

Organisational Safety Culture; Why Bother?

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Why Bother?

It is often said as a joke within the Railway Industry, and I stress that this is a joke! that if we didn't have any passengers we wouldn't have any delays or problems. In the same vein, I once heard a personnel manager say that if he didn't have any staff he could get on with his job a lot better.

Whilst the one comment was humorous and the other was said in exasperation, the logic would lead us to a staff-less business. Indeed, as technology advances, more and more effort is expended on taking the decision away from the human being and giving it to a machine. It is sometimes forgotten, of course, that that machine itself was built by human being.

There is, however, in the transportation industry a paradox that presents itself.

It is generally acknowledged that 80% of accidents can be attributable to human factors and this is the driving force behind trying to remove the interference of human factors into every level of operation. The railway is not alone in this. It has developed, for instance, automatic route setting to take decisions away from signalmen regarding train regulation and automatic train protection which, in some cases, is a constant vigilance of a machine over the drivers capabilities and performance. If the driver strays outside his operating envelope then the machine will intervene and eventually, if necessary, stop the train within a safe margin.

The paradox, however, is this if any group of people were asked whether they would travel on aircraft from London to Johannesburg without a pilot or travel on a train from London to Newcastle at 125 miles per hour without a driver, I believe there would be some nervousness. Despite assurances that machines had been provided which would take care of the travelling public, I would suggest that the majority of people would not use that particular airline or train operating company. What we have therefore, on the one hand, is a recognition that human beings make mistakes and on the other that we will feel a lot safer if there is a human being 'at the front'.

Since, in my view, there is no question that we can move people at high speeds either across land, sea, or in the air without a 'driver' it is incumbent on all transport operators to ensure that all staff involved in the safety of that movement are fit and proper people to carry out their task. If some form of automation is inserted into the travel experience, there are still occasions when the automation will break down and the human being needs to take over. In a strange way, it needs a particular sort of human being to be alert enough to act at the very moment of breakdown quickly enough

to avert the major disaster. It was for this reason that London Underground paid their Victoria Line drivers a higher rate than the other drivers because, although it appeared that they only needed to press a button to start the train and then sit back, they had to be alert at all times to any possibility of degradation of the system or an emergency which the automation could not cope with.

The Personnel Manager, therefore, has to remain disappointed – staff will always be present and will always need money and attention lavished on them.

The human being, therefore, is the most valuable asset to any company, particularly a transport company. It is surprising, therefore that sufficient cognisance is not taken in many cases of this importance and that insufficient attention is given to the recruitment, training, re-training, certification, checking, development and all the hygiene factors that are so integral to transport safety.

In this paper, therefore, I wish to examine one or two actions that could be taken in order to increase the level of safety as far as human beings are concerned – indeed to deal with the subject of human factors.

I have been subjected to many erudite lectures from consultants and experts in the field of human factors and have found myself, on some occasions, unable to identify with the points being made. I have to stress that not all such lectures have been in this category. The human being is an extremely complex animal and the solution therefore to any problems that might arise can be, in some cases, complex also.

I approached this subject, however, from that of a ‘simple operator’. I have spent my railway life in operations at the sharp end and in the more ephemeral sphere of higher management and at board level. I have always tried to keep a sense of perspective and believed it correct to test any theory against the practicality of introducing that theory. I want therefore to treat this subject in a more practical way than is sometimes achieved by offering some basic tenets by which I believe better safety could be introduced to a operating company both in a very short time and in most cases at relatively low cost. The benefits, I would suggest, are enormous. These are, if you will, some simple suggestions, which could be used to test the human factor management principles that are adopted within any company. It is not rocket science, and, indeed, I would expect that some might say it is over simplified. I make no apologies for that as simplicity must be called clarity and clarity is something for which we all strive.

Let me start with recruitment. When Eurotunnel commenced the massive task of recruiting controllers, drivers, on train staff, platform staff and terminal staff, it adopted an extremely sensible approach. If I take the case of controllers, the easiest thing to have done would have been to have stipulated railway knowledge as a given for application for such a job. Luckily, this was not the case. Eurotunnel believed that what they were looking for was people who displayed common sense:- the ability to debate the various standard and rules by which the operation would be worked and to contribute to their development. (Importantly not during an incident) in this particular case, bilingual French and English speakers.

As a result, the control staff that were recruited came from a variety of backgrounds – air traffic controllers; nuclear submariners; some railwaymen who displayed these

qualities and in some cases people who had never been involved with any form of transport and indeed safety management previously in their careers. Despite the difficulty of finding bilingual people, Eurotunnel stuck to its principles and as a result the control centre was an extremely professional outfit.

The message for me is therefore to dig right down in the basic requirements for a job and regard them as being as equally important as any technical requirements that you may have. By recruiting the right staff, many benefits will present themselves.

Turnover will be low, sickness and absence will be low, the output will be of optimum quality and, as in this particular case, a good team feeling will be generated which will only add to support and assistance during times of crisis.

I wonder how many of you in this room underwent induction training into the organisation, which you have joined within the first week of joining. Induction training is extremely important since it is the ideal opportunity for the organisation to put over not only the physical facts that are necessary but also to start the process of encouraging the sort of culture that it has decided upon. It is also an excellent chance for people of different groups to meet together very early on in their career and I have often found that the friendships made on induction courses last some time. Networking is therefore achieved in this way very early on.

On the job training is something that the transport industry practices fairly well. It uses a variety of methods, some of them depending on the organisation concerned and some on the level of job which the trainee is given. Thankfully, the railway industry is catching up on the airline industry on the use of simulation and aids such as this are vital to producing professional discipline and well-trained staff.

Following the fire at Eurotunnel, it was evident that some of the procedures within the railway control centre had not been followed in accordance with either the rules or the training that had been given. The easiest thing to do would be to have blamed the relevant staff concerned, discipline them and in extreme cases dismiss them from the service. It was apparent, however, that the shortcomings were not their own but that of management. Not only had the training been perhaps not as good as it could have been but the follow-up training and the constant attention to detail was something that had been allowed to slip.

As a result of Eurotunnel's investigations, the Board decided, on my recommendation, to build 2 simulators; 1 for the Railway Control Centre itself and the other a simulation of the shuttle and tunnel in order that emergency exercises could be practised easily and that training could be given safely. Both simulators have now been built and both are impressive in the extreme. Not only has the cost of training diminished because it is easier to train a railway controller in the simulator than it is 'on the job'. It is also possible to test out new rules and to revisit any incident or accident that may have occurred to see whether the procedures that were in place were sufficient to deal with it.

There was another interesting off shoot from the construction of the simulators, which nobody had thought of. The staff themselves, seeing the effort that management were prepared to put in to their training and the expense they were willing to incur, became,

more motivated and more dedicated to achieving higher professional standards. In the case of the railway control centre, controllers wish to work in the simulator and make use of the control centre as the simulation room because the mistakes that were made in the design of the control centre have not been replicated in the simulator. This, I believe, is an extremely important point in the promulgation of the culture that states we really do care about the way you do your job and are prepared to help you all we can. The feeling of inclusion is extremely important to all of us and I don't think there is anybody in the transport industry that would not say that they would like to be even more professional in the job that they do.

It is relatively easy, after training has been given, to forget the follow-up. Another result of the Eurotunnel fire was a visit to the nuclear submarine base at Plymouth. In order to understand not only how they use simulation in training but also to see how they achieve the high levels of alertness and readiness that is almost legendary within this country. In the words of a Chief Petty Officer at Plymouth, "it's all about drill, drill and drill again". He emphasised that it's not exclusively the major catastrophes whereby lines may be shut down, casualty unions brought in and police and fire brigade crawl all over the site to practise their emergency response. It is in fact about the simple things which can go wrong and which lead to those major emergencies that need constant attention.

As a result Eurotunnel introduced a system of task observation that was extremely simple. Now the manager sits down with a controller, with no notice, and providing that nothing untoward is occurring will ask the controller to tell him or her what action they would take if x happened at this moment. The explanation of the action could well take only 30 seconds and if the manager is satisfied 'the drill' ends there with a note being taken that a particular controller was satisfactory in the way that they carried out their task. However, if a controller were found to be unsatisfactory, then retraining would be offered which would probably take the path either of re-explanation, or in some cases retraining followed by a short test. This could be considered by some as intrusive and indeed patronising. The controllers at Eurotunnel did not believe it so. They again stated that they welcomed this sort of attention to detail as it increased their professionalism and their confidence that they could do the job properly.

Certification, too, was something that was slightly changed as a result of our visit to the Navy. How many managers in the transportation industry walk into a control room or travel in the driving part of the equipment but are not able to undertake the basic duties of the person that they are managing. In order to overcome this, certification of managers was carried out by the staff, thus, when a manager gave an instruction, the staff understood that the instruction came from somebody who recognised what should be done because, indeed, they had been passed out by the very people they were instructing. This may come as a surprise to some managers and indeed they would see it as a threat – I believe it is vital to the better management of safety.

All the above contributes towards the culture of an organisation. It is often a forgotten art that when building up an organisation, the principles and drivers are not examined properly and people rush to draw charts of organisations rather than think what lies behind them.

In safety terms, it is vital that an open and transparent culture exists. Let me explain what I mean.

It must be a rule within a company that if anybody makes a mistake – a genuine mistake or error – they will not be disciplined if they come forward and admit to it. There is a difference between a genuine mistake or error and sheer unprofessional conduct – perhaps, I could quote coming to duty under the influence of alcohol. The latter does not fall within this category.

The adoption of an open and transparent culture means that all staff will feel that they are able, without threat, to tell it exactly as it happened. The benefits of this are, of course, enormous. Not long after Eurotunnel started operation in its railway control centre but before the public was admitted to the system, a controller livened up the overhead catenary system whilst a possession of a line was still underway. Potentially, this is an extremely dangerous thing to do since 25,000 volts tends to obscure any debate regarding human factors very quickly. Luckily no one was killed. However, the controller came forward and told his supervisor what he had done. Consequently, we were able to examine the switching arrangements and the rules by which he had worked and were able, as a result of him coming forward, find that an error existed. Had he not come forward that error could have been fatal in another circumstance. A letter of congratulation was written to the controller for what he had done. It would have been extremely simple to have disciplined him; we would have learnt nothing.

I really commend such a culture in any industry that has safety within its portfolio and indeed that must encompass indeed every industry. The antithesis to this is the blame culture and the blame culture causes introversion.

When I worked with the British Railways Board, we decided not to discipline drivers who had passed a signal at danger due to misjudgement. It's fair to say that everyone of us who drives a car has at some time in our lives misjudged a white line either at the road junction or traffic lights and passed over them further than the law would allow. So it is with train drivers on some occasions and we have the somewhat ludicrous situation of disciplining drivers who had passed a signal by no more than a cab length because they had for one reason or another misjudged it. As soon as we dropped the discipline the number of misjudgements increased and the Board became extremely worried. I have to say that I was extremely pleased because it meant that what we were now getting was the real facts because so many signals passed at danger had been 'covered up' in order to avoid discipline. I am of the opinion that the reduction in the number of SPADs (Signals Passed at Danger) over the last few years has been as a result, partly, of this initiative.

My last point deals with career progression. There are, in my simple model, three types of person that work within an organisation. The first is quite content with the job that they are doing and wishes to stay there for the rest of their working life. The second is the one who wishes to get on who is upward, thrusting and wants more challenges. The third is the one who doesn't really know whether he wants to get on or not but is not particularly happy with the job he is doing but cannot explain why.

In order to ensure that all staff feels part of the company; there should be regular dialogue between the manager and the person concerned regarding the possibilities of

career progression. Managers should be made aware that in the first example there is nothing wrong with someone who wishes to remain in a particular job for the remainder of their working life. If you are happy why move? However, those who wish to go further up the ladder must be given some idea as to how they can achieve this. This idea should not take the form of a promise but should take the form of a suggested way forward and should identify any training or development needs that that person has to complete in order to achieve their goal. The worst thing that could then happen is that the training is never fulfilled – a common cry certainly within the old railway industry. As far as the third category is concerned, the discussion itself would I believe improve the situation immeasurably and either put the member of staff in to the first or second category.

Conclusion

The simple rules that I have been expanded therefore are: -

- Recruit wisely
- Carry out induction training immediately on joining the company
- Use training aids to good effect ensures that on certification you are confident that the job will be done correctly.
- Drill, drill and drill again
- Adopt an open and transparent safety reporting culture
- Ensure that development and training for development are a regular and important part of the management system.

These rules are clearly not exhaustive. There are many other components which go together to make the human factor a controlled factor within safety management.

What I have tried to do, as I stated at the outset, is to give some simple tests that may be applied to anybody's system to establish whether improvements could be made.

We must all strive to reduce the numbers of accidents and incidents, which occur within our industry. Good management equals good safety and good safety equals good management. If we are to do this, human factors are extremely important and we must begin or indeed in some cases continue to value the staff who work for us almost as we would do with our own children.