MANAGING YOUR OHS PROGRAM: A Case Study on Improving Safety Culture & OHS Performance

Many companies have internal OHS departments and may also have JHSCs. The overarching goal of these entities is to protect the health and safety of workers and ensure compliance with the OHS laws. But research indicates that these departments and committees don't always have the intended impact on companies' safety performance. So a Danish study of an industrial plant set out to test whether an OHS department can improve company safety culture by creating more and better safety-related interactions both within the department and between department members, such as safety managers or coordinators, and workers and supervisors on the shop floor. The researchers found that focusing on safety-related interactions resulted in a marked improvement in OHS performance, interaction patterns concerning safety and safety culture. Here's an overview of the study and what you can learn from it.

THE STUDY

In Denmark, the OHS law requires companies with more than five employees to establish a health and safety organization (HSO) consisting of a representative of senior management and so-called 'safety groups' made up of a worker-elected safety

representative and a supervisor for each major work area. There's no clear equivalent in Canadian OHS law to the HSO, although an internal safety department comes closest. In addition, companies with more than 20 employees were obligated to establish a health and safety committee (HSC), which is similar to the Canadian JHSC. The study says the most common problems with the HSOs in Denmark are their dependence on a few highly committed individuals, a reactive approach and a lack of systematic action. At the same time, the HSO often lacks integration with the company's core activities'i.e., production'which in turn leads to insufficient managerial attention.

To try to address these issues, the study was aimed at testing whether the HSO can improve company safety culture by creating more and better safety-related interactions both within the HSO and between HSO members and the shop floor by implementing interventions aimed at the JHSC, the whole HSO and the safety representatives. The theory was that these interventions would create a more active and visible HSO, engaging in more and better safety-related interaction, which should result in improvements in safety culture.

The key elements of the study include:

Workplace studied. The study took place at a Danish industrial plant that produces large industrial lifts. Besides the approximately 275 workers, the study population consisted of the company's five supervisors, the safety manager, the production manager and the CEO. The company's HSO consisted of five safety groups (employee-elected safety representatives teamed with supervisors), the safety manager and the production manager. And its HSC consisted of the production manager, the safety manager, two of the safety representatives and the company's building inspector.

Methods used. The researcher used various methods. Semi-structured interviews were performed at baseline and follow-up

with three groups of four employees, all safety representatives, all supervisors, the safety manager, the production manager and the CEO. The interviews focused on seven themes such as knowledge of safety issues, risk behaviour, perception of the HSO and the priority of safety.

Questionnaires containing scales on HSO performance and safety culture were administered to all workers at baseline and at follow-up. Sample items included: ‘When we report an accident, we receive feedback afterwards,’ ‘I have been shown how to perform my work safely at my current place of work’ and ‘My inputs on safety issues are not considered.’

The activities of the HSO and HSC were measured by questionnaire and analysis of documents such as written minutes of HSC meetings, inspection reports and company injury records. To map the informal safety-related interactions, all members of the HSO were instructed to register all safety-related interactions that they participated in for a month three times during the study period. A safety-related interaction was defined as any interaction where safety was mentioned in some way. So safety didn’t need to be the main topic of the interaction, but could just be touched upon briefly either verbally or nonverbally, such as in a gesture telling a worker to put on PPE. Each safety-related interaction had to be registered on a short form containing information on date, time, place, duration, interaction partners and general content of the interaction.

Lastly, the safety culture was quantified using various indicators, including attitudes toward safety, unsafe behaviours by workers, form and number of formal safety meetings, visible safety information in the plant, signposting, and safety standards of equipment and machinery.

Baseline safety performance. Baseline data showed that the company performed very poorly safety-wise and revealed a lack of management commitment to safety. Safety in general wasn’t

an important issue for either management or workers, who had productivity as the dominant top priority. There were no objectives for safety performance, formal safety policies or any systematic preventive efforts. This situation was partly due to a very inefficient and passive HSO that had no knowledge of actual safety performance and didn’t even resolve identified safety issues. For example, the company had compiled 19 unresolved enforcement notices from the OHS regulator over a few years and was regularly penalized for violations of the OHS law. Likewise, an audit by an external OHS advisor documented 110 instances of insufficient or lacking safety signage.

But there was also a strong motivation to change. Six months earlier, the CEO had been replaced and the new CEO was, in his own words, ’embarrassed by the company’s safety performance.’ Similarly, the production manager, supervisors and safety representatives all were dissatisfied with the current state of affairs, but they were unable to create change as they didn’t know how to do it.

Interventions. Interventions were focused on creating more and better interactions involving safety within the company, which consisted of starting three processes of development in the company aimed at the:

HSC: To create a more active HSO, monthly meetings of the HSC were arranged. Four new members were also appointed, including two supervisors, an expert consultant from an external OHS advisor and the researcher (primarily in an observatory role). The aim was to create more efficient meetings. Previously, recent incidents were discussed at the meetings, but the company never analyzed incident data to guide preventive efforts because the conviction was that incidents could be attributed to lack of attention, thoughtlessness and stupid mistakes by workers. The researcher challenged this conviction and urged the HSC to look for patterns in incidents and search for underlying causes, instead of focusing on immediate

causes.

HSO: The second intervention was aimed at the HSO and was based on the four compulsory formal meetings of the whole HSO during the study period. The researcher planned the content of these meetings, which were used to share information on current safety performance. The aim was to enlighten the HSO and use the information to specify objectives and goals for safety performance. Every meeting concluded with all paticipants formulating specific activities to carry out between meetings to fulfill objectives. Examples:

- Clear goals were set for safety performance every six months, initially primarily by the CEO but later by consensus in the HSO;
- Safety specific bulletin boards containing minutes of meetings, safety goals and safety performance data were established in eight different places in the production facilities;
- The safety manager started writing a regular column about safety performance in the plant magazine;
- Safety performance became a regular point on the agenda of the meetings of the works council, supervisors' staff meetings and the weekly production meetings between the production manager and supervisors, and was also included in the oral information the CEO subsequently gave to all workers about company status; and
- Supervisors were encouraged to include the topic of safety in their day-to-day interactions with workers. The production manager had the safety manager come up with different weekly topics that could be the focus point for the supervisors. The production manager then briefly introduced the safety theme of the week for the supervisors and gave them a handout giving a brief introduction to the topic, such as the rules regarding use of PPE.

Safety representatives: The third general intervention was

aimed at the safety representatives' commitment to safety. At baseline, the safety representatives said there was no unity in the group and it was frustrating that management didn't prioritize safety. A workshop addressing these issues was arranged for the safety representatives at which they set personal goals for future activities. A common theme in the personal goals was to improve at getting supervisors committed to safety issues. Progress on these goals was later discussed at their regular monthly meetings with the safety manager. The researcher encouraged safety representatives to be more proactive, which led to the idea of safety themes in which a specific safety issue (such as the use of PPE) was a common focus area for all safety representatives for a period of time.

THE RESULTS

The study found a number of improvements in the company's safety culture and overall OHS performance in several areas, including:

Issue identification and resolution. The data showed a doubling of formal meetings of the HSC in the two project years due to the pre-planned intervention of monthly meetings. But more importantly, there was an increase in unique issues on the agenda of these meetings'from approximately 20 a year in the years before the study to 62 the first year and 115 the second study year. Even more remarkable was the increase in resolved issues. While only two issues were resolved per year before the study, 32 and 50 issues were solved in the two project years, including the 19 enforcement notices from the OHS regulator. And a deeper understanding of incident causation gradually emerged in the HSC. At the end of the study period, specific preventive measures aimed at root causes were taken after nearly every incident and incident analyses were used to initiate safety campaigns. Thus, the result was a more efficient HSC, which was able to resolve safety issues.

Safety violations. The inspection reports from the OHS regulator showed that the enforcement notices that the company had at baseline were all resolved and no new enforcement notices had been issued. In fact, when the OHS regulator did a surprise workplace inspection midway through the project, the company's rating changed from the worst to the best category, indicating a marked improvement in performance.

Safety-related interactions. The interventions aimed at improving safety-related interactions by creating more and better interactions, both on the formal (such as creating more meetings of the HSC, involving relevant persons) and informal level (such as focus on safety in supervisors' daily interactions with workers). The number of interactions between supervisors and safety representatives increased from baseline to midway and almost tripled from baseline to follow-up, with an overall 58% increase in interactions from measurement to measurement. In addition, supervisors increased the number of safety-related interactions with workers by 41%. At the same time, the more efficient HSC contributed to these safety-related interactions being more fruitful, as the ability to identify and handle safety issues was increased. Put together, these results indicate that more and better safety-related interactions were created during the study period.

Safety culture. In the questionnaire data, all the HSO performance scales show significant improvements from baseline to follow-up. For example, the workers reported:

- Getting more feedback from the HSO;
- Feeling more involved in safety;
- Improved safety instruction; and
- Perceiving the safety representative as more committed.

In addition, there were significant improvements in both 'Top management commitment to safety' and 'Safety specific transformational leadership.' Plus, safety issues were addressed a lot more by management when giving formal

statements, such as information meetings by the CEO and supervisors.

The HSO had set safety objectives and was formulating a formal safety policy at follow-up. Also, it was now using incident analysis and registration to guide preventive efforts and plan campaigns. And safety ended up being a fixed point on the agenda of the works council and information meetings.

To reflect the changed approach to safety, the role of safety manager was changed from a staff function to a part of the line-management, indicating safety becoming more of a managerial responsibility. In interviews, supervisors indicated that the economic prioritization of safety was far higher at follow-up than baseline. There was also a different approach to external OHS advisors, who at baseline were seen as a nuisance and linked with confrontations and control. At follow-up, they were still seen as performing a controlling function, but also as necessary sparring partners in the safety effort.

BOTTOM LINE

The study shows that with straightforward interventions and a change in attitude and approach, a company's safety culture and the effectiveness of its safety department, JHSC and OHS program can all be improved. Before the study, the company's safety performance was lax and approach to safety was inefficient. During the study, the company questioned the governing value of ignoring safety. It identified the basic causes of its safety issues and then addressed those issues, trying to improve management commitment to safety, the economic priority of safety, and safety knowledge and skills. After the study period, management was more committed to safety, safety issues were dealt with in a competent manner, and resources were spent on safety issues and external advisors. Safety information became much more visible and safety signage improved markedly. *Bottom line*: Your company

can improve its safety culture and OHS performance by adopting the belief that safety warrants the necessary priority to be handled in a proper way, while still recognizing the importance of production.

***Insider* Source**

'Improving safety culture through the health and safety organization: A case study,' Kent J. Nielsen, Journal of Safety Research, Feb. 2014