

Promoting safe behaviour is not the ultimate challenge when improving safety performance

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Safe behaviour has long been the holy grail for organisations concerned about their safety results. The limitations of this approach are now known and safe behaviour must be seen in the context of a broader view of risk management.

What are we talking about?

The behavioural approach to safety starts from the premise that a large component of risk lies in human actions, notably in the workplace. Therefore, regulating these activities by 'key' requirements that must be followed is seen as a major contribution to risk management. And since, under this approach, risk lies at the level of the individual, it is also where to look to find the causes of accidents. However, this approach is problematic when it is the key risk management tool. In this case, it does not leave room for systemic causes, notably workplace constraints created by the organisation (e.g. contradictory instructions, an inadequate safety culture).

Take the example of finance. In this case, risk-taking is intrinsic, but the extreme complexity of modern financial schemes and the opacity of the organisation that produces them, means that detecting an unexpected toxic phenomenon is very difficult. In practice, blaming the risk often only comes after the consequences of these risks are known. The lack of a broader vision means that the causes that are identified do not take into account either the system or the lack of control and regulatory mechanisms. Instead, causes focus on the at-risk behaviour of a few individuals. This is followed by a public outcry, a multitude of calls for increased rigour and new controls are hastily put in place.

Limitations and ways forward

The important role of individual behaviour in risk management is well known. Safety at work was first addressed by personal protection equipment long before anyone asked

questions about the role of the system. We all recognise the image of the blacksmith's leather apron or the simple peasant's hat.

Closer to home, the behavioural approach and its tools does have a place in industrial practices. Technical fixes and the use of PPE, which are the emblems of this approach, are measures that are within the reach of almost every business. While acknowledging their short-term effect on accident rates, an increasing number of studies have noted the limitations of this approach.

Bird's Pyramid has been swept up in the controversy. The Texas City accident proved that it was impossible to find a causal link between the occupational accident rate and this major accident. In the history of safety management, the emergence of systemic issues represents a severe blow to the behavioural approach. The solution is not to abandon the behavioural approach, but rather to zoom out and examine two other ideas:

- the creation of a new managerial working climate, and



- ensuring consistency in certain key business processes.

With respect to the first idea, drivers include, for example, participative management, an individual commitment to safety, and the presence of managers in the field. From this perspective, it is tempting to consider each manager as a safety leader. The renewed enthusiasm that is triggered has beneficial effects on performance. However, stopping here is equivalent to putting in place an individual approach to safety that is focused on managers. Although it is a step forward, the challenge is broader.

Certain key processes must be made consistent: this is the second idea. We can look at production, maintenance, finance, purchasing, strategic workplace planning, etc. Take the example of a subcontractor that works onsite with its own certified equipment, which it maintains in its own workshops. This approach is

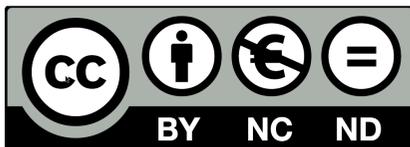
guided by safety: certified equipment is maintained to a standard that the company controls. However, the company's workshops are not always able to respond in time to the needs of projects that can find themselves short of equipment. The solution adopted by onsite managers is to rent equipment locally that is as close as possible to the company's own machinery. Although production is maintained, control of safety standards is lost.

This example highlights the very limited scope of the behavioural approach, which is centred on the individual. Business processes clearly shape what happens in the field and taking action via managers cannot, by itself, change this state of affairs. Therefore, promoting safe behaviour is useless if the overall organisation (individuals, management, processes, technology) is not structured around a shared vision of the expected level of risk management. This means defining the priority given to safety is, by fully

integrating it into the culture of the entity while remaining realistic about market constraints. This angle of attack requires a change of indicators and making the integration of safety activities something that is measured. Companies that are leaders in safety culture measure: a) what their workforce does and thinks about safety; and b) the overall consistency of thoughts and actions.

It's a big challenge for everyone. What do you do where you work?

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