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LEADING WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH - THE SIX KEY LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES

Leading Workplace Safety and Health - The Six Key Leadership Attributes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of senior management in building and fostering an organisational culture of workplace safety and health (WSH) is certainly crucial. Leaders set the WSH tone of the organisation through their verbal and non-verbal WSH communications. Using an inductive thematic analysis of research and academic journals as well as leading WSH publications, this report aimed to identify the attributes and behaviours of an exemplary and effective WSH leader.

The findings revealed that there are six dominant attributes of a WSH leader. These attributes are:(i) having a vision of excellence in WSH (ii) being a strong WSH role model (iii) demonstrating an unyielding commitment in all matters relating to WSH (iv) taking time and putting in efforts and resources to engage the organisation in WSH matters (v) getting personally involved in processes and decision-makings concerning WSH and (vi) exhibiting a high level of personal mastery in WSH.

Leading Workplace Safety and Health - The Six Key Leadership Attributes

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, many empirical studies have supported the link between leadership and workplace safety and health (WSH) (Parker et al., 2001; Simard and Marchand, 1994). According to a report published by the Health Safety Executive (HSE) in 2007, companies with director-level leadership in WSH had up to 25% reduction in work-injury compared to companies which had to do without this crucial element.

Leaders thus play a pivotal role in ensuring good WSH performance of their organisations, possessing a natural influence to shape the company's programmes and policies.

“...companies with director-level leadership in WSH had up to 25% reduction in work injury compared to companies which had to do without this crucial element (HSE, 2007).”

From the perspective of a manager or leader, a strong WSH culture would help in providing a comparative advantage by means of better productivity and efficiency, resulting in healthier workers and lower staff turnover. In Singapore,

of the estimated S\$10.45 billion incurred for work-related injuries and ill-health that was equivalent to 3.2% of GDP for 2011, S\$2.31 billion was borne by employers for cost items relating to loss of worker output, insurance premiums and legal costs (WSHI, 2013). Globally, countries that are ranked the highest in terms of competitiveness also tend to do equally well for safety (ILO, 2005).

“In Singapore, of the estimated S\$10.45 billion incurred for work-related injuries and ill-health that was equivalent to 3.2% of GDP for 2011, S\$2.31 billion was borne by employers for cost items such as loss of worker output, insurance premiums and legal costs (WSHI, 2013).”

A good organisational track record in WSH would also help to boost the corporate image. It would position the organisation favourably, attracting investors and partnerships, recruiting and retaining employees, and appear to be more appealing to customers, thus earning the trust and loyalty that are particularly crucial in times of crisis.

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to identify the attributes and behaviours of an exemplary and effective WSH leader.

METHODOLOGY

An inductive thematic analysis was carried out, reviewing research articles, academic journals and leading publications on WSH leadership. In all, 68 articles were included in this study. The attributes relating to an effective WSH leader were identified and synthesised. The recurring patterns of themes were captured and coded along with their descriptions. Some of these themes included the leadership principles, values, characteristics and actions displayed by the leaders. Further, coding into main and sub-themes were carried out in order to capture the ideas, their specific discussions and possible detailed patterns.

“...themes included the leadership principles, values, characteristics and actions displayed by the leaders.”

FINDINGS

By undertaking an analysis of the principles, values, characteristics, and actions of exemplary WSH leaders, six key leadership attributes were identified. They were (i) having a vision of excellence in WSH (ii) being a strong WSH role model (iii) demonstrating an unyielding commitment in all matters relating to WSH (iv)

taking time and putting in efforts and resources to engage the organisation in WSH matters (v) getting personally involved in processes and decision-makings concerning WSH and (vi) exhibiting a high level personal mastery in WSH.

1. Having a vision

Leaders need to have the vision of WSH excellence and they need to communicate and inspire the rest of the organisation to achieve it. Having a vision where all injuries and ill health arising from work are preventable, a Vision Zero mindset would help chart the directions for WSH initiatives for the organisation. A litmus test for this would be to assess if the leader has a clear goal that drives the continual improvement of WSH performance across the organisation. The vision for WSH is only meaningful when it is articulated and clarified with the employees.



“Having a vision where all injuries and ill health arising from work are preventable, a Vision Zero mindset would help chart the directions for WSH initiatives for the organisation.”



2. Being a role model

Leaders need to be role models in demonstrating WSH excellence, and they need to be consistent and have personal accountability in the expression of the WSH values i.e. through their words and actions. To encourage WSH participation from employees, a crucial element would be for leaders to hold themselves accountable. This would be someone who is trustworthy, demonstrates credibility and honesty and lead WSH by example.

“...leaders need to hold themselves accountable. This would be someone who is trustworthy, demonstrates credibility and honesty, and lead WSH by example.”

3. Demonstrating commitment

Leaders need to demonstrate their unyielding commitment in all matters relating to WSH through establishing goals and setting policies, allocating human and financial resources, establishing WSH management systems and processes, providing training, as well as monitoring and reviewing their organisation's WSH performance. Beyond espousing the values of WSH excellence, leaders need to support their actions with tangible commitments to help achieve the vision of zero harm for everyone in the organisation.

4. Engaging the organisation

Leaders need to continually engage and communicate with their employees and other stakeholders on WSH, and establish initiatives

and structures which allow the employees from all levels of the organisation to participate and have a say in WSH matters. Discussions in WSH matters should be held regularly and conducted with openness and sense of clarity. Decision-making in WSH should also be done in a collaborative manner with all stakeholders so as to engender strong ownership.



5. Getting personally involved

Leaders need to be visible in their commitment to WSH. This could be done through their involvement in management walkabout, worksite inspections or participation in WSH initiatives on the ground. Leadership involvement is particularly important during site visits for inspection and investigation, and during WSH discussions.

“Decision-making in WSH should also be done in a collaborative manner so as to engender strong ownership and to engage with all stakeholders.”

6. Having personal mastery (Knowledge and Skills)

Leaders need to be knowledgeable and are cognisant of the WSH risks faced by their organisations. They should be familiar with the processes and procedures to mitigate these risks. Leaders also need to have a personal mastery in the soft skills required to communicate, engage and inspire their employees to achieve excellence in WSH.

CONCLUSION

The study identified the six key attributes of an effective WSH leader. Leaders set the tone for WSH in the organisation and play a pivotal role in ensuring excellence in the WSH performance of their respective organisations. Possessing a natural influence to shape corporate programmes and policies, their active involvement in WSH is indeed a prerequisite.

REFERENCE

Characteristics	Reference
Vision	Williams (2002), Blair (2003), Krause (2004)
Role Model <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trustworthy ▪ Credibility ▪ Honest ▪ Respect ▪ Leading by example ▪ Role retention ▪ Representation 	O’Dea & Flin (2003), Krause (2004), Little (2004), Watson, Scott, Bishop & Turnbeaugh (2005), Conchie & Donald (2006), Luria (2010) Kath, Magley & Marmet (2010a), Conchie, Taylor & Charlton (2011), Fleming (2001), Williams (2002), Little (2004), McMahon (2006), Wu (2008), Martínez-Córcoles, Gracia, Tomás, Peiró & Schöbel (2013)
Commitment	Cohen (1977), Smith, Cohen, Cohen & Cleveland (1978), O’Dea & Flin (2003), Rudmo & Hale (2003), Watson, Scott, Bishop & Turnbeaugh (2005), Yule, Flin & Murdy (2007), Ginsburg, Chuang, Berta, Norton, Ng, Tregunno & Richardson (2010), Hansez & Chimel (2010)
Engagement and Engaging the Organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication ▪ Safety discussions (frequent, close contact) ▪ Persuasive ▪ Informing ▪ Openness & clarity ▪ Supervisory safety practices (i.e., frequency of addressing safety issues during interaction with subordinates) ▪ Decision-making ▪ Work group participation ▪ Collaboration ▪ Showing concern for subordinates ▪ Valuing subordinate’s contributions ▪ Motivating staff to work safely ▪ Practice ‘tough empathy’ ▪ Recognise the crew’s limitations ▪ Create motivation and a sense of community ▪ Feedback & recognition ▪ Accountability ▪ Providing communication and feedback ▪ Participative management 	Cohen (1977), Smith, Cohen, Cohen & Cleveland (1978), Kivimaki, Kalimo, Salminen (1995) Hofmann & Morgeson (1999), Fleming (2001), Williams (2002), O’Dea & Flin (2003), Zohar, D., & Luria, G. (2003), Flin & Yule (2004), Krause (2004), Little (2004), Mullen (2005) Cigularov, Chen & Rosecrance (2010), Conchie & Moon (2010), Martínez-Córcoles, Gracia, Tomás, Peiró & Schöbel (2013), Tjosvold (1990), Fleming (2001), Williams (2002), O’Dea & Flin (2003), Little (2004), Fleming (2001), Krause (2004), Martínez-Córcoles, Gracia, Tomás, Peiró & Schöbel (2013), Kivimaki, Kalimo, Salminen (1995) Krause (2004)

<p>Personal Involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Involvement in safety activities ▪ Visiting site regularly ▪ Integration ▪ Action-orientation (proactive) 	<p>Fleming (2001), O’Dea & Flin (2001), Williams (2002), O’Dea & Flin (2003), Krause (2004), Yule, Flin & Murdy (2007), Frankel, Grillo, Pittman, Thomas, Horowitz, Page & Sexton (2008), Cigularov, Chen & Rosecrance (2010), Conchie & Moon (2010), Probst & Estrada (2010)</p>
<p>Personal Mastery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supportive ▪ Tolerance of uncertainty ▪ Demand reconciliation ▪ High risk awareness ▪ Low fatalism/Beliefs that accidents can be prevented ▪ Priority (place the safety of crew and passengers above everything) ▪ Draw on knowledge and experience (developing capabilities) 	<p>Parker, Axtell & Turner (2001), Williams (2002), Huang, Chen, Krauss & Rogers (2004), Mullen (2005), Rudmo & Hale (2003), O’Dea & Flin (2003), Little (2004)</p>



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