

Is it safe in the Boardroom?

How to think about Boardroom health and safety.

Across the world health and safety culture has become a business issue.

Until recently responsibility for most health and safety has been at an operational level, but now there are real pressures to ensure enterprises have an effective 'health and safety culture'. This will demand a much greater degree of expertise, strategic thinking, and real leadership.

As unpalatable as it may be, the research says that sixty percent of business (and safety) results are attributable to an enterprise's culture, and eighty percent of culture is attributable to leadership, (read business owners, board members, and executive team members). This is particularly disconcerting if we ask who is ultimately responsible for killing and maiming employees at work.

The good news is that given the expertise of most successful business leaders, it would be fair to assume that when they do turn their skills and attention towards building effective health and safety cultures, then the appalling global statistics will rapidly improve. (About 240 employees per hour are killed at work – my guess is that not many of these happen in the Boardroom or Executive Suite)

Tougher financial, moral, and legal obligations for directors and company officers to exercise due care for employees may help, but I hope the new awareness that an effective safety culture is a powerful leadership tool to improve business productivity, quality, engagement, and financial performance will provide more of an incentive. These are all aspects of a business that executives and board members are interested in, but only now is the link between safety culture and business performance finally beginning to be recognised.

We've been measuring health and safety culture for more than seven years and one of the most frequent responses we hear from senior managers when they receive their company's results is: "We had a gut feeling that these issues were present, but we've never been able to quantify them until now, so we could never identify where the risks existed, nor how to make the necessary improvements."

Everyone seems to agree that negative reactions to accidents block communication and crush learning, but alarming numbers of employees and managers say that they think the most important piece of safety gear in their organisation is 'butt protection'. It is obvious no amount of safety training, equipment, or policies will ever compensate for a workplace culture where employees are too fearful to speak-up or report an incident, and yet a culture of blame is alive and well in the majority of large and small enterprises. Unquestionably Boards and Executive Teams both have the ability to change a blame culture into a learning culture, all it takes is the will to do so.

To improve safety outcomes, don't start by changing the systems, or processes already in place. Start by changing hearts and minds. Show how important health and safety is, not by forcing employees to comply with rules and regulations (they're important), but instead, encourage managers and leaders to actually demonstrate they care. Before that happens some courageous questions may need to be asked, for example:

- Who is ultimately responsible, and accountable for safety outcomes in your business? Do they know they are? How are they accountable?
- Do senior leaders and managers consistently demonstrate that workplace health and safety is important? Do their employees think they do?

- If something is identified to improve safety, can it be done instantly? Or does the budget process mean it waits until next year in the hope that no one gets hurt in the meantime?
- Is safety top of the agenda or do profit, production, and process get the most attention? Is safety seen as a strategic priority? Is safety effectively represented by an executive?
- Is identifying someone to blame the reality of accident investigation?

What would be the response if a new CEO or Board member said: "People, and their safety at work, really are the most important asset we have – they are more important than financial goals, and we are going to make their health and safety our number one priority?" So far, when I've asked the question during conference presentations, I've been greeted either with guffaws, or a deafening silence.

International research makes a persuasive argument for building an effective safety culture. As well as contributing to improved reputation and company marketability, they cite increased employee creativity, engagement, and initiative along with gains in productivity, profitability and shareholder value. (Given those attributes, it might not be too much of a leap to link poor productivity with poor health and safety statistics.) Certainly I see a significant difference between employees who think they are regarded by management as just another 'human resource' used to generate more dollars, compared with the attitudes of those who believe management first has a genuine interest in their wellbeing.

There is no doubt that understanding and building an effective safety culture takes effort and resources, but for Board and Executive Team members, that is nowhere as onerous as having a serious harm accident or death at work.

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