

Major hazard safety leadership

Investigations into recent major accidents, such as the Texas City refinery explosion, the Gulf of Mexico oil well blowout and the Fukushima nuclear accident, all highlight the importance of effective leadership in preventing disasters in the major hazard industries. But why emphasise leadership and not management? What does a leader need to do differently to assure major hazard safety as opposed to personal safety?

A leader is different to a manager

Leadership and management, while necessarily linked, are not the same thing and it is worthwhile thinking about the differences. The manager's job is to plan, organise and coordinate. The leader's job is to inspire and motivate. The American quality guru Peter Drucker arguably best described the difference, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." So if major hazard safety



leadership is about doing the right things to control major hazards, what are those things?

Major hazard safety is different to personal safety

Whilst important for personal safety, holding the handrail and putting lids on cups of hot coffee will not prevent major accidents. Disasters don't happen because someone slips down the stairs or scalds their hand. They result from flawed ways of doing business that accept poor risk control.

Leaders must understand this difference. If they don't, they cannot focus on the right things. If they don't focus on the right things, why should anyone else? The best leaders focus intensely on what they know is right and what needs to happen. Others see this and know what the leader cares about. This creates employee engagement and loyalty, and in this environment, employees choose to do the right thing as well.

Focusing on the right things

All major hazard facilities operating in highly regulated environments will have a management system of some sort in place to control major hazards. For example, there will be operating and maintenance procedures, and standards covering risk assessment, management of change, incident investigation, emergency preparedness and audit.

This is the world of management and, while having these systems is important, what really matters is the shared beliefs and perceptions about major hazard safety – that is, the safety culture of the organisation. This is the world of leadership.

The Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (INPO) puts it very clearly, "Production behaviours will take precedence over prevention behaviours unless there is a strong safety culture – the central focus of leadership".

Whereas a manager is more likely to accept the status quo, a core characteristic of a leader is to challenge and improve the systems and the culture. Indeed, the Australian professor Andrew Hopkins, author of several excellent books on major accidents, refers to "mindful leaders" as those who don't just assume that because systems have been put in place everything will be fine. Their mindset is one of "chronic unease" – they are preoccupied with the potential for failure and the possibility of a major accident, not solely on commercial matters, lost time injuries or climate change, for instance. Mindful leaders continually ask searching questions of themselves and their organisation to get a feel for whether the right things are happening (see Box 1).

Conclusion

To prevent major accidents leaders need to focus on things that make a difference. In this respect, a leader's role is to challenge the organisation on whether the right things are being done. And it is better to do this today rather than in the aftermath of a major disaster.

Further reading

- Leadership Fundamentals to Achieve and Sustain Excellent Station Performance, INPO, 2007.
- Corporate Governance for Process Safety, Guidance for Senior Leaders in High Hazard Industries, OECD, 2012.
- Understanding Your Culture, Hearts & Minds, Energy Institute.

Box 1 - Doing the right things

- Does our Board have any competence in major hazard safety?
- What are the possible major accident events at our facility?
- What action is being taken for events at the upper end of the risk profile?
- Are the reporting lines of engineering authorities and major hazard safety specialists high enough in the organisational structure to have influence over decisions?
- Do senior management incentive systems incorporate measures of major hazard safety?
- How are the layers of protection (risk control systems) performing? Are there any warning signs such as more leaks, increasing maintenance backlog, etc?
- Are we identifying the root causes of our 'near miss' incidents where, under slightly different circumstances, a major accident could have resulted?
- Have we incorporated lessons learnt from major accidents in our industry?
- Do we ask open questions about major hazard safety during our management walk rounds?
- Do people in the organisation raise concerns and issues?
- Do we welcome bad news?
- Do we regularly 'step back' and take a fresh look at our organisation?

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