

Using Learning to Drive a Culture of Safety

Safety has become the number one priority in the engineering, energy, extractive and construction industries, and new approaches are being implemented in leading firms to meet this challenge. Barely a week goes by without some prominent example of an industrial disaster dominating our news agenda: BP's oil well spillage in the Gulf of Mexico, the Copiapó mining accident in Chile and the tragedy at the Pike River mine in New Zealand, to name but three, have created headline news in 2010 and reminded the world of the heavy price to be paid for safety failures. Besides the moral expectation of not doing harm to employees and other stakeholders, increasing pressure is mounting on corporations to focus on improving their safety performance:

- Governments are becoming more demanding in the standards they impose
- Unions are pursuing better safety conditions for their members
- Customers and other stakeholders are reviewing safety records and imposing strict terms
- Analysts and investors are using safety performance as a marker of a corporation's quality of management
- Insurers are requiring companies to mitigate risks from accidents
- Brand is increasingly being defined by safety performance as a dimension of social responsibility

Above all, safety has become a marker of the quality of an organisation and its culture. Successful companies are highlighting their safety records, and seeking reward and recognition for it.

Traditionally, safety at work has been the province of technical experts, engineers with a strong focus on process and systems. Although these approaches are essential in any industry, they are rarely sufficient in themselves to achieve step changes in results. For this to happen requires an organisation to focus on aspects of culture—to shift the expectations of people on the ground, how they are managed, and how they interact with one another and approach risks. Ultimately, safety is a human challenge, and people need to be engaged around the solution beyond adherence to systems. Real step-changes in safety performance will not be attained through rethinking historic systems, these evolutions will result from looking at the problem in new ways. In this white paper, we will review two very different examples of recent interventions Duke Corporate Education has co-created with clients to realise cultural change to improve safety performance.

International Mining Company: Front Line Supervisor Approach



This is an organisation which operates in extremely hazardous working conditions where serious injuries and fatalities are historically commonplace. This initiative was designed to target new approaches with the Front Line Supervisor population (10,000 people located in 8 mines across South Africa). Each Front Line Supervisor is responsible for a team of 15 miners operating in an intense underground environment, while sometimes speaking up to five different languages – often without the ability to communicate with one another. The intervention targeted the operational culture of the mines to ultimately reduce accidents and improve operational efficiency through targeting how people engage within and across teams, and the channels open to them for influencing

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the operations.

The initiative was rolled out operation-by-operation, each programme customised to the needs of the site. The programme integrated the needs and priorities of each operation with prominent involvement from the local leaders to achieve buy-in and public advocacy of the programme, while linking the programme tightly to the priorities of the operational leadership team. This entailed an initial programme launch with the site General Manager and his team, clearly linking the effort to their goals, and to the ways in which they might have to operate differently to ensure a shift in culture. The General Manager then launched the programme and followed up with monthly “Town Hall” meetings to review outputs from the programme, and embed the learning and culture change in the routines of the operation.

As a lasting legacy, Duke CE also built internal capability ... to deliver the programmes in the future.

Participants attended the workshop in intact teams reinforcing existing work relationships. The programme was delivered on-site or near a production facility and in local languages to ensure engagement. The programme focused on shifting the expectations that these leaders had of themselves and one another, enabling new skills with practice, and improving operational excellence. After each programme, key issues and priorities were communicated from the programme leaders back to the site General Manager, to ensure that they were addressed at the next Town Hall meeting.

The impact of the programmes has been directly measurable: better employee engagement, improved production and a 58 percent reduction in fatalities over an 18 month period. As a lasting legacy Duke CE also built internal capability within the organisation to deliver the programmes in the future.

Global Construction Company: Senior Executive Approach

This intervention with a major player in the construction industry was designed to institute new approaches with the top 400 Senior Executives of more than 27 operating companies within the Group. The company had committed to markets to causing “Zero Harm on any of their sites by 2012,” and operational leaders were feeling pressure to deliver. The integration between the learning programme and the overall operating realities were critical to the success of this effort. Attendance on the programme was in small sets of four to six members from a specific operating company’s leadership team, mixed with four to five other sets from other operating companies. The programme was launched with a video conference with each leadership team linking the themes of the programme with the operating company’s business priorities, and each participant had an individual “tutor” call prior to, and following the programme, to ensure translation of key ideas back to work.



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The 2½ day face-to-face programme sought to execute a very deliberate shift in thinking, from rethinking, to believing, to accelerating. Application exercises were conducted with the leadership teams to embed the principles and align with local priorities. Content included transfer of best practice within the firm, and highly customised materials, mixing various leadership and change models to create new approaches that fit the company context. Overall the safety journey was tightly linked to subjects like leading change, organisational culture and innovation. The effort recognises the challenges of leading safety efforts from the top of the organisation, and highlights the levers senior leaders can pull to affect performance—privileging how senior leaders engage and shift organisational cultures.

The programme was launched in March 2010, followed up by other efforts from the company, and has resulted in fundamentally new approaches to safety—specifically, moving from a “compliance” and “blame” orientation around safety, to an “engagement” orientation around safety.

Conclusions and Lessons Learnt

Through our work in this area, Duke CE has identified some key principles to establishing a “Culture of Safety” within an organisation:

- Safety is about operational excellence and organisational culture;
- To improve safety, link it to the key organisational drivers of operational excellence: safety cannot be a “bolt on” activity, and it will not be attained through blind application of compliance;
- Formal and informal power structures at work matter;
- Embedding safety efforts in the patterns and routines of the work environment greatly improves results—how do you build safety priorities around intact relationships, and existing routines;
- Engaging front line staff and work teams meaningfully in the improvement process is critical;
- Shifting decision-making styles away from “command and control” towards more participative styles produces lasting effects—ultimately, safety performance, like operational excellence, happens because people locally “own” it.

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Duke CE designs and delivers learning solutions to solve client’s business challenges. Our work is always customised, and built around the challenges and context of each individual business.

For more information about Duke Corporate Education’s experiences in safety at work please contact Ian Turner at ian.turner@dukece.com.