

Safety Culture and Leadership

When I think of what the essential ingredient is needed for eliminating occupational injuries or illnesses, it is having a safety culture within an organization. What safety culture is, how it impacts an organization and ways to build a positive safety culture is what I will focus on during this essay. I will also detail how leadership affects culture and how creating a safety culture should be the mission of all organizations. As I read articles on Dick Martin, it became very apparent to me that he was a man of great integrity and passion. His leadership skills made him the perfect person to help change the way people looked at health and safety in the workplace. All it takes is one person to stand up fight for the fundamental rights of people and make a positive difference. Like in most cases, standing up to protect people sometimes comes with much resistance, but like most great leaders, Dick Martin stood up for what he believed in and prevailed.

Safety cultures consist of shared beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes in an organization. Culture is the atmosphere created by those beliefs and attitudes which shape our behaviour. For an organization to have a positive safety culture, all levels must have the shared perception of importance of safety and must communicate with each other. Strong safety cultures are resistant to change and are a “mindset”. Leadership is the most powerful component of culture. Leaders affect change, which in turn creates and sustains an organization’s culture. A poor safety culture is the result of poor leadership and an organization with no culture or vision, breeds dysfunction. Leaders are vision-creators, initiators and change agents who guide people, but having the trust of their employees is essential for a positive change process to occur. Dick Martin exemplified a leader in every facet, his words and actions helped to change the paradigms of whomever he came in contact with. He was a far-sighted advocate whose vision and passion helped change the safety culture in Canada and around the world.

The only way an organization can attain a positive safety culture is by having the unconditional commitment from all its high level management. These are the people who will implement the safety program to the employees and it's imperative that their beliefs and attitudes match what they expect out of their employees. This is why their actions and behaviours must illustrate their philosophy and commitment to health and safety; otherwise

they will be sending mixed messages to their employees. To be more precise, leaders must walk the talk. These are the five fundamental general beliefs that everyone in the organization must truly believe to build the foundation for a safety culture. The health and safety of workers has first priority and must take precedence over all other business objectives – this is a critical measure of management commitment and means no cutting corners or having situational policies. All injuries and occupational injuries can be prevented – this can be done by managing and self-managing techniques and also means that injuries cannot be blamed simply on worker negligence.

Excellence in safety = Excellence in business - safe, healthy employees have a positive impact on all operations and without this belief, cost-benefit tradeoff thinking leads to compromises in safety. Safety must be an integral part of every job – just like the quality of each employees work, safety must also have the “do it right the first time “ attitude. The Human factor, mainly in the head – most injuries occur because of inattention, not lack of knowledge or physical reasons. People take risks because they truly believe that they won’t get hurt. This attitude, especially among young workers, is a recipe for disaster. The benefits of having a strong safety culture are undeniable. Research has shown that developing a strong safety culture has the single greatest impact on accident reduction of any process. This, in itself, should make it the top priority for all organizations. An organization with a strong culture typically experiences fewer at risk behaviours – therefore lower accident rates, lower employee turnover, lower sick days and higher productivity. And for the bottom line, the cost savings from reducing accidents and injuries can be staggering.

There are five main components needed in a good safety culture. These components are very closely linked to how a leader leads his organization. Organizational Commitment – this refers to the extent to which upper management identifies safety as a core value or guiding principle. Their commitment to safety is reflected in the ability to demonstrate a consistent positive attitude and behaviour towards safety. Management Involvement – this refers to the extent management at all levels get personally involved in critical safety activities. Their active presence and input in all safety operations are key, as well as how they communicate the safety issues with others. Employee Empowerment – within the context of safety culture, this means that employees have a substantial voice in safety decisions and have the leverage to initiate and achieve safety improvements. They have the power to hold

themselves and others accountable for their action and will take pride in the safety of their Company. Recognition System – a fair evaluation and reward system is needed to promote safe behaviour and discourage or correct unsafe behaviour. One of the key components of an organizations safety culture is the manner in which both behaviours are evaluated and the consistency in which rewards or penalties are handed out. Reporting System – this is the keystone to identifying the weakness and vulnerability of safety management before an accident occurs. The willingness and ability of a company to proactively learn and adapt its operations based on incidents and near misses before an accident occurs, is critical for improving safety. The awareness and education about reducing hazards and eliminating risks in the workplace is key for preventing all workplace injuries or illnesses. This is where CCOHS is instrumental in aiding this cause. During my OH&S Practitioner course, CCOHS was my main resource for researching many of my class assignments. Their massive database of information incorporates a variety of relevant topics for all the types of stakeholders in an occupational health and safety system.

What I really find upsetting is the fact that my province, Saskatchewan, has one of the worst rates of injuries in Canada. Being that I will be embarking in a career in the OH&S field, I take this statistic rather personally. My mission when I graduate is to promote the benefits of an organizational safety culture to the leaders of business in Saskatchewan. Making them aware of its benefits and the potential ramifications of not having one is the key selling point. This leads to the question of - Why do we have to sell the benefits of ensuring the health and safety of workers when it's the law? Well, a bad culture can be entrenched in an organization so deep that it's accountability and responsibility systems do not function properly. The sad fact is most organizations don't realize this until it's too late and someone gets seriously injured or killed.

The foundation for a positive culture must be laid by the leaders of business, their vision guides and controls the workforce. In a strong safety culture, all your employees will take this positive vision and feel responsible for safety, and pursue it on a daily basis. They will go beyond the call of duty to identify unsafe conditions and behaviours, and intervene to correct them. Any process that brings all levels within the organization together to work towards a common goal, that everyone holds in as a value, will strengthen the organization's overall corporate culture. The benefits from this will breed employee organizational commitment and

loyalty, which will ultimately mean a more productive and safer work environment for all. The bottom line is that a faulty safety program costs money and maybe a life. The leaders of business must understand why a safety culture is imperative and guide their workforce towards this ultimate goal with determination and uncompromised values. Once a safety culture is achieved, all involved will reap the rewards. Just like Dick Martin had done, his deep-seated values and principles paved the way for positive change to occur and we have all benefited from his great contributions.

RESOURCES

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. About Dick Martin.

<http://www.ccohs.ca/scholarship/aboutDM.html>

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. <http://www.ccohs.ca>

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Culture and Leadership. Earl Blair. Professional Safety – June 2003.

<https://www.asse.org/ps0603blair.pdf>

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<http://www.humanfactors.uiuc.edu/Reports&PapersPDFs/isap03/vonwiemitshazha.pdf>

Leaders Role in Creating a Safety Sensitive Culture. Dr. Janice Foley – University of Regina.

http://www.usask.ca/nursing/cne/docs/OHSFoley_pres.pdf