

Developing competence in strategic safety management for business success

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Arthur D. Little Limited
Science Park, Milton Road
Cambridge CB4 0XL
United Kingdom
www.adlittle.uk.com
watson.stephen@adlittle.com



The railway business environment in Europe is changing rapidly

- The market is changing
 - The split of infrastructure from train operations
 - The entry of new freight and passenger companies
 - The development of pan-European freight and passenger operating companies
- Regulation is changing with increasing focus on risk and objective based regulation, leaving the 'how to do it' to company management
- External stakeholder pressure on companies to 'get safety right' is increasing
 - Pressure from financial markets for shareholder value
 - New more aggressive legislation
 - Relentless media pressure

Railway companies need to develop and strengthen the competence of their most senior staff to be able to effectively lead and manage safety

Key success factors

In our experience there are five key success factors

- Safety professionals
- Chief Executive engagement
- Gap analysis
- Verification
- Training

So how can a railway organisation make the business case for the competency development, and then actually deliver it?

Safety cannot be left to only safety professionals, and these professionals will need new and different skills to better engage with both company senior management and external stakeholders

Safety professionals

- The role of safety professionals is
 - To provide the professional, business-focused strategic and tactical/operational advice to executives and line managers
 - To coach executives and line managers on how to ensure their behaviours demonstrate their commitment to safety throughout the company
- Safety professionals believe that excellent safety performance is critical to business excellence and reputation management and this needs to be demonstrated to executives and line in a language they understand, typically a business case
- Leadership of safety is (and must be seen to be) part of the wider business leadership, and therefore is a line management responsibility

Active engagement in safety leadership and in the safety competence development process is required by the Chief Executive and entire Executive Team

Chief Executive engagement

- Safety leadership needs to start with the Chief Executive. This means more than just signing the safety policy and agreeing to pay for a few safety professionals – staff in the company see the Chief Executive taking a personal interest in safety management
- While some Executives are natural at ‘leading safety’ many are not – however with some training/competence development and effective coaching they can become very effective – the participation of the Chief Executive in safety competence development sends a clear message to the entire company
- The Executive Team must be seen, as well as heard, to be united on the importance of the safety imperative. Any decisions that put safety before short-term profit need to be communicated, as this helps build the confidence of line management to do the same thing

Both the business case and the competence development need to be underpinned by a gap analysis - what skills are required and what is the current position

Gap analysis

- The logical starting point for the development of safety management and Executive competence in strategic safety management is a realistic gap analysis
 - Realistic can be very uncomfortable for the Executive team
 - This creates the ‘burning platform’ to get the attention of the Chief Executive
- The gap analysis should show where the company’s safety management position is now and where the company’s safety management position needs to be (based on stakeholder expectations)
- An essential part of the gap analysis is the competence required at the Executive Team, in line management and in the central safety team

Independent verification of the gap analysis ensures best practice from within and outside the sector is considered

Verification

- Independent leadership of the gap analysis or independent verification of the gap analysis is important, particularly when defining the 'future position' for safety management
- It helps to 'name' the current and future positions, and intermediate positions if required, and to describe the characteristics of each so that the company and Executives understand what the future position would 'feel' like
- Independence also allows injection of best practice both within the rail sector and from outside - a good example of this would be learning in the rail sector from the conclusions and lessons from the Texas City refinery accident

Any training or other competency development activity needs to be business-based, focused and time-efficient to ensure senior staff see safety management as a strategic imperative

Training

- To make sustained change in the company Executives need to buy-into the rationale and business case for safety management
- Today's Executives and line managers in railway companies need to be able to communicate confidently to key stakeholders, including the media, about their company's commitment and approach to ensuring safety
- Training (attended by the Chief Executive and all the Executive team) is a very effective way to develop competence in strategic safety management - a session of five hours respects their time constraints
- Training needs to be focused on the company and the sector, and facilitated by those with experience of strategic safety management and executive management

To conclude...

- Strategic management of safety must be considered to be similar to the management of any other railway company issue and while there are key specialist topics, the fundamentals of management remain the same
- These fundamentals of management transcend national safety regulatory regimes
- In our experience railway company Executives and line managers already have many of the skills and knowledge required to manage safety
- The strongest leaders of safety are often not safety professionals but smart, clear thinking Executives
- Bringing Executives to a common frame of strategic safety management reference considerably strengthens decision-taking