Managing the organisational sword of change

Without getting your head cut off!

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"*It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself.*

(Darwin 1809-1882)

Table of Contents

1. Abstract 2
2. Introduction 3
3. The Environment, change, and culture 4
4. Technical and Non-technical skills, emotional intelligence and why clever people sometimes do stupid things! 7
5. Conclusion 10
6. Bibliography 12

Acknowledgements

Acknowledging the work of James Reason, Rhona Flin, Paul O' Conner, Margaret Crichton, the Keil Centre and significant others who have contributed to the field of Human Factors, this paper seeks to extend the understanding of the part an individuals non-technical skills and in particular Emotional Intelligence contribute to managing change, safety and culture. This paper does not cover the full breadth of Human Factors in detail and is not intended as definitive explanation but does expand on elements of each and focus on the element that has been identified as having the greatest influence… organisational factors.

Abstract

The quote by Charles Darwin, serves to remind us that change is not a new-age phenomenon and is as relevant to organisational life as it is evolution. Yet while many organisations have been able to keep pace with advancements in technology, it is evident that adapting to the ever-changing socio-economic and cultural conditions in which they operate appears to be more difficult. In the dynamic landscape in which organisations operate, change is not only unavoidable, it's the constant and well cited that the only variables are the rate and complexity of it. Managing these variables safely and maximising a return amidst global competition and economic uncertainty isn't easy, and, as the acts, behaviours and omissions of leaders and managers (*organisational factors*) are now more than ever being identified as part of the causal sequence of organisational accidents and fatalities, it's going to get tougher.

It is proposed that the next level of safety and operational improvements for organisations requires more than refining current practices and norms. A greater appreciation of organisational culture, change and in particular the human contribution of both will be key to managing not only change, but also safety. Accepting Cameron & Quinn's (2011) view that the most obvious manifestation of organisational culture is the explicit behaviours of the members of the culture, this paper explores the leaders behaviours, and their role in leading change, managing safely and the extent to which their emotional intelligence (EI) can determine their behaviours, the outcome of both, and influence the organisational safety culture. Goldman's (1998) view that EI is a prerequisite for successful leadership and belief that by changing the behaviours of the leaders will bring about a change in the organisational culture is a view shared by many and central to the theme of this paper. This paper proposes that a key component to managing change safely lays in a leader's ability to adapt their emotions and behaviours to meet the changing conditions in which they execute their role and actively engage those around them. With the human contribution in accidents becoming more apparent and with information from a number of industrial sectors indicating that up to 80% of accident causes over the last decade are continually being be attributed to human factors there is a greater need to understand the dimension of a leader's general intelligence other than the cognitive technical dimension that contributes to accidents, incidents and as Reason (2008) states, heroic recoveries.

The UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) in Health & Safety Guidance 48 (HSG 48) (*reducing error and influencing behaviour*) clearly state that organisations must recognise the need to consider human factors as a distinct element, which must be recognised, assessed and managed effectively in order to control risks. This paper aims to establish that a leaders individual, and an organisational collective EI is the foundation from which a structured HF framework can not only be established, and maintained, but also developed and sustained.

Introduction

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a history of change, nor make a case or suggest a model for managing it (*as it is rare that any two change programmes are ever the same, therefore requiring different approaches)*. However, the paper does discuss the influence and effect change has on individuals and the organisation, as any change will in turn effect an individual, and individuals behaviour, and this will ultimately hinder, or improve organisational safety and operational performance. There is also no distinction drawn between leadership and management in this paper although it is acknowledged that the distinctions exist. Throughout this paper leadership, safety, change, and culture will not be separated into distinct sections. This is deliberate as it reflects the inter-connectivity and complexity they occupy in organisations and the environment in which they exist. There is also no clear distinction made between culture and safety culture, as it is evident that a positive organisational culture transcends into that of a positive safety culture.

While acknowledging the importance of teamwork, followers and team development in organisations today, the focus is primarily on the behaviours of the leader as team composition is rarely fixed in today's organisational structures where members are required to be multi-disciplined and mobile. The cornerstone of this paper is the acknowledgement that the question as to what is more important, the ever-changing landscape that organisations operate in, or an individual, is a meaningless one, as an individual's behaviour is always a joint function of both. As the acts, behaviours and omissions of leaders and managers are now more than ever being identified, and widely publicised as part of the causal sequence of organisational accidents and fatalities it is clear that there is a need to define a new approach to leadership in safety and operations that accounts for, and makes accountable the leaders non-technical skills, their behaviours and their role in reducing exposure to risk and creating a culture which is favourable to both. Reason (2008) when describing HF identifies that accident investigators have become increasingly conscious of the crucial role played by cultural factors in creating bad events, and states that culture, unlike almost anything else within a system, can effect the integrity of the defences, barriers and safeguards for good or ill.

The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, states that an employer has a legal obligation to ensure that the health and safety of their workers are protected, and by law must have policies and systems in place to ensure this. Health & Safety Laboratory (HSL) (2014) state that this legal obligation does not extend to organisational culture and its assessment. With the adverse effects of culture now widely acknowledged the authors belief is that defending the acts, inactions, omissions and behaviours of those responsible for setting and maintaining the organisational culture and managing high-risk activities is going to become increasingly difficult, as growing bodies of research become available

and pro-active organisations create ‘best practice’ benchmarks on which others can be measured and judged against in relation to supportive cultures and safe behaviours.

With a growing body of evidence and applied research widely available to duty holders supporting the theory that it is the actions and behaviours of leaders that ultimately influence culture and safety, and ultimately determine the outcomes of change and influence someone’s decision to work unsafely, the authors view and the premise of this paper is the question “How long before judgements are passed based on a duty holder’s failure to recognise and address the culture and specific behaviours and non-technical dimension of a leader’s ability”?

There is no disputing the important part technical competence occupies in a leaders skill set, but with the growing interest in, and accident investigations repeatedly identifying non-technical skills as a cause of workplace accidents, what is emerging is that the concept of EI, the non-intellective (cognitive) dimension of general intelligence that is said to determine a person’s ability to succeed under pressure and in the immediacy of organisational change and uncertainty, is one that is emerging as a potential model for addressing the behavioural, non-technical dimension of a leaders development. This paper discusses the concept and possible application of EI based models to develop leaders, assist change, manage safely, and assist in reducing risk closer to so far as is reasonably practicable.

The Environment, change, and culture

With the management of change becoming a growing area of concern for both organisations and Health & Safety Regulators there is an increasing need for a greater understanding and appreciation of the human element in its successful application. Whilst acknowledging that organisations require enough stability to continue to function satisfactorily, yet prevent themselves from becoming too static and unable to adapt, they must have the flexibility and capacity for rapid transformation in the face of competition. It is suggested that organisations shouldn’t be overly concerned with the constant of change so much, but how they respond to it from a leadership perspective, as it is the leadership behaviours, and their impact on organisational culture that has the potential to seriously worsen or profoundly improve the safety and efficiency of the organisation and assist in or inhibit a successful change process. While it is acknowledged that the environments in which organisations operate are created mainly by external factors and forces beyond the organisations influence such as political, economic, regulative/legislative, or consumer driven factors, it appears that some still fail to consider the pervasiveness of individual and collective behaviours, the overarching culture and its influence on operational and safety performance when try to adapt to it. Cameron and Quinn (2011) identify that most efforts by executives, and senior managers to significantly change the organisations they lead do not work.

They aren't alone in this view and while there are a number of cited reasons as to why these attempts may fail including that changing something as major as culture is '*difficult'*, and the lack of knowledge of how to plan and implement organisational change is limited, there is no doubt that with the focus on organisational factors such as culture and its influence in relation to managing safely, time is running out for these reasons being accepted as excuses.

It is well publicised that as many as three quarters of re-engineering, total quality management (TQM), strategic planning, and downsizing efforts fail entirely or have created problems serious enough that the survival of the organisation was threatened. What is more interesting, and central to this paper regarding these failures are the reported reasons. Again the most frequently cited reason given for their failures was the neglect of the organisational culture. Although organisations must be able to recognise when changes are necessary, most importantly, they need to possess the skills and competence to implement the changes and manage them safely if there is to be an acceptable level of success.

For the purpose of this paper the author is distinguishing between 'managing' and 'surviving' change. Brown (2011) states that '*managing'* change successfully does not lay in traditional rational, quantitative approaches, but rather in the commitment to irrational, difficult to measure things like behaviours, emotions, employee engagement, culture and commitment (*managing change in this instance is not the same as determining the need to change, which should always be data driven)*. Change brings with it the need for an adaptive response from individuals, therefore '*surviving'* change depends on both an individual's, and leader's ability to adapt their emotions and behaviours to meet the changing conditions in which they execute their respective roles as leader's, and follower's. A leaders propensity for this adaptive response and ability to recognise, and manage emotional responses and behaviours in times of both planned and unplanned change can have, and research has proven a significant effect on their own health, that of their followers, safety and organisational efficiency.

With the theme of this paper being managing change safely, and focusing specifically on culture, behaviours and those responsible for managing it, it would be amiss to exclude the definition given by the UK's Health and Safety Commission in 1993 when describing culture:

> The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and efficiency of, an organisation's health and safety programmes. Organisations with positive safety culture are characterised by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety, and by confidence in the efficiency of preventive measures.

If the safety culture is the product (output) of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and efficiency of, an organisation's health and safety programme, and is characterised by communications founded on mutual trust and shared perceptions, then the HSC definition alone serves to re-focus the attention on the '*shadow*' side of organisational existence.

Literature reviews, and quotes defining culture all have one element central to the concept, behaviour. As it is solely the responsibility of senior management to manage the organisational culture it follows that there is a need for a greater understanding, appreciation and application of leadership/management behaviours, levels of authority, influence and the effect they have on individuals and the organisation. Furthermore, how in turn they affect an individual, their behaviour, and ultimately hinder, or improve organisational safety, operational performance and the management of change. The term 'culture' has many well-coined meanings but it is generally accepted that it refers to a specific civilisation, society, or group and its distinguishing characteristics. Skinner (1969) comments that a culture is not the behaviour of the people 'living in it'; it is the 'it' in which they live, which generate and sustain their behaviour.

Recent events in the oil and gas sector have unfortunately sent a clear message as to how quickly the economic landscape can change. It has been acknowledged that the challenge facing this sector will now be how quickly they are able to adapt themselves to the conditions, and introduce internal changes that will allow them as a whole to remain efficient. The sectors ability to adapt itself in a timely manner and in line with the external forces will to a great extent be dependent on the prevailing organisational culture, the adaptive responsiveness of those within it and the leaders ability to positively engage others. Reason (2008) states that few phrases occur more frequently in discussions about hazardous technologies such as oil and gas than safety culture, and that although sought after, it is still little understood. The focus now in the immediacy of the challenges being faced will be managing the required changes safely.

Changes of this magnitude will require a change in individual functions, members, leaders, or form, bringing with it anxiety, uncertainty and job insecurity. Jex (2002) suggests that these changes subsequently require an adaptive response on the part of employees. The author's previous research identified that changes of this nature potentially lead to stress, inattention, increased risk-taking behaviour and be a precursor to higher levels of stress-induced absenteeism. The relationship held between stress and cognitive functioning is an important one as an individual's ability to function effectively is directly related to their emotional state. When we're in appositive emotional state, our brain works best, enabling us to perform at our best.

Maintaining the central theme of this paper and focussing on behaviours, Huy (2002) identified that successful organisational change results from two abilities of a leader: first, the ability to display emotional commitment to the change; and second, the leader's awareness of the emotions of others throughout the change process. Literature reviews for this and previous research regarding stress and related absenteeism identified that one of the main causes of employee stress, was a direct supervisor's inability to lead, communicate and engage followers effectively. Interestingly, all three have been cited in numerous accident investigations and attributed to the cause.

Technical and Non-technical skills, emotional intelligence and why clever people sometimes do stupid things!

Why do some technically minded 'experts' have trouble managing and influencing others, and why under pressure do some leaders make poor decisions that can lead to disastrous outcomes? It is probably not because they lack intelligence or technical 'know how'. They will have likely reached their position within the organisation based on those technical, cognitive skills acquired while progressing in their respective discipline. The answer may lay in the non-technical dimension of intelligence that is said to enables them to engage others, regulate theirs, and others emotions and enables them to function logically under pressure. The question "*Do technical experts make good leaders?* " is one that has been discussed in research arenas.

There is, and always will be a lucrative consultancy market dedicated to the development of leaders, but the majority of leadership development programmes, especially for those of a technical nature neglect the dimension of intelligence that over the last ten years has proven to be the greatest predictor of a leaders potential, EI. Research into dimensions of intelligence have been underway for over 100 years but the concept of EI is relatively new. It is only in the last twenty-five years that social scientists have begun to identify the relationship between EI and other phenomena such as organisational performance, leadership, managing pressure and managing change. It is not the intention of this paper, and beyond the scope to provide a detailed history of EI but there is no doubt as to its validity and application in the workplace in relation to managing stress, change and safety performance. The literature reviewed for this and previous research supported Doyle's (2003) view that the categorising and defining of intelligence has been one of the most contested areas of psychology for many years. Cognitive Intelligence is said to relate to a person's cognitive capacity and functioning, i.e. one's ability to learn, recall, apply, think, reason and abstract, Kaplan & Sadock, (1991). It is this dimension of intelligence that is said to have a bearing on an individual's ability to acquire technical skills and competence. These skills can best be described as abilities acquired through learning and practice and are often job or task specific, and are a particular skill set or proficiency required to perform a specific job or task such as an engineer or expert.

However, over the last century it has been recognised that there is another dimensions to intelligence that is now proven to be equally valid and is said to addresses the non-technical dimension of someone's intelligence.

It is openly acknowledged by the likes of Bar-On (2004) that it was Wechsler (1958) who first brought about the notion of the existence and acceptance of another dimension to intelligence, which he named the non-intellective aspects of 'general intelligence.' It appears that it was this notion of another dimension to intelligence that instigated the investigation into what is now termed EI. EI differs from cognitive intelligence in that it addresses the emotional, personal, social and survival dimensions of intelligence, which are often viewed by authors such as Goleman, Bar-On and Wechsler as being more important for daily functioning than the more traditional, cognitive aspects of intelligence. EI, according to Wechsler, is more concerned with relating to people, adapting to cope with the immediate surroundings and success in dealing with environmental demands. In this respect, EI is tactical (for immediate functioning), while cognitive intelligence is strategic (for long-term capacity). EI is concerned with how a person applies tactical knowledge to the immediate situation.

While non-technical skills have long been referred to, and viewed as 'soft' skills and 'touchy feely' and less tangible, research over the last twenty years is now identifying that these 'soft' skills can be assessed, measured and developed, and play a key role in effective leadership, managing change and working safely. The importance of technical skills is not being understated, but as Flin, O'Connor & Crichton (2008 p10) quote in relation to human error *"It should always be remembered that high technical expertise, although important, does not provide adequate protection from human error".* The authors then go on to describes non-technical skills In relation to the human contribution in accidents as the cognitive and social skills needed to cope with the risks and demands of their work. There is now a growing body of scientific and research evidence that makes explicit the link between specific components of EI, non-technical skills and particular behaviours associated with accidents, ineffective change programmes and leadership in-effectiveness. In a process of change or in the immediacy of a crisis, the leaders ability to handle pressure, adapt to the environment, communicate effectively, and engage those around them will ultimately determine the outcome.

What is apparent is that leading change and managing it safely requires more than technical knowledge and cognitive ability. What is required is a skill set that compliments technical 'know how'. A set of emotional and social competencies which fall under the banner of non-technical skills and fundamental to effective leadership, and identified for providing the ability to influence the behaviours of others. There is no distinction made between leaders and managers in this paper as the authors view is that leadership is required at every level, although it is acknowledged there are numerous distinctions that exist. The reason for this omission is that in relation to the central theme of this paper, behaviours, it doesn't matter what title or position is held.

It is acknowledged that personality has an influence on leadership and behaviours and acknowledged that it is very difficult to change personalities and values, but it accepted that it is possible to adjust behaviours to enhance ones overall influence as a leader. As Flin, O'Connor, & Crichton (2008 p9) quote *"personality should not be accepted as an excuse for the maintenance of unsafe behaviours at work".* Both Reason, and Flin, O' Connor and Crichton use the same quote from an airline operator when addressing their pilots to sum up a stance that should be taken in relation to the view on personality and the power it has held as an excuse for poor behaviour.

> *" You can have any personality you like, but this is the standard of behaviour we expect from you on our flight decks" Anon.*

A distinction that is made is that between leadership and authority. Burke (2008) states that authority concerns the "right to": the right to make decisions that are binding on others, to use and distribute resources, and to perform certain functions such as hiring and firing. Burke (2008) identifies and differentiates between three sources of authority and defines it as coming from above, below, and from within. Leadership is more associated with authority from within and below. Leadership is about influence, not command and control. Burke goes on to state that to be successful at influencing requires personal skills such as active listening, persuasion, empathy, and an awareness of how one as a leader is affecting others and in turn how others are personally affecting one. There is now extensive research challenging the conventional wisdom that good leaders use their authority to dominate followers by telling them what to do and by enforcing compliance. It is now evident that a new picture of leadership has emerged that better accounts for leadership performance. The new psychology of leadership suggests that leaders with a certain set of emotional and social skills are more effective at influencing followers. This influence has been described by Newman (2009) in terms of emotional capital, and the leaders who possess high levels of emotional capital create value and influence through their capacity to identify with the emotional experience and aspirations of their followers. In short, Newman describes these leaders as emotional capitalists who have the ability to guide people to action from within by engaging the prime movers of behaviour- EMOTIONS.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to move beyond the behavioural aspect of leadership and discuss the specific styles, attributes and theories of those that exist. However, extensive research and considerable attention has been given to Transformational Leadership (TL) and the part it plays in organisational performance and the central themes of this paper, managing change and safety. In recent years there has been a conscious shift away from a control and command style of leadership in industry to one characterised by employee empowerment, collective engagement, and mutual respect. It is TL and its emotional, social and engaging components that are being identified in both HF and EI approaches to leading change, and managing safely.

Butler and Chinowsky (2006) Identifies that this style of leadership is characterised by leaders with a greater awareness and understanding of their emotions and how to manage them, as well as a greater awareness and understanding of the emotions in others. This supports the earlier statement by Huy (2002) where it was identified that successful organisational change results from two abilities of a leader. First, the ability to display emotional commitment to the change and second, the leader's awareness of the emotions of others throughout the process process. This ability to adapt to the environment, manage their own emotions and others in the immediacy of a serious incident are key in determining/ securing a positive outcome. Flin, O' Connor and Crichton (2008) identifies that TL theory has been extensively tested in relation to safety in the workplace, with studies consistently indicating that team leaders who show a more transformational style result in fewer unsafe behaviours and accidents in the workplace.

Conclusion

The contribution of HF, EI and the part non-technical skills play in a leaders ability to influence change, create positive cultures, adapt to changes in the environment and manage safely are now well understood. The sensible link here between HF and Flin, O' Connor and Crichton's description of non-technical skills and EI would be best described as ability, involving the cognitive processing of emotional information. This concept of someone's ability to apply knowledge to the immediacy of a situation and be more successful in dealing with the immediacy of environmental and organisational demands is the foundation upon which this investigative research is based.

It is widely acknowledged that an individual's ability to cope with stress can be directly linked to safety outcomes, therefore maintaining the theme of this paper, it is identified that a leader's ability to recognise stress in themselves and in others during times of change would be a key non-technical skill. Stress and its influence on safe working is well documented and discussed in both this paper and the authors previous investigative research. The key literature reviewed throughout this research does indicate that while the complexities of the modern working environment and the factors that increase stress such as culture and change at work are now slowly beginning to be acknowledged and understood within an organisational setting, the impact of emotions and stress on managing safely within the two is less so. In relation to EI and managing stress Bar-On, (1997), Slaski & Cartwright (2002) postulate, if stress is so closely related to emotions, then those with higher emotional intelligence should be better able to manage stress. Slaski & Cartwright believe that it is only logical to define stress in terms of emotional experience.

They go on to point out that while there are many 'experts' in the field of EI, there are very few who really understand the true nature of emotions and their role and function when trying to link stress to performance at work. It is hoped that this paper will serve to extend the understanding of the impact of emotions and the need to manage them. There are a number of non-technical skills identified within the field of HF for managing safely that are very closely aligned with EI competencies associated with leadership success or derailment. The acceptance of the inter-relationships between these non-technical skills, and the part our emotions play in influencing our behaviours in times of change and a leaders ability to adapt and use emotional information and integrate it with thoughts and actions during times of acute stress are the key to organisations managing change safely and a leaders ability to respond appropriately when faced with a traumatic event or life threatening situation. Even though EI initially appeared to present itself as an innovative, yet unconventional idea, what is emerging is that the concept of EI, the non- intellective dimension of general intelligence that is said to determine a person's ability to succeed under pressure and in the immediacy of organisational change and uncertainty, is one that is emerging as not only a potential model for addressing the non-technical dimension of a leaders skill set identified as key to leading safely, but also as a model for reducing stress related absenteeism. The suggestion here is that by ensuring leaders have an appreciation and understanding of the impact of their emotions and displayed behaviours on safety and change, and posses a level of EI, they will be better equipped to manage the environment and the uncertainty it holds.

The author is not advocating that EI is 'the' answer to all organisational safety and change issues. However, there is compelling evidence through both extensive research and accident investigation findings to suggest that the next level of operational and safety performance will be determined by a greater appreciation of the pervasiveness of organisational culture, change and in particular the human contribution of both. What is evident is that an approach to managing change and safety that neglects the emotional/behavioural dimension is an approach that could be destined to fail. The establishment of EI as a credible dimension of intelligence provides the perfect opportunity for organisational learning in relation to emotions, their meaning, and their impact on managing change and safety. One of the reasons often cited why behavioural based safety programmes fail, is because those that were entrusted to lead it weren't perceived as genuine, authentic and credible. This is best summed up and used as the final point in this paper when Marsh (2011) quotes in relation to safety performance *"we don't get what we say we want, we get what our behaviours demonstrate what we really want".*

The displayed behaviours of those you have intrusted to lead safety will have a direct impact on outcomes on change and safety. These leaders need to set the example and set the standard of behaviour. Marsh makes this point when saying that organisations wont get very far with their safety culture if their safety leaders inspire animosity rather than respect.

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