Making Process Safety a core value through effective leadership

Safety is defined as the state or condition of being protected from harm, danger or loss. This definition can be expanded to include all measures and practices taken to prevent harm, danger or loss. This is written into UK law through the Health and Safety at Work act 1974 and the Control of Major Accident Hazards (COMAH) Regulations 2015. Safety is the responsibility of employers and employees. So rather than a priority, safety should be regarded as part of the core business and integrated into business work practices.

Leadership is defined as the ability of an individual or a group of people to influence, motivate, inspire and guide others. Poor process safety leadership has been identified in several major accident investigations including BP Texas City, Gulf of Mexico deepwater horizon, Fukushima nuclear incident and Buncefield in the UK, to name a few. There has seen a growing emphasis from regulators and industry to set out process safety leadership principles and guidelines. The Process Safety Leadership Group (PSLG), a joint industry and regulator group, published the eight principles of process safety leadership in 2009. In 2012 the OECD published a guidance document 'Corporate Governance for Process Safety – Guidance for senior leaders in high hazard industries' aimed at senior decision makers able to influence the direction and culture of their organisations.

The Health and Safety Executive also has COMAH competent authority procedures and delivery guides including Major Hazard Leadership guide and intervention tool. These provide useful information to operators on the expectations for major hazard leadership including investigating leadership failures that may have contributed to major accidents. In addition to this, upper tier COMAH sites are required to have a major accident prevention policy (MAPP) to prevent major accidents and minimise their potential impact. A MAPP should set out the roles and responsibilities of management and their commitment towards continuous improvement.

It is now well recognised that the behaviours, decisions and actions of leaders have a huge influence on the safety culture in a workplace. Company leaders are often unaware to the extent of their influence. Just saying the right words and writing policy statements about safety being the number one priority is not enough. The behaviour of the workforce is mostly influenced by actions not just empty words.

The starting point for all leaders is an understanding of process safety and why it is important. Industry examples of major accidents all serve as good examples for why it is important. Major accidents are relatively rare events, but their consequences are severe and can result in fatalities, environmental pollution and damage to company assets.

Process safety leadership is more than the ability to influence, motivate and inspire people. Leaders must also understand the major hazards specific to their workplace. The HSE's statement following the Buncefield prosecutions outlined the following key questions leaders should ask themselves:

- do we understand what could go wrong?
- do we know what our systems are to prevent this happening?
- and are we getting the right information to assure us they are working effectively?

Answering the above questions gives leaders the information they required to put in place process safety management systems and process safety performance monitoring in line with their other business monitoring systems. Leaders need to communicate with the workplace to gather and understand the information required to answer the questions.

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