THE IMPACT OF SAFETY CULTURE ON THE DELIVERY OF GOOD HEALTH AND SAFETY

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SUMMARY

Having a good safety culture within an organisation is a pre-cursor to delivering effective performance in health and safety. Establishing such a culture is not a matter of luck but of detailed planning, coordinated action and 'buy in' by senior management. This paper defines what is meant by culture and why it is important. It outlines a number of external and internal drivers that need to be present when developing a safety culture. It explains the importance of leadership in embedding a safety culture and the attributes that a leader requires to achieve this. It explores the importance of risk to an organisation when considering safety culture before outlining the key attributes that a good safety culture should have. It concludes by re-iterating the need to understand the legislative obligations that organisations have and to recognise that a good health and safety record leads to a better business.

INTRODUCTION

Culture has a variety of different meanings but can be broadly defined as 'what we do around here'. Culture plays a vital role in establishing and underpinning the success of an organisation, and setting the conditions for it to flourish. There is debate about how culture affects the delivery of good health and safety, but it is generally recognised that embedding a compliant culture is critical; an organisation without it cannot be assured of 'what happens when no one is looking?' Inculcating the right culture is particularly important as the demands of growth place pressure on the capacity of the railway system and its people.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

External Drivers

There are a range of factors that influence how organisational culture takes shape. Many of these are external and some have national attributes.

Historical. Within the UK, rail has been established for almost 200 years and the development of the rail network was largely incremental. This meant that there was little strategic thought and direction given, in the early years, to how the industry would develop over time. Differing practices and procedures within individual companies were allowed to take root and the implementation of standards and safety systems came later. In cultural terms there has, therefore, been an independence of view that challenges and can be reluctant to follow centrally imposed norms.

Political. British society is dynamic and, in common with much of the developed world, is changing fast to accommodate external pressures. The recent move to BREXIT has the potential to be one of the most fundamental political changes that the UK has taken in the last 50 years. It may mean a deviation from a common European position to one that is more globally focused; although as an island how much this will influence land-based transportation systems is debatable.

Economic. BREXIT may also bring temporary economic challenges that will affect investment in a system that is already stretched. Trying to do more with less might make rail companies less focused on safety.

Social. Socially there has been an exponential rise in migration that has added further capacity pressures to a rail network that is already over-stretched.

Technological. The need for innovative solutions, both technological and operational, to cope with these pressures may inculcate a more entrepreneurial and forward looking culture to an industry that has been reactive and conservative in the past. The advent of the digital railway brings real opportunity and it will require a cultural shift to ensure that these opportunities are realised. Again the reactive, rather than progressive, nature of the UK rail industry has, perhaps, delayed the implementation of the relevant technology. Working practices and the workforce will need revitalising to accommodate the necessary changes.

Environmental. Finally the move to an environmentally sustainable rail network is still in its infancy and much more will need to be done, principally around electrification, to meet the targets to which the industry aspires.

Within a crowded island, dependent on an effective rail network to get people to work, railway undertakings need to consider the influence they have on the society which they serve. The communication between companies and the people their enterprise touches needs to be sensitive and responsive, so that there is a sense of common ownership of the rail network. Privatisation of the rail network has brought benefits, but there remains for some a degree of suspicion over privatising a part of the national transport infrastructure on which so many depend.

Having a culture that reaches out to its customer base should be a prerequisite for success. Meeting the expectations of customers has not always been important for a number of British institutions and the rail industry is no exception. Introducing competition into the rail sector has meant that rail companies are more sensitive to how others are doing. Benchmarking of performance has been a welcome step and assurance measures to show that acceptable performance levels are being reached have driven up standards.

Internal Drivers

Vision. The role of leadership within an organisation cannot be overstated; so much so that it merits consideration in its own right. However equally important is the vision that the leaders of a company have. If the vision – the end state that they desire to reach – is articulated clearly this will then drive the behaviours that exist within the company. Clarity of vision, and one that is attainable in terms of time and resources, are key factors in embedding a successful culture.

Challenge. An inquisitive and questioning management team that is prepared to analyse the performance of the organisation, and not take progress for granted is key to success. Without the courage to challenge performance the inclination to become complacent and indolent becomes evident.

Demographics. The demographics of the workforce are an important influence of how culture develops and embeds itself in an organisation. Age, educational ability, diversity both in gender and background, and experience are part of the mix that generates culture. Each organisation, through its own recruitment, selection and retention policies have the ability to make choices about what culture is attained. If one aspires to a progressive, forward looking, innovative and agile culture it generally pays to have as diverse a workforce as possible. However there is a balance to be struck between these attributes and the benefits of experience, homogeneity and cohesiveness. It is fair to say that the culture of an organisation reflects those who work in it.

The ways an organisation learns and develops over time is part of culture, but are also factors to develop it. Being self-critical, conducting performance evaluation, identifying themes for improvement and then lifting performance through training, coaching and mentoring are generally considered attributes of an open, healthy culture. Closed minds, a failure to assess performance and being satisfied with the *status quo* point to a poor culture.

LEADERSHIP

The role of the leader in setting the culture of an organisation is fundamental. This does not mean that the organisation has to reflect the attributes of the leader – or that the leader needs to mirror the characteristics of the organisation's culture. There must, however, be an explicit recognition by the leader of the culture that exists within the organisation on his/her appointment, and then clear action by the leader to shape the culture if it does not support the vision for the organisation.

Leaders shape culture through two actions: behaviours and exemplars. The former are the behaviours that leaders should show to ingrain a quality culture and the latter are those things that leaders should expect their subordinates to emulate to support the same.

Behaviours

When structuring an effective organisation – one that empowers subordinates to act on their own volition – it is essential to ensure that responsibility is given with sufficient authority to carry out the role, but then each individual with responsibility is held accountable for the responsibilities they have been given. Delegation of responsibility energises subordinates, gives them ownership of their own destiny, and imbues them with confidence and a feeling of trust. It supports succession planning by exposing individuals to greater responsibility while also ensuring there is redundancy within the organisation in the event of key people being unavailable to make decisions. Of all the measures that can be employed to create a virtuous culture it is empowering suitably qualified subordinate that will make the most difference.

Communication within, and without, of an organisation is crucial for openess and agility. Communication involves both listening and articulating, either verbally or through other media, key messages so allowing the flow of information and ideas into, around and out of an organisation. Without this interchange organisations become inward-looking, defensive, unresponsive and stale. It is the role of the leader to ensure that the channels of communication within an organisation remain free-flowing and unrestricted.

A leader sets the standards for an organisation and should be rigorous in ensuring those standards are met. Maintaining standards not only support the quality of the output of the organisation but also underpin the notion of moral courage. It is a truism that 'the standard you walk past is the standard you accept'. By insisting on maintaining the highest standards, and not accepting performance that deviates from it, the stock of moral courage grows. This has the important effect of maintaining standards in the absence of supervision. The culture of an organisation can be judged on what happens when there is no one there to check.

Leaders have to be effective in what they do. If a leader is effective and delivers what he/she promises then it is likely the organisation will do the same. A leader needs to be efficient, doing everything that is necessary and nothing which is not. Efficiency preserves resources, either in time or money, and will ensure the organisation is lean and cost-effective, not flabby and expensive.

Leaders need to be visible to the workforce. Remote, invisible leaders who communicate through electronic means never stamp their personality on their subordinates. It is the most human of behaviours to speak face-to-face and this can only be done by being there. An organisation in which each employee knows their bosses has a greater chance of success.

Exemplars

Leaders need to provide a vision of where the organisations aspires to be over time. It is a vision that must be credible and achievable, albeit with an element of aspiration. A compelling vision inspires a workforce, pushing them to achieve more than they feel capable and motivating them to do more than conditions will often allow.

Setting an example by the way a leader conducts him/herself is important. Subordinates tend to want to emulate those above them and, if the example is a good one, then their performance is likely to improve the more exposure they have to the leader.

Developing values within an organisation, communicating them and exhorting employees to live up to them is a way of developing a robust culture. If people do not know what is right or wrong within an organisation a moral equivalence sets in which can permeate throughout the organisation to the detriment of performance.

Leaders need to be compassionate to those for whom they have responsibility; humanity is a critical part of leading people in adverse and trying circumstances and understanding human weaknesses and failings and making the necessary allowances will generate loyalty that will be repaid when it is most needed. Optimism is the antithesis to cynicism and cynicism generates a corrosive culture. Finally leaders need to have a sense of humour; this is particularly important in dealing with a British workforce where the quality of a leader is often judged on how good he/she is in raising morale through well-placed humour.

SAFETY CULTURE

All of the issues discussed already will influence how the culture of an organisation is determined. When this transfers into a safety culture there are some further factors that need to consideration.

Risk

How an organisation treats risk is one of the fundamentals in seeing how their safety culture evolves. Knowing the risks that exist within an organisation is the starting point and full risk evaluation is key to understanding the problems that the organisation confronts. An organisation that doesn't know its own risks – and has no way of monitoring the emergence of further risk – will always be vulnerable.

Once the risk has been quantified knowing who is at risk, and to what extent is important to see how mature the safety culture is within the organisation. Determining risk appetite within an organisation is very much for the leadership to decide. Depending on the sector risk appetite will move up and down the spectrum. The appetite for risk within the rail industry is generally very low and so the availability of controls to management is material in understanding the safety culture that exists within an organisation.

The challenge of reasonable practicability – a primary element of UK H&S law – is also an indicator of the nature of safety culture within an organisation. Although it is for the courts to decide whether a measure is ‚reasonable practicable' the efforts an organisation makes to judge this, erring generally on the side of caution, is indicative of the maturity of their safety culture.

Key Attributes

A strong safety culture is achievable by every business in the railway sector. The critical elements from a UK perspective are:

- **Vision**. Placing the well-being of staff and customers above all other considerations and ensuring that policies and procedures are in place that explicitly articulate this.
- **Leadership**. Effective leaders who have safety as their top priority and who demonstrate it, to their workforce, their customers, the regulatory authorities and to the general public.
- **The law and company policy**. Understanding the business's legal obligations and setting and developing policies to meet them reliably.
- **Standards**. Industry and company standards must be understood, current, publicised and achievable, with appropriate 'stretch' targets included.
- **Safety as a mainstream activity**. This must be embedded in the fabric of the company and not treated as a delegated task carried out away from the central outputs of the business.

- **Accountability**. Emphasising that safety is everyone's responsibility. This is where line managers have a critical role.

- **Excellence**. Striving to do better and avoiding the complacency and slippage associated with unthinking acceptance of current standards.

- **Involvement**. Ensuring involvement of staff and their representatives, listening to the staff and acting on what they say.

- **'No blame' culture**. Encouraging, reporting, learning from mistakes, incentivising the workforce, monitoring and auditing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, health and safety measures across the European railway sector are mostly set by law – which is becoming increasingly harmonised. As well as understanding their obligations in law, businesses in the rail sector must also grasp the full extent of their activities and the risks that pertain to them. 'Good health and safety means good business' has become a cliché because it is true, but it is still sometimes necessary to win this economic argument with the naysayers.

A strong and effective health and safety culture has been shown to benefit the competiveness of organisations that operate them. A strong culture comes from good leadership.