

Upward Challenge

I have just returned from a fascinating business trip to India. I was following in the footsteps of a colleague who had completed a culture assessment at a large manufacturing facility and part of the purpose of my trip was to provide feedback on the findings of that assessment and give my recommendations. One significant finding was that people found it particularly difficult to challenge upwards. This is almost certainly a wider cultural aspect of Indian life and one that will no doubt prove a difficult hurdle to overcome in the coming months and years of culture change for the business.

This finding got me thinking about the wider difficulty of challenging or questioning someone in a position of relative authority. This is related to the question of how easy it is to refuse to do something on the grounds of safety. Refusal in itself is a strong form of challenge to authority, though in this case I generally find that people are more comfortable – perhaps because it is less personal and there will often be assumed support from a safety professional or trade union rep. However when it comes to pointing out an unsafe behaviour of an individual manager the person will naturally be more wary. But why would this be the case in an organisation in which everyone wants the same result i.e. nobody, whoever they are, getting hurt?

Of course there may be a sense of embarrassment, a perceived fear of reprisal or at least an uncertain response. This will be stronger in an organisation with a very pronounced hierarchy and no history of open communication. There is also likely to be a feeling of lack of influence at a more junior level. This can be overcome by:

- Empowering everyone to take real personal responsibility for their own safety and that of all others around them.
- Responsibility for overcoming this situation must rest at the senior level.
- There should be no hierarchy when it comes to keeping each other safe. This requires some significant barriers and social norms to be broken down.
- It is up to managers and supervisors to recognise and understand how they are perceived as role models by their employees and team members.
- Managers and supervisors must learn to see how they come across and recognise the huge inhibition that has been overcome when someone does speak up.
- If this behaviour is to be encouraged then it must be recognised and reinforced when it occurs – going out of your way to thank the person for their observation. This requires the senior person to feel genuinely grateful that someone has been looking out for them and not try to hide their potential embarrassment or even annoyance (at themselves maybe) by making some cutting, sarcastic remark.

Staff will find it much easier to speak up if they have a flexible yet structured approach to follow and if they have received some basic engagement skills. Everyone in an organisation must be given 'permission' to speak up, raise issues and make any genuine observation – recognising that permission is communicated by what we do much more than by what we say. Only when the culture allows this can managers expect their staff to be watching out for them for the good rather than so they can snipe at them behind their backs in the canteen.