

Workplace Safety and Health Institute

Leadership in Workplace Safety and Health

Understanding the leaders' perspective



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This article summarises the findings that were collated from the WSH Leadership consultation project. A full report will be released by the Workplace Safety and Health Institute at a later date.

July 2012

Introduction

The Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Institute has developed a National WSH Leadership Framework to strengthen the competencies of business leaders to create safe and healthy workplaces in Singapore [refer to Annex]. Singapore has made significant progress on the WSH front in recent years as a result of greater industry ownership of WSH outcomes and regulatory reforms that include the enactment of the WSH Act. To ensure such improvements are sustained and achieve WSH excellence in Singapore, we recognise the critical role that business leaders have in influencing behaviours and hence the need to engage them to the WSH cause.

Business leaders, in particular the senior management, provide strategic guidance to the framework at the workplace within which WSH can thrive, for instance, by providing employees with adequate training on WSH and allocating resources to WSH. It is the senior management that usually sets the tone for the safety and health culture of the company, decides on the importance of WSH outcomes relative to other business outcomes and establishes clear performance indicators for WSH. A 2007 study funded by the Health and Safety Executive¹ found that companies whose directors took a personal responsibility for safety and health had decreased work-injury levels of up to 25% more compared to companies without director-level leadership.

Early this year, the WSH Institute embarked on a project with the following objectives:

1. To understand C-suite leaders' motivations and challenges in WSH Leadership
2. To identify perception gaps between C-suite leaders' views on WSH Leadership versus their employees' expectation
3. To gather feedback and views on the WSH Institute's role in strengthening WSH Leadership capabilities in Singapore.

An independent WSH consultant was appointed to facilitate the consultation process which involved one-to-one interviews with C-suite leaders and focus group discussions with middle management representatives. The 19 C-suite leaders included Chief Executive Officers (CEO), Chief Operating Officers (COO) and senior company executives. The 60 middle management representatives included senior managers, WSH professionals (e.g., engineers) and line

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr817.htm>. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is the national independent regulator for work-related health, safety and illness across Great Britain.

supervisors, and provided the employees' perspectives on WSH leadership in Singapore. Majority of the companies involved in the project were multinational companies (MNCs) operating in Singapore; from the construction, marine, manufacturing, property development and logistics sectors. Two were statutory board agencies.

Key Findings

1. Leaders' motivations and challenges in WSH

The C-suite leaders interviewed in this project identified their main motivator to address WSH risks in the workplace to be a fundamental concern for their people. This was followed by the need to maintain the reputation of their company for its good governance and operational integrity. The punitive threat of fines and prosecution was a less cited influential motivator. The threat of imprisonment for directors was mentioned by a small number as being an issue they were conscious of, but in itself, was not a motivator towards their personal commitment towards WSH.

According to the C-suite leaders, the major ongoing challenge to achieve WSH excellence in Singapore was the question of how to engage the "hearts and minds" of line managers, supervisors and workers, contractors and subcontractors, from across the diverse industry sectors. Another frequently mentioned challenge to WSH performance in Singapore related to the low-skill level of foreign workers. This included their technical competence, language and communication skills, and low or lack of perception of industrial-based risks. Many C-suite leaders also related their concern on the reluctance of foreign workers to speak up on operational risks. They felt that this could be the result of cultural differences, where speaking to supervisors or reporting negative feedback about their fellow workers were not part of their communication style.

The C-suite leaders interviewed also identified that companies needed to become more proactively engaged with and supportive of the many contractors they engage, in order to assist them to achieve good WSH performance. Although WSH management systems and accountability were included in the legal agreements between companies and their contractors, many cited that contractors did not have the knowledge, competence or confidence to ensure the implementation of a sustainable WSH management system on their own.

2. Perception gap between C-suite leaders and their employees

While personal commitment towards achieving excellence in WSH performance was evident during the one-to-one interviews with the C-suite leaders, their level of personal engagement in the company's WSH strategy varied greatly. This ranged from C-suite leaders chairing senior executive committees with WSH as a key agenda, to hands-on participation in operational programmes and setting WSH leading and lagging indicators. Hands-on participation also included some C-suite leaders' preparedness to be personally involved in workplace inspections and behaviour-based observation programmes, as well as direct involvement in incident investigations and support for injured workers.

Interestingly, while some of the C-suite leaders were confident that they were proficient in their WSH leadership, 57% of middle management representatives felt that the C-suite leaders could do more to *"walk the walk and talk the talk"*. The overall recommendation was that successful WSH leadership required the C-suite leader's personal engagement and participation in WSH programmes. In order to effect this, participants suggested that C-suite leaders need to visit worksites to understand the WSH issues that exist in the workplace (*"walk the walk"*), and discuss their findings directly with supervisors and workers (*"talk the talk"*).

3. Role of WSH Institute in Strengthening WSH Leadership Capabilities

Many innovative programmes were identified through the interviews and focus group discussions. The C-suite leaders interviewed were interested to engage further with the WSH Institute to explore opportunities for learning innovative "WSH best practice management approaches" from their peers. Showcasing these programmes will expose leaders to alternative and innovative approaches to addressing systemic WSH challenges.

Conclusion

The C-suite leaders interviewed in this project were passionate about their companies' WSH achievements and strongly supported the Singapore government for taking a leadership role in WSH. They welcomed the government's proactive initiatives to make Singapore a Centre of Excellence in WSH and saw success in this goal. However, they acknowledged that reaching for this goal will involve addressing the current challenges Singapore faces with workers and companies which have lower WSH capabilities. The leaders also expressed a desire to see Singapore explore into emerging WSH risks such as psychological health in the broader industry context within Singapore.

Overview of National Framework to Raise WSH Leadership Capabilities

