Walking the talk

While most companies have robust procedures, policies, safe systems and risk assessments, many are still falling short of effectively, efficiently and economically leading employees’ and contractors’ wellbeing. Low incident rates in their general operations are practical reflections of the ways leaders perform when the pressure is on. After all, “safety leadership is about doing the right thing when no one is looking”. Good habitual attitudes breed good habitual behaviours; bad habitual attitudes breed danger. If employees witness habitually irrational examples of their leaders or their senior managers taking operational short cuts – for example behaviours that are inconsistent with the organisation’s stated policies – this impacts on both morale, as respect is lost, and on everybody’s safety when the employees follow such dangerous examples of leadership. Followers will only follow where they are led.

Promoting safety leadership to the board is vital because it is only when the executive team of leaders are seen to be genuine about leading rigorous change – when together they are ‘walking the talk’ – that other senior managers, managers and supervisors are encouraged to take sufficient and necessary, personal and group initiatives to cooperate.

Because essential safety messages can get lost in translation as they pass down through an organisation’s hierarchy (even to the point where verbal and non-verbal messages can dissipate altogether), the senior management team – the leadership – needs to cascade to all aspects of the organisation an absolutely clear and evidence-producing message of sustainable safety leadership.

What is sustainable leadership? According to a Towers Watson survey, to influence employees’ performance and their willingness and ability to go the distance their leaders should focus on two aspects of their work environment:

- Provide the support that employees require to do their work effectively, which they call ‘enablement’.
- Employers can also create a healthful work environment, one that supports employees, physical, social and emotional wellbeing.

When organisations promote multi-level distributed leadership it both galvanises high levels of employee engagement, enablement and energy and can be shown to generate significant improvements in organisational performance. As shown in Figure 1 overleaf, these marginal operational improvements can generate up to three times as much general improvement. Given the competitive complexities and operational challenges of present and projected organisational efficiency, the business case for sustainable multi-level distributed leadership has never been as strong as it is today.

Why sustainable leadership? Leadership plays the vital role in establishing this process of engagement. Just imagine if we were to treat our employees with the care and consideration with which we treat customers. Many companies who already do so report that their organisational morale is very high and that they have lower accident and incident rates as well as significant reductions in absenteeism and presenteeism.

A short interactive session delivered to the board requires careful delivery. It involves several areas of consideration in order to align all the members of the board into agreements that will unite over the delivery of strategic, innovative development and effective safety leadership.

Safety leadership is not an abstract concept. The proposed financial benefits of such safety strategies are to increase the organisation’s return on all aspects
Deliver a balanced and powerful organisation’s market profile. thus enhancing and evolving the organisation’s market profile. What do we need to consider?

- Get on the board meeting agenda. Secure an allotted time to put across the safety leadership case. Ensure that you both ‘took the part’ as well as preparing a clear, no-nonsense presentation of the safety leadership case that you are advocating.

- Be open with your conclusions. Do not, under any circumstances, make your senior-level audience wait to find out why you are there. They are busy people with many responsibilities and limited time. Get down to business!

- Deliver a balanced and powerful message with engagement. Get straight to the point! If you are using a PowerPoint presentation keep your slides uncomplicated; for maximum effectiveness, the less cluttered the slides the better.

- Be specific and hit the key points. If necessary spend a little time on the true cost of incidents, and guidance on the return on investment. (See The Power of Three: Taking Engagement to New Heights by Towers Watson at http://bit.ly/1JPtswc, which is a research paper that identifies other critical factors that play important roles in productivity and results.)

- Describe the benefits and potential costs. As with any sustainable safety leadership initiative explain how the benefits of what can be achieved should outweigh the costs, for example risk versus cost analysis. The true cost of presenteeism alone is staggering. As professor Cary Cooper explained: “A rise in presenteeism is affecting productivity levels at work, as nearly two in three employees have attended work while feeling ill.” (www.hrmagazine.co.uk)

- Be confident! Look the leaders in the eye. Using a congruent, appropriate and powerful delivery style ensure that you engage the members of the leadership group into their being intrinsic to the process of your delivery as soon as possible.

Tangible benefits

- The potential for safety leadership to increase organisation-wide morale leading to improved work engagement and application.

- Less absenteeism and presenteeism leading to improved operational efficiency, economy and organisational effectiveness.

- Enhanced face-to-face communication leading to more exact ‘climate’ intelligence-monitoring and evaluation.

- Better industrial relations leading to enhanced sector leadership.

- Improved buy-in leading to improved shared objectives and culture for safety awareness and compliance.

- Increase in trust, leading to... all of the above.

Use of sales methodology. Build your case. Impress and engage the group and with your knowledge deliver a clear message. Do your homework! Know both the people to whom you are talking and their organisational history and mission. Gather information on the way the board thinks; this includes knowing the company’s health and safety policy. Examine the evidence-based organisational adherence to the organisation’s mission and the effectiveness of its safety-strategic thinking to date. Look out for areas of self-justification or verbosity; safety is about deeds, not words.

Look out for the all-important buy-in signals; ask what the organisation anticipates it will require to lead the safety and health culture forward (see references below).

Using your time logically, effectively and sequentially, tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.

Outline for yourself a closer strategy of what you would require from the board in terms of sustainable leadership and of what you would want them to do to optimise its attainment.

Sustainable leadership can have a profound effect when it is witnessed, especially for example senior managers who, when on site, take the time to show that their concern for the safety and success of the project is no less than their concern for the safety and success of the people achieving it. Even if the examples of such concern are only for a few moments here and there they are validators of true leadership. I have witnessed the power of such leadership behaviour many times.

I’ve seen how, as its attitudinal and behavioural example cascades throughout the organisation, it irresistibly becomes the core unifying factor of “how we do things around here”.

Potential benefits

The leader sets the tone of the organisation; in this case the normalisation of visible, witness-verifiable safety leadership, safe attitudes and safe behaviours in all departments.

More open communications between all members of staff, particularly those with whom senior management seldom converses. It only needs to be a little showing of care here and concern or how are they getting on to make them know that they are respected and that their work is recognised and appreciated as a contributory factor in both their and the organisation’s success. This demonstrates and thereby ensures the optimal organisational tone.

With thanks to Dan Terry MIIRSM, principle consultant with HASTAM and Director of Leadership and Development with his own company, for submitting this article. Dan is currently co-writing ‘The Art of Safety: A Theory of Safety Leadership for the 21st Century’, with John McKay, proposed for publication in early 2016.

References

www.iocd.org/hfguide
www.hse.gov.uk/leadership
Terry, D. (2009) How to engage, Inspire and Stimulate your Audience in 10 invigorating ways (www.leading-safety.co.uk)