management. The delusions are created for a variety of reasons, often egoistic ones for the priests, but then one delusions feeds the next and the next, until we have the ultimate delusion of invulnerability: we will or even have achieved zero. We are impenetrable with our defences, we are Titanics. These are the seven deadly delusions, based on extensive research since 1997 of organizations that suffered unexpected disasters.

1. The delusion of predictability

A key aspect of modern risk management approaches is that risk has a certain 'probability' (likelihood or chance) and if the risk is analyzed, its probability can be identified and cautionary actions taken. The result is often a simple matrix with likelihood and consequence as the axes and a risk profile places some rare events with sever consequences in the upper corner, where it demands special protocols or mitigation.

All well so far, except that in most cases, unlike the risk insurance industry, there is little objective and hard data available about most events in most organizations. There simply isn't enough data to achieve the goal of risk quantification, and risk assessments often become a subjective guess, often by unqualified people who have a vested interest in a certain guess and easily manipulated for "organizational politics". Most of all, it creates the delusions that risks are measurable, measured and mitigated. It actually plays strongly into the last, most damaging delusion of invulnerability.

2. The delusion of statistical trends

The saying: lies, damn lies and statistics is a famous one in the world of business research and reporting, but nowhere as damaging as in the world of safety statistics.

The accident as an event is a spurious, incidental and minute event in the bigger scheme of organizational activity. Millions and millions of tasks are performed every day by employees, taking multitudes of decisions about those tasks. The magnitude of all this simply cannot be fathomed, yet the few incidents are treated with statistical analysis: simple frequencies per thousand and then further treated with moving averages.

The direction of these graphs are critical – for the plant manager and safety manager, jobs are on the line if the trends are not in the wanted direction. And to show commitment, the Board, President, Vice-Presidents all ask questions when the stats are not right – resulting in all kinds of 'treatments' of the data. Workers are quickly 'rehabilitated' to return to work before a certain cut off period that would render it a lost time incident, or the incidents is argued away as not a work-related injury. Large incentives often drive reductions in the rate of accident reporting or the

behavior of many to hide incidents from management , slowly and deadly feeding into the last delusion:

3. The delusion of (risk) control

The first delusion of risk control is the most persuasive and the most attractive one. We learn about risks primarily through accidents or incidents that occurred, less so from risk assessments but either way, the mitigation process that follows almost always has a preventative procedure as a result. This procedure now specifies the right or safe way of doing the particular risky job and all must comply with it.

We create a myriad of rules and procedures that are supposed to defend us and create controls in the workplace and while it is largely successful, it eventually becomes a complexity of its own. Layer upon layer of risk controls actually create behavioural responses that expose the organization in unpredictable ways: most of all creating the 7th delusion of invulnerability, discussed below.

4. The delusion of human error

The delusion of human error is closely linked with the stereotypes about humans that the safety profession holds, and also linked to the delusions discussed above. One of the long-standing 'axioms' in behavioral safety is that the majority of accidents are because of human error, and that behavioral observations will eliminate that. This linear approach wholly underestimates the complex interactions between humans and their dynamically changing environments. It also completely misses the point that human actions are only the visible sharp end of many behavioral systems that 'create' human error.

5. The delusion of compliance

James Reason (2001) published an insightful article in which he made the controversial statement: "following safety procedures has killed people" and he cites examples such as the Piper Alpha disaster as just one such case, where workers who strictly followed the safety procedure were the ones killed in the fire, while those who jumped into the sea, against procedures, survived. This doesn't imply that all safety procedures are wrong and shouldn't be adhered to, but it does mean that human beings in a high-risk work environment should firstly apply their risk skills and risk judgment.

6. The delusion of consistency

Human beings learn to deal with risks though a complex process of cognitive adaptation, often developing an intuition and competence that defies reasoned thinking. This 'capability allows them to deal with risk in a highly variable fashion, a readiness for any/many possibilities. But then our risk control logic says we should limit all variability and create consistency and compliance in the workplace. This logic seems flawed.

7. The delusion of invulnerability

The delusion of invulnerability is the most deadly of them all. It pervades the minds of individual workers, supervisors and managers and eventually becomes ingrained in the culture of the organization. It is caused by three factors or 'conditions' in the organization: high levels of perceived safety protection, systems and programs, low levels of incidents occurring and the increasing trend of workers (and supervisors and managers) to hide risk-taking, risks and potential safety problems away. This is largely a result of a well-intentioned, but poorly deployed, focus on zero accidents – a number chased by all, mystified by gurus and used as a large stick against all "heathens". The problem of risk secrecy is exacerbated by elaborate reward schemes for people or departments who achieve defined periods of zero accidents.

The 7 deadly delusions are not readily visible in an organization, mostly because there are no mechanisms from inside to identify them. The problem is that role players such as managers, supervisors and employees all have a vested interest in positive safety outcomes, positive trends and good news about safe work performance.

The massive focus on positive safety in today's business world, the lack of self-critical analysis and understanding of the complex dynamics in safety all contribute to the problem. Add into this mix peddling of simplistic safety solutions, such as the concept that the human being can be reduced to a simple ABC (Antecedent-behavior-Consequence) model such as espoused by behavioral psychology/safety, you have an explosive concoction.

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Leadership perceptions and safety culture

Recently, a web-based safety culture survey was conducted by SAFEmap, amongst 500+ randomly invited leaders (managers/supervisors) in the Australian mining industry. The survey measured perceptions on 20 factors pertaining to safety and a separate report with the full results is being prepared. In this summary, it will be referred to as the leaders' survey.

The results of this survey were compared with a similar survey that was conducted by SAFEmap amongst all levels of workers in the Australian mining industry, from 1999 to 2008, with more than 25000 people surveyed by SAFEmap during this 10-year period. In this paper it is referred to as the workers' survey.

Both surveys tested people's views on each of the underlined factors below that make up a safe culture.

The definition of safe culture is based on James Reason: "A safe culture is an informed culture. An informed culture can only be built on the foundations of a reporting culture. And this, in turn, depends upon establishing a just culture. This can only come about if people have trust in their leaders"

In the surveys, the perceptions of trust varied significantly, with supervisors and managers from the recent leaders' survey believing that the workers trust them, although the workers' survey showed low trust in management, with more trust in direct supervisors.

On the issue of a just culture, leaders feel that they are treating employees fairly and consistently when it came to safety transgressions, but most workers have a strong and opposite view that they are not treated fairly for safety transgressions.

The two groups also show very divergent views on the issue of a reporting culture. More than 65% of leaders feel confident that reported incidents are mostly acted upon and dealt with, while most workers perceive it generally to not be so.

On the final and critically important question of whether we have an informed culture, it was found that 75% of leaders had confidence that workers are "freely reporting incidents and have no fear in doing so". However, the reverse was true when workers' responses were analysed. By far the majority of workers indicate that "rules are broken to get jobs done", without the knowledge of leaders.

The issue of transparency in the safety culture is a very important one and is one of the trigger conditions of many mine and other disasters. The tendency of workers not to report risks, mistakes and near misses for a variety of complex reasons, inevitably leads to a situation where senior management get good and positive reports about safety, but latent risky conditions are building up. This was evident at Moura Mine, Piper Alpha, Longford and recently at Texas Refinery.

With increasing pressures for safety in our industry, it is suspected that risk secrecy is on the increase, towards the titanic curve.

A way forward to improve this aspect of our industry is to consider the deployment of positive safety leadership processes, to ensure that the fundamental trust levels within the organization support the other cultural aspects. This should especially include leadership skills at supervisor levels, although the major hurdle of an increasingly litigious environment remains unaffected.

Conclusions

The safety profession is big business world-wide and has a long history of lies, facades and delusions. Organizations are caught up in the competitive cycle of publically pronouncing how safe they are and citing impressive accident free achievements. Some organizations and consultancies have built up huge reputations with many "millions of hours accident free", selling their expertise and magic tools and yet, most of these claims are simply lies, damn lies and statistics.

A significant drawback in safety is the many cycles of fads and buzz words that soak up resources for little real return, other than creating a lot of 'busy-ness'. We have, as an industry, fired off many silver bullets in our relentless pursuit of the "safety goals" and we are increasingly aiming at the worker. We are now fast turning to the next fad and silver bullets from the worlds of psychology, neurology and cognitive sciences, again aiming at the worker to 'switch' them on - while the answer to safety lies within our organizations and well within our grasp: valued and credible safety leadership at all levels, especially our first line supervisors.

Inspirational leaders share and lead with their values, make decisions based on values, challenge traditions, inspire and enable people to act. Inspirational leadership creates the accountability and values for safety we so desperately seek and it creates the 'safe culture' that is able to reach into the deepest crevices of our organizations, where our systems and defences cannot. Leadership is a process that an organization can acquire, nurture and develop.

It is felt that safety in our industry is at or near a critical turning point. Continuing with the same safety management philosophies and behavioural fads may take us quicker and further towards the titanic curve, unless we make fundamental shifts in

our safety thinking. However, societal pressures, the safety profession and accident-chasing lawyers may not allow us to change direction.

Step changes in our near-zero safety performance are not likely anymore - and we will continue to experience random fluctuations in accident rates, and larger spikes if we have a disaster. And as we relentlessly push for incrementally better accident rates, so risk secrecy increases and so does the likelihood for catastrophic events.

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