Health and safety culture

Every group of people develops a 'culture' - shared attitudes, beliefs and ways of behaving. In an organisation with a good culture everyone puts health and safety high on the list. Everyone shares accurate perceptions of the risks and adopts the same positive attitudes to health and safety. This influences the ways in which individuals in the group handle new events and decisions. They know, for example that they are not expected to react to a problem by cutting corners on health and safety for operational needs.

Some key aspects of an effective culture include:

- good ways of informing and consulting the workforce;
- recognition of the fact that everyone has a role to play;
- commitment by top management to involving the workforce;
- co-operation between employees;
- open two-way communications; and
- high quality of training.

The inquiries into major accidents such as the King's Cross Fire, the Clapham Junction Accident, Piper Alpha and the *Herald of Free Enterprise* found faults in the organisational structures and procedures. These were judged to be as important as the technical and individual human failures. After these accidents there is now an emphasis on the need for organisations to improve their safety culture.

Occupational health can also be improved by a climate which considers health issues. For example, a positive health culture may encourage self-protective behaviour such as taking suitable precautions in the face of known health hazards. It can also encourage positive organisational responses to reports of work stress and other psychosocial risks.

Defining safety culture

There are a number of definitions of safety culture but one which covers the key elements is given by HSC's Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations (ACSNI, 1993).

'The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management. Organisations with a positive safety culture are characterised by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety and by confidence in the efficacy of preventive measures.'

'Health and safety climate' is the term often used to describe the tangible outputs or indicators of an organisation's health and safety culture as perceived by individuals or work groups at a point in time.

A number of organisational factors have been found which influence an organisation's health and safety culture and are also associated with good safety performance. The key ones are:

- **Effective communication** - a high level of communication between and within levels of the organisation and comprehensive formal and informal communications.
- **Learning organisation** - the organisation continually improves its own methods and learns from mistakes.
- **Health and safety focus** - a strong focus by everyone in the organisation on health and safety.
- **External pressures** - pressures from outside the organisation including a buoyant financial state of the organisation, and the impact of regulatory bodies.
- **Committed resources** - time, money and staff devoted to health and safety showing strong evidence of commitment.
- **Participation** - staff at different levels in the organisation identify hazards, suggest control measures, provide feedback, and feel they 'own' safety procedures.
- **Management visibility** - senior managers show commitment and are visible 'on the shop floor'.
- **Balance of productivity and safety** - the need for production is properly balanced against health and safety so that the latter are not ignored.
- **High quality training** - training is properly managed, the content is well-chosen and the quality is high. Counting the hours spent on training is not enough.
- **A clean and comfortable working environment** - including general housekeeping, the design and layout of the plant.
- **Job satisfaction** - confidence, trust and recognition of good safety performance impact.
- **Workforce composition** - a significant proportion of older, more experienced and socially stable workers. This group tend to have fewer accidents, lower absenteeism and less turnover.

Organisational factors associated with a health and safety culture

An effective health and safety management system is the basis for a good health and safety culture. There are certain key aspects of an organisation which will influence its culture. These factors tend to be intangible and often difficult to change and include:

Senior management commitment - crucial to a positive health and safety culture. This commitment produces higher levels of motivation and concern for health and safety throughout the organisation. It is best indicated by the proportion of resources (time, money, people) and support allocated to health and safety management and by the status given to health and safety. The active involvement of senior management in the health and safety system is very important. Managers need to be seen to lead by example when it comes to health and safety.

Management style - influential. A 'humanistic' approach to management involving more regard by managers for individuals' personal and work problems is likely to be

effective. This assumes direct and rapid action to identify and resolve individual problems in an appropriately caring and concerned manner.

Visible management - very important for a health and safety culture. Good managers appear regularly on the 'shop floor' and talk about health and safety. Staff need to believe that all their managers are committed to health and safety.

Good communications between all levels of employee. An 'open door' policy may be helpful with direct access to the management hierarchy where appropriate. In a positive culture questions about health and safety should be part of everyday work conversations. This flows from ownership - the encouragement of personal responsibility and participation by everyone in health and safety measures.

A balance of health and safety and production goals. People may believe that high standards of health and safety inevitably mean slower work rates. In contrast, production may be seen to be increased through 'cutting corners'. Excessive production pressure creates an atmosphere of distraction and a shortage of time which makes human errors more likely. Excessive pressure may give rise to physical or mental health effects in some employees, and to a higher rate of 'violations' of health and safety rules. In a positive culture health and safety is regarded as important, is promoted, and is not compromised.

Taking steps to influence culture

A step-by-step approach to improving the health and safety culture of an organisation is recommended. The steps of the plan could be as follows:

- review the existing health and safety climate;
- decide on the aspects that have the highest priority for change;
- decide on actions that may change these aspects and take these actions; and
- check and review the actions and then repeat the steps again.

Begin by assessing where you are now and be aware that it takes time to change the culture of an organisation. The ACSNI report provides a comprehensive set of audit questions that you may find particularly helpful. HSE guidance (1997) on measuring safety climate contains detailed information on the use of a survey tool. The tool has been developed for organisations to use to assess aspects of their health and safety climate. It consists of a 71-statement employee questionnaire, a guidance booklet and computer software which enables easy analysis of the data generated by the questionnaire. The statements cover aspects such as: organisational commitment and communication, workmates' influence, competence, obstacles to safe behaviour, and risk-taking behaviour. The primary aim of the tool is to promote employee involvement in health and safety and to provide information which can be used as part of a continuous improvement process.

Changes made by managers to improve health and safety will be seen as clear indicators of their commitment. Some suggestions are:

- Review the status within the organisation of the health and safety committees and the health and safety practitioners and increase it if necessary. Give them high visibility.

- Make sure senior management are seen to receive regular reports of health and safety performance and act on them.

- Give publicity to the work of all health and safety committees. Make sure their recommendations are implemented.

- Ensure appropriate health and safety actions are taken quickly and are seen to have been taken.

Action plans to improve health and safety culture should establish that the health and safety procedures:

- are based on a shared perception of hazards and risks;

- are necessary and workable;

- have been developed through employee participation and consultation; and

- are continuously reviewed.

KEY MESSAGES

The health and safety culture of an organisation is an important factor in achieving and maintaining good health and safety performance. Key factors for a positive culture include: open communications, management commitment and leadership, availability of resources, and the balancing of production and health and safety goals.

References

- ACSNI Human Factors Study Group: Third report – Organising for safety. HSE Books (1993), ISBN 0 7176 0865 4
- Health and safety climate survey tool: A tool to help your organisation improve health and safety performance through employee involvement, CD ROM, HSE Books (1997), ISBN 0 7176 1462 X

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