"SAFETY IS OUR FIRST PRIORITY". - (OR IS IT)?

15 Signs That Your Company is Lacking Commitment.

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SUMMARY

With the rapid development and application of technical safety systems in railways, it is not surprising that human errors and compliance failures represent a growing proportion of accident causes. This is despite advances in training and a greater access by workers to detailed procedures and other information than ever before. Could this be due to a lack of care or commitment by staff, or are there other forces at work? This paper explores some of the myths and signals which could be sending the wrong messages to front line staff and defeating the best efforts of safety managers.

INTRODUCTION

Railways today are one of the safest forms of transport, a legacy of 200 years of progressive technical and cultural development which in many ways has been ahead of other industries. Given this long historic commitment to the achievement of safety, the number of organisations that perpetuate the myth that safety is their "number one priority" is surprising. A brief search of the internet will quickly identify over 2.4 million occurrences of this or a very similar corporate goal. More than half of these also reference railways. No one can argue that safety is not an important issue for railway organisations, but it is only one of several important aims in the performance balance and cannot be the highest or else with identification of the slightest safety risk, trains would not run. Such platitudes from corporate leaders which are often claimed to "send a message of commitment" are clearly hollow and potentially counter-productive. Railway workers are much too smart to be fooled by such statements, particularly if they see it contradicted in daily organisational behaviours.

Demands to follow specific safety procedures or use certain equipment and methods fail if inadequate resources are provided to workers to achieve these demands. Often those responsible for such decisions are unaware of the consequences but are attempting to achieve some other organisational goal such as reducing costs or the volume of stock holdings. They may have no idea of the importance of their activities to achievement of safety in the field, yet field staff will see such failures as a shortcoming in corporate safety commitment. It is the accumulation of such experiences which collectively conspire to defeat the best safety initiatives.

Workers often make simple errors or fail to comply with good safety practices despite being trained and assessed as competent. They are also often the direct victim of a resulting accident. How can this happen? Surely they don't want to injure themselves or others?

The answer can often be found in the risk judgements which they make each time they are faced with a compliance decision or uncertainty. The ability to rationally assess risk is one of the prime reasons that humans have survived so long. Risk decisions are based on available information and a weighing of positive and negative consequences. Any situation which provides positive rewards for taking safety short cuts will influence these risk decisions. This is especially so if the probability of the negative consequence is seen to be remote. Omissions and compliance failures are rarely seen by the individual to be reckless, but rather calculated or conditioned by experience.

In such situations, even vague signals provided by an organisation can result in a profound impact on the commitment of staff to maintain safety compliance. Additionally and largely due to legislative

requirements and the paranoia of lawyers, safety related activities have become more and more complex and onerous, with many appearing to workers as illogical and excessive. Where these activities directly impact on cost, operational performance or productivity, workers are faced with the dilemma of how to balance all outcomes. Often safety process compromise is indirectly rewarded, especially if the lack of compliance is commonly known and accepted.

So what are some of the signals that workers experience within their organisations that might be contributing to their lack of commitment to compliance and safe behaviour and how many of these can you identify within your own organisation. The following 15 examples are just the tip of the iceberg and many more will become apparent if you simply go out and look.

15 COMMON INDICATORS OF POOR SAFETY COMMITTMENT

1. **Inexperienced Organisation Leaders**

The board or executive is controlled by accountants & solicitors, without any industry experience or understanding.

Issues

- Board and executive has little or no operational knowledge.
- Predominantly hold a financial or legal risk focus.
- Leaders are aware of their lack of knowledge remaining insulated and rarely seen by staff.
- Leaders appear unaware of the specific activities or problems faced by staff.

Hidden Messages

- They don't understand our problems.
- Won't value what we are doing to maintain safety.
- Unable to lead us.

2. **Short Term Result Focus**

An aggressive business plan with short term objectives, implies an executive exit strategy.

Issues

- Annual budget focus with little consideration of planned investment.
- Lack of clear long term lifecycle plans for what is a long life asset.
- Deferral of essential works with no plans for catch up.

Hidden Messages

- They don't care about our problems
- Not worried about future problems.
- They won't be around for long.
- Why trust them?

3. **Safety Managers Powerless**

Safety managers & support staff positioned lowly in organisation structure, poorly paid and subordinate to commercial managers with no direct or independent access to executive. They are the most expendable when the purse strings tighten and reluctant to press safety demands.

Issues

- Positioned at a low level in organisation.
- Many are OH&S focused and unable to comprehend rail system safety issues.
- Change regularly.
- Dispensable when money is tight.

Hidden Messages

- They don't care about our safety
- It's not a high priority to them

4. **Experienced Staff Removed**

Management staff regularly restructured and rotated before gaining sufficient understanding of safety issues. Downsizing of staff numbers undertaken to improve financial performance without consideration for retaining critical knowledge base.

Issues

- Experienced staff purged or moved due to cost of retention.
- Promotion of "Qualified People" ahead of experienced people.
- Inadequate practical competency assessments.

Hidden Messages

- Experience is not important.
- Corporate knowledge not seen as an asset.
- Change control is not important.
- No point in learning job or I'll be moved.

5. **Engineering Outsourced**

Engagement of in-house engineers or technical experts are avoided in favour of a parade of part time consultants to ensure that corporate memory does not become a burden.

Issues

- Reduced engineering scrutiny & oversight of commercial decisions.
- Elimination of expensive engineering training.
- Removal career progression paths.
- Control of records and documentation lost.

Hidden Messages

- Trying to transfer responsibility?
- It's OK to selectively manipulate advice.
- Trying to hide something?
- Not worried about the future
- Why trust them?

6. **Safety Standards Compromised**

Little or no effort is made to maintain technical or safety standards allowing anomalies and non-compliance to be accepted without challenge.

Issues

- Standards changed without explanation.
- Capacity stretched without risk assessment or staff consultation.
- Standards breaches disregarded.

Hidden Messages

- Standards are meaningless.
- Our opinions are not valued.
- Are ALL standards optional?

7. **Performance Indicators**

Performance indicators are carefully selected and presented to ensure possible bad news is discouraged in favour of morale lifting high performance statistics. All Safety KPIs reactive with no lead indicators to encourage good safety practices. Unrealistic and symbolic "Zero Harm" safety targets mean reporting is suppressed and a zero KPI achievement is regarded as acceptable rather than outstanding, so there is little safety performance recognition compared to non-safety KPIs.

Issues

- Many safety KPIs are meaningless.
- Other KPIs encourage safety compromise.
- Unbalanced performance rewards

Hidden Messages

- Safety is not as important as other outcomes.
- It's OK to compromise safety as long as accident doesn't happen.
- Don't report all safety incidents or KPIs will be affected.

8. **Safety Data Controlled**

Data and operational information is kept securely in the hands of the IT manager or the chief financial officer to ensure that it is not used by staff or others for "inappropriate" purposes.

Issues

- Poorly defined or corrupt data.
- Data is outcome rather than input based
- Data is not accessible to the group at risk.
- Safety data is not structured for meaningful analysis.

Hidden Messages

- They're trying to hide something.
- Safety is not a high priority.
- They don't trust us?

9. **Blame Culture**

Investigation resources are carefully focussed on determining responsibility, to "protect" the organisation (executive) and ensure more effective cost recovery.

Issues

- Investigations seek human fault.
- Little or no design error tolerance considered.
- Lawyers everywhere.

Hidden Messages

- They're trying protect themselves.
- Happy to sacrifice staff.
- Don't understand their safety accountabilities.
- Not prepared to identify the need to invest in safety system improvements.

10. **Insurance Mentality**

Widely held belief that all safety risks can be insured and responsibility taken by low level employees,

Issues

- Focus on extreme consequence safety risks rather than frequent near miss events.
- Hazard rating manipulation to achieve acceptance.
- Data & KPI manipulation.

Hidden Messages

- They're happy to accept accidents as long as it's insured.
- We're not important.
- Customer safety is not important.

11. **Safety Committees Not Effective**

Safety committees confined to union delegates or "favourites" and no real consultation with front line staff. Committee record keeping is minimised to reduce "administrative load".

Issues

- Not outcome action focused.
- Irregular meetings and poorly documented.
- Poor front line representation.
- Adversarial or union politics focus.

Hidden Messages

- Management is not interested in our safety issues?
- Looking for excuses for inaction.
- Committees only for show.

12. **Safety Equipment Access**

Safety equipment is required to minimise risk of accident or injury is of little use if it doesn't comply with requirements or arrives late. Staff trying to deliver work or satisfy operational demands may be tempted to make do without proper equipment.

Issues

- Cheap, unreliable and low quality equipment.
- Unnecessary bureaucracy slows supply and discourages requests.
- Timely delivery not given a priority.

Hidden Messages

- More interested in cost.
- Don't care about my safety.
- It's OK to compromise standards.

13. **Resource Limitation**

Pressure on budgets and staff numbers for efficiency gains, result in inadequate resourcing of works and puts pressure on work groups to compromise safe practices.

Issues

- Inadequate resources to work safely.
- Budget limits force safety compromises.
- Increases in work scope or requirements without consideration of resource impacts.

Hidden Messages

- Costs more important than safety.
- Change control not important.

14. **Communications Controlled**

All outgoing correspondence checked by the legal department to ensure accuracy and security. E-mail discouraged and regularly erased (archived).

Issues

- Written reporting discouraged
- All outgoing correspondence vetted by lawyers.
- Negative results suppressed.
- Only "need to know" information provided.

Hidden Messages

- They're trying to hide something.

- They treat us like idiots
- Why trust them?

15. **Regulator Avoidance**

Unnecessary contact with safety regulators is avoided and all contact is carefully controlled to prevent possible "misunderstandings"

Issues

- All regulator contact controlled.
- Problems hidden from safety audits.
- Only minimum information is provided for compliance.
- Regulator advice never sought.

Hidden Messages

- It's ok to hide safety issues.
- Commercial and reputation risks more important than safety.

CONCLUSION

In many ways the rail industry has progressed remarkably over recent decades. Investments in new technology and rebuilding have brought a new era for railways around the world in a time of increased demand for efficiency and environmental performance. However those same pressures threaten to compromise a proud safety heritage if the traditional safety culture of rail workers is eroded by the lack of clear corporate leadership and commitment.

Delivery of rail safety on the ground is the responsibility of all managers, not just those in direct line management positions or with "Safety" in their job titles. As we have seen, managers of finance, human resources, stores and supply and every other department or provider can have a direct influence in the behaviour of staff and the system that they operate and support. These influences are never intended to be result in negative safety impacts, however they often do due to a lack of care or knowledge of those they are meant to support. The best work of an organisation to encourage safe behaviour can often be defeated by the smallest conflicting signal, irrespective of its original intent.

These issues cannot be eliminated by a few individuals but only by an open and trusting organisational environment, where the safety views and experiences of workers is sought and listened to and where workers can see that the leaders are committed to addressing their concerns. Only then will safety be seen by all as a real imperative worth embracing.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

A CULTURE OF MYTHS

By Phil La Duke - *Director Of Performance Improvement - **OE Learning, Inc.**,*

http://www.fabricatingandmetalworking.com/2010/10/a-culture-of-myths/

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