

Safety Leadership – thoughts for 2012

By

Mary Darlington

BSc., CFIOSH, CFCIPD, MIITD

Safety Leadership Expert and Chartered Safety & Health Practitioner

Darlington Consulting

www.darlington.ie

Introduction

We hear leadership mentioned and called for in all sorts of areas – Government, business, the Church and in society generally. But do we know what kind of leadership we want or need? It is clear that ethical leadership was lacking in our banks and other corporate entities and that this lack of a moral barometer led us into our existing financial and social mess.

It is a fact that in a time of recession health and safety slips down the priority list, in some cases falling off the end of the list altogether. Yet it is needed more than ever with cutbacks in staff numbers, training, equipment maintenance and replacement and other health and safety related resources.

Some statistics

Within the world of health and safety we absolutely need true ethical leadership which strives ultimately to prevent all injuries and deaths at work. The new phrase being used to reflect this is “Zero Injuries”. That might sound like a lofty goal but I believe it is achievable. We are very far away from that as the statistics from International Labour Organisation reveal below:

- Every 15 seconds, a worker dies from a work-related accident or disease.
- Every 15 seconds, 160 workers have a work-related accident.
- Every day, 6,300 people die as a result of occupational accidents or work-related diseases – more than 2.3 million deaths per year.
- Over 337 million accidents occur on the job annually; many of these resulting in extended absences from work.
- The human cost of this daily adversity is vast and the economic burden of poor occupational safety and health practices is estimated at 4 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product each year. (1)

Within Ireland we have had 54 fatalities during 2011 (as per Health and Safety Authority website updated on 23rd December 2011). Agriculture, forestry and fishing accounted for 26 with 8 in Transportation and Storage and 6 in Construction. While this is an improvement it is still not earth shattering.

When we look at non-fatal incidents the official reported figure for 2010 (those incidents reported to Health and Safety Authority) was 7284. Total days lost in 2009 according to Central Statistics Office were 746,900 (2).

So although our figures are improving we cannot become complacent. I feel strongly that some of the improvements stem from the reduction in the size of the active workforce rather than as a result of more effective health and safety management being practiced.

When we look at the reduction in the labour market we see that total employment peaked in the final quarter of 2007 at 2.1 million - up from 1.09 million in the last quarter of 2004. It fell to 1.8 million in the last quarter of 2009. (3)

What Leadership is not

I like the approach of the OSHA Academy – Safety Supervision and Leadership series of modules when they describe what leadership is not:

Leadership is not power - power is the capacity to bring about desired outcomes and prevent those not desired. Power is derived from status, position, money, expertise, charisma, ability to harm, access to media, control of assets, communications skills and physical strength. Leaders always have power, but the powerful are not always leaders. The thug who sticks a gun in your back has “power” but not leadership. Power is self-centred, ethically neutral (can be used for good or bad), amoral.

Leadership is not status - Status or position may enhance the opportunity for leadership. Some may have status or position, yet haven't a shred of leadership. It's very important to understand that position is assigned from above...leadership is conferred from below.

Leadership is not authority - The boss will naturally have "subordinates," but, if leadership is not present, he or she will not have followers. People will follow...confer leadership... only if the person acts like a leader.

Leadership is not management - Management is the process of controlling systems through planning, organizing, and supervising. Managers organize system inputs - processes, policies, plans, procedures, programs. Managing is a planned activity. Leadership is more spontaneous than planned. Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things. (4)

What are leading commentators saying about Leadership?

Within their Factsheet on Leadership published in March 2011 the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) state that:

“At the heart of many interpretations, leadership is deemed to involve developing an initial vision and inspiring others with an overview of how that vision may be achieved, while management involves translating the vision into reality by marshalling and guiding the actions and behaviours of a

group of people on a day-to-day basis. Clearly, in this analysis, both leadership and management are essential attributes for an organisation". (5) In her August 2011 article in Washington Post entitled "What men can learn from women about leadership in the 21st century" Carol Kinsey Goman makes the following point:

"The most successful leaders of the future will take the time and effort necessary to make people feel safe and valued. They'll emphasize team cohesiveness while encouraging candid and constructive conflict, they'll set clear expectations while recognizing what each team member contributes, they'll share the credit and the rewards. And, most of all, they'll foster true networked collaboration through a leadership style that projects openness, inclusiveness and respect."

She argues that the masculine traits that described leadership in the past may be no longer appropriate for the new world we now need to lead. (6)

So what is Safety Leadership?

It is having pride in your organisation and your employees. It requires all decision makers to refer regularly to their Moral Barometers about what is right and how their employees should be treated - not just about health and safety law. The law after all is the minimum level of compliance required not the optimum level. Safety Leadership requires a management style that puts people first and that really believes that Zero Injuries are achievable. It is a style of management that puts its resources (it's money, time, people, technology etc.) into what is important – enabling all employees to work safely and healthily all of the time no matter what they are doing.

What does poor Safety Leadership look and feel like?

Sadly we have had a number of high profile examples including the Piper Alpha Disaster, which exploded in July 1988, killing 167 men, with only 61 survivors. In the report of the Public Inquiry into the Piper Alpha disaster, Lord Cullen stated: "I am convinced from the evidence...that the quality of safety management by operators is fundamental to offshore safety. No amount of detailed regulations for safety improvements could make up for deficiencies in the way that safety is managed by operators.

Similarly, Mr. Justice Sheen investigating the sinking of the Herald of Free Enterprise concluded, "a full investigation into the circumstances of the disaster leads inexorably to the conclusion that the underlying or cardinal faults lay higher up in the company...From top to bottom the body corporate was infected with the disease of sloppiness" (7)

More recently we have had the major health and safety and environmental disaster of the Deepwater Horizon when on 20th April 2010, a well control event allowed hydrocarbons to escape from the Macondo well onto Transocean's Deepwater Horizon, resulting in explosions and fire on the rig. The fire, which was fed by hydrocarbons from the well, continued for 36 hours until the rig sank. Hydrocarbons continued to flow from the reservoir

through the wellbore and the blowout preventer (BOP) for 87 days, causing a spill of national significance. Eleven people died and 17 others were injured. Interestingly when Tony Hayward became CEO of BP he said: 'I promise to focus like a laser on safe and reliable operations.' Between June of 2007 and February of 2010, OSHA checked 2 BP oil refineries and they racked up 760 citations for egregiously (conspicuously and outrageously bad or reprehensible) wilful safety violations. During his Congressional Testimony after the disaster he said this 20 times: I wasn't familiar with any of the decisions or any of the documents surrounding this well prior or during the drilling of the well.'(8)

The role of the Senior Manager

Senior Managers (and that includes MD or CEO) must become Health and Safety Champions who don't just talk the good talk but actually walk the good walk. What I mean is that they actually walk around the business regularly observing what is going on, talking to employees and asking them what the key health and safety issues are.

They need to obtain advice and guidance from competent health and safety professionals (internally or externally) in order to inform themselves about the real hazards and problems within their organisations. They need to give up some of their valuable time to discuss and manage health and safety to prevent injuries. They need to stay abreast of all new technological developments that impact on health and safety within the business and strive for continuous improvement year on year on their organisation's health and safety performance.

They need to learn how to listen, how to talk health and safety up as a real value within the business and explain consistently how each employee can play their part in making that happen. Ultimately they need to link this health and safety value back to how it will serve the customer better.

The role of the Line Manager

Line Managers need to be trained to become excellent Role Models, Coaches, Givers of Positive Recognition and Feedback, Team Builders and Setters of health and safety standards. They need to be seen genuinely to care for the well-being of their teams to earn the trust of those they work with. There may come a time when they are asked to decide between production and health and safety and their decision then will determine their credibility with their team.

When it comes to communicating the company message about health and safety, Line Managers are "the company" as far as their direct reports are concerned. If a Line Manager is seen to take health and safety seriously then that directly impacts on the response they get from those they manage. Real health and safety performance does not happen in the Board Room but on the shop floor, factory, depots, shop or site. It has to become real in the way employees work, how they work and with what equipment and tools.

Why do we need Safety Leadership now?

We need it on two levels, - firstly we cannot sustain the level of fatalities and injuries in such a small country. When an employee is so badly injured that they cannot work again, they generally become the responsibility of the State in terms of the provision of an Incapacity or Disability pension for the rest of their lives. With our current budgetary situation we must strive to prevent injuries to workers that put them in this position.

Secondly we have a moral obligation, over and above any laws, not to injure those that we contract to work for us. No contract of employment gives any employer the right to injure their employees. I sincerely believe that if a well-resourced company cannot manage health, safety and welfare effectively, then it is not generally fit to manage anything.

Where is your Safety Leadership?

In order to measure your leadership efforts with those of “best practice” ask your CEO and the Senior Management Team the following questions:

- Do you ensure that you are kept up to date on all health and safety issues within your organisation (asking for the bad news as well as the good)?
- What resources (time, money, people etc.) are each of you giving to the achievement of Zero Injuries?
- How much time do you give to health and safety every single day?
- Do your staff see your safety leadership?
- If yes, exactly what do they see?
- Have you provided all of your Senior Team, Line Managers and Team Leaders with Safety Leadership training?
- Do you measure the Health and Safety performance of your Managers?
- Do you hold all Managers to account for health and safety performance?
- Do you get involved personally in near miss and accident investigations?

If your Senior Team have answered no to some or all of these questions then there are pro-active steps you can take to change your current approach to the protection of your employees – they are after all your most precious asset.

How I can help

For advice and guidance on all aspects of health and safety including Safety Leadership training and consultancy services – contact Mary Darlington, Chartered Fellow of IOSH on 086 2437677 or by email at: info@darlington.ie. Please also visit my website: www.darlington.ie

References:

1. ILO Statistics: <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/lang--en/index.htm>
2. Summary of Workplace Injury, Illness and Fatality Statistics 2009 – 2010 - <http://www.hsa.ie/eng/Publications> and Forms/Publications/Corporate/Summary of Workplace Injury Illness and Fatality Statistics 2009-2010.pdf
3. “Ireland’s Economic Crisis – Implications for the Labour Market” - a lecture by Dr Alan Ahearne given at Kemmy Business School at University of Limerick on April 8th 2010 - <http://www2.ul.ie/pdf/213673196.pdf>
4. OSHA Academy – Courses in Safety Supervision and Leadership - <http://www.oshatrain.org/courses/mods/712m8.html>
5. CIPD Factsheet on Leadership - <http://www.cipd.co.uk/hr-resources/factsheets/leadership.aspx>
6. Washington Post Article, August 2011 entitled “What men can learn from women about leadership in the 21st century” by Carol Kinsey Goman - http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-leadership/what-men-can-learn-from-women-about-leadership/2011/08/10/gIQA4J9n6I_story.html?hpid=z8
7. Lord Cullen Report on Piper Alpha Disaster and Justice Sheen on report on Herald of Free Enterprise - <http://www.consultnet.ie/Leadership%20Safety.htm>
8. Deepwater Horizon and Safety Leadership - <http://www.safetyconversations.com/blog/full/?id=272137&title=DEEPWATER+HORIZON+AND+SAFETY+LEADERSHIP>