

Leadership and Management in Safety

One of the classic questions set on any leadership course will be “what is the difference between leadership and management?” There are many articles and books devoted to answering this question – some more conclusive than others.

When it comes to safety, I believe it is much simpler and the difference is more clear-cut. Nonetheless it is no less important to recognise the difference and to understand the important part that both of these concepts have to play in driving up safety performance and keeping people safe.

Safety Management is all about the systems that we put in place: the policies, procedures, rules, risk assessments, permits and so on. All of these are essential to ensuring good safety. They form the foundations of our approach; they set boundaries and provide guidelines for people to follow and generally keep us on the straight and narrow. That does not mean that it is easy to get this right. They have to be written clearly, they need to be realistic and make sense to those who are expected to implement them. The better our safety management, the better our safety performance – up to a point! A fatal error that many organisations make is to try and rely solely on safety management and ignore the other half of this equation – Safety Leadership.

Safety Leadership (like any other aspect of leadership) is all about direction, support, encouragement, motivation and a shared belief in a common goal. Surely this should be really easy as we all share the same goal – none of us want to get hurt or see others hurt; we all want to go home safely and in one piece at the end of each day/shift. The problem is that most of us don't believe we are going to get hurt. We believe we will achieve the desired goal whatever we do. That (rather feeble) desire to not get hurt is also in constant competition with other values: saving time, getting the job done, being comfortable, fitting in with the crowd and pleasing the boss. This is where the leadership element is so important. Really, leadership is a sales job. The question is: what exactly are you selling? What do you support and encourage? What do you recognise and celebrate? What example do you set?

Very few leaders would actively encourage someone to work unsafely but then they don't need to. It is very easy to send the wrong signals that are perceived as meaning “just get the job done”; “don't bother with that precaution”. I often hear people say “Leaders should lead by example”. They always do! That's the point, by definition leaders lead by example – the question is: what kind of example are you setting?

Good Safety Leadership is about ownership, involvement, recognition of safe behaviour and understanding unsafe behaviour. We achieve this most effectively through good engagement with all members of our teams. It is these actions that will turn the requirements of the safety management system into real-life, sustainable behaviour. A lack

of good safety leadership results in, at best, a compliance culture where people follow the rules when they have to for fear of getting in trouble if they don't. This is like someone who sticks to the speed limit whilst driving past a speed camera. They don't believe their actions could result in an accident, they don't respect the rules of the road and they don't value safety over the need to reach their destination – or whatever else motivates them to choose the unsafe behaviour.

It should be easy to get Safety Leadership right because on the face of it we all agree on the desired outcome. If we get that right, we can gain many other benefits also.