

Leadership in hazardous industries

Do you know what impact your leadership and decisions have on the level of risk at your operational sites – and not just now, but several years into the future?



Major accidents are not anomalies that arise from isolated human error – such accidents arise from deeply embedded features of the systems of work. The history of complex systems is littered with such events where the technical details were all more or less well understood before the events occurred. What was lacking was the ability to foresee that circumstances would conspire to create the conditions needed to make these technical features active and lethal.

Leaders play a particularly influential role in creating principled organizational contexts that have far

reaching implications for the conduct of operations and consequences for process safety, controlling work and whether or not there is an effective ‘speak up’, ‘listen’ and learning culture. And this can be informed and shaped through two means. First, through

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the on-going enquiries, questions and challenges that people raise. Second, from accidents and failures that the system cannot cover up. Clearly, the former are preferable to the latter.

Effective leadership in this sense requires a shift in the balance of focus - from a results-driven focus to one committed to continual improvement of all the processes within the technical system and its human operating environment. This requires more visible, pro-active and engaging face to face interactions with staff in the

operation. And research shows that a positive impact by leaders in this regard crucially depends on the quality of the transactions and relationships they establish between themselves and their members. This in turn depends upon greater humility and listening on the part of leaders – not typical attributes found in the popular stereotyping of successful, action-oriented, decisive and ‘heroic’ leaders.

Depending on the leadership intent, there is a purpose to be served, and a distinctive way of talking and listening to serve that intent. What we talk about, and the way we talk with each other, makes a difference within a world that is constantly changing and ripe with the potential for countless conflicts and misunderstandings. As leaders in complex organisations and hazardous environments, we need to ‘talk with intent’ and interact with others about.

- What are we missing? What unintended consequences might be arising from our decisions?
- Creating a climate of flexibility and re-framing, where dissent and bad news is not suppressed, and learning is cultivated
- Listening and verifying that our processes and systems are working as intended: thinking in terms of processes and the psychology of those who work therein
- Exploring system boundaries and continually improving their definition and accountabilities
- Measuring and improving processes rather than solely monitoring results – using defects and discrepant events - identified small and early - to identify and fix the system that is causing them, and to build capability in our people to do so.

The insights derived from 20 years of research into major organisational

accidents all point to systems failures as a result of organisational factors – with the key factor within that being the decisions taken within the system. The fact that these decisions are always the prerogative of leaders is a sobering thought.

