L is for leadership

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) tells us that “the way you lead your team on health and safety can determine how safe your site is to work on”. This is backed up by research, as summarised by Sharon Clarke of Manchester Business School (bit.ly/2fgBvue) and by accident investigations. In the inquiry report into the rail crash at Ladbroke Grove in 1999, Lord Cullen supported the belief that “the first priority for a successful safety culture is leadership”.

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The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development defines leadership as “the ability to lead others toward a common goal”. In achieving health and safety goals, it is not always clear who the leaders are. On the HSE website, one area focuses on supervisors as leaders; elsewhere leaders are “directors, governors, trustees, officers and their equivalents”.

When she was HSE chair, Dame Judith Hackitt [1] told risk managers she believed leadership was a thread running through the organisation: “Leadership must come from the top and must be cascaded down the line, with everyone understanding their roles and responsibilities,” she told the Institute of Risk Management in December 2015 (bit.ly/2fxgf4j [2]). Hackitt argued that health and safety professionals should be advisers and specialists, not the people leading health and safety. Health and safety professionals might disagree.

The US Occupational Safety and Health Administration is clear in a study guide, Safety Supervision and Leadership, that employees at any level may display leadership, since it is not about power, status, authority or management (bit.ly/2fgzuHZ [3]). The HSE agrees that leadership is not the same as management: a leader creates and communicates a vision for the future, encourages others to commit to it and promotes innovation and adaptation to change; the manager develops the plan, allocates resources, sets objectives, organises a schedule to meet the vision and monitors them to ensure standards are met.
The qualities of a safety leader can sound more like the shopping list for a modern saint than a guide on how to lead well: honest, fair, approachable, trusting, receptive, motivational, challenging, concerned. These are admirable virtues, but it is difficult to train people to develop such qualities if they don’t already have them.

One of the foremost thinkers in leadership since the 1970s is Professor John Adair. His model presents leadership as a Venn diagram, with three sets of needs to be considered: those of the individuals, the team (or organisation) and the task. This is true for safety as for any other function, with the aim to reduce risk to an acceptable level, without hampering the organisation’s functional tasks.

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One classification of leadership styles referred to in HSE research divides them into transformational, transactional or laissez faire. The last of these is characterised by indifference, avoidance of action and lack of communication, and is regarded as ineffective. Transactional leaders are useful, and will achieve goals by explaining what is needed and rewarding good performance. However, only the transformational leader can energise and motivate followers both to play their parts in achieving the common goal, and to reach their full potential.

Another adjective applied to leadership is “mindful”. This should not be confused with what we used to call meditation, though a web search yields plenty of examples of this usage. Mindful leadership, as described by Australian Professor Andrew Hopkins, means something more unsettling. Mindful leaders, he says, are constantly preoccupied with the possibility of something going wrong. It is a trait he explores in his book, Lessons from Gretley: mindful leadership and the law, which recounts a mining disaster in New South Wales in 1999.

Mindful leadership links to the idea of “chronic unease”. The mindful leader should be a pessimist and have the imagination to think of the worst that could happen. As HSE chair, Hackitt referred to this version of mindfulness (bit.ly/2fju7kU [4]), telling process safety specialists that their role was to “create unease, not to provide false (re)assurance”. In considering what the “right process safety culture” would look like, Hackitt said: “We will have created a sense of chronic unease which replaces complacency.”

But there is more to being a safety leader than lying awake at night worrying about what could go wrong. Hopkins explains that leaders must focus their unease for it to be useful. Mindful leaders will personally probe for problems rather than seek assurances of compliance, and will not allow layers of management to get between them and the people who know about safety.

Leadership is not just about the saintly qualities of a few people, nor about sleepless nights for worried executives; it is about an organisation that is confident to be led, with mindful leaders at every level.

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