

Issue #80: Why Safety Is Never First and What To Do About It

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“Safety First” is a popular slogan that no one can disagree with. However, it is not realistic. All workplaces serve a specific purpose for society, whether it is manufacturing foodstuffs or treating patients. The workplace needs to deliver with acceptable quality and cost to secure access to resources to survive and in that quest, health, and safety are not the first priority.

Yet, realizing this fact does not downgrade occupational health and safety (OHS), but rather it points toward important implications. First is the need for public regulation of OHS to build health and safety into the priorities of the workplace. As the priority of workplaces is the delivery of goods and services to society, OHS will in principle always be on the sideline. The regulation thereby sets the minimum standard for workplaces to secure the legitimacy necessary for a “license to operate” as customers, citizens, employees, and the local community will turn away from workplaces that lose legitimacy¹.

Second, we as professionals and researchers need to understand the drivers and mechanisms of workplaces to ensure that OHS receives a sufficiently high priority. The logic for managers is to secure timely delivery at the lowest possible cost and the highest quality to optimize production efficiency. Health and safety professionals have a different logic; we try to avoid worker health risks and unwanted exposure². These two logics are quite different, and the paradox is that attempts to secure safety as a priority may push OHS further out on the sideline. Managers may experience OHS professionals as questioning their competence to manage the workplace and as establishing tripwires that hamper operations. In the best case, health and safety becomes a sidecar with its own pillar of activities such as safety committee meetings, injury reporting, and administration of personal protective equipment, but with little or no influence on operations in practice. OHS may run parallel to, but not integrated with, organizational operations.

Integrating Operations and OHS

Integration has long been the buzzword in the debate but mainly as health and safety stakeholders standing on the sideline of the playing field, shouting to the players: “Please remember health and safety,” although the players have a quite different agenda. Luckily, time works for the integration-in-practice agenda. Several developments in society support a stronger integration.

Bureaucratic top-down management and performance-based incentives become dysfunctional as technology removes simple tasks and leaves more complex tasks to humans. In addition, organizations experience constant pressure for change: to be competitive in private businesses and to meet growing citizen expectations in public organizations. Management, therefore, relies increasingly on employees who are engaged, take responsibility, and are competent to make decisions. To achieve such human resources, employees must thrive by being healthy and experiencing autonomy and recognition. Here the OHS agenda can help develop these human resources.

At the strategic level, businesses are increasingly evaluated on their sustainability performance expressed in ESG indicators (e.g., environment, social, and governance). The UN’s guiding principles for business and human rights include sustainable development goals and more lately, the

European Union's requirements for all companies >500 employees to report ESG indicators. These are examples of international development pushing for not only environmental but also social sustainability.

These trends have created a unique chance for OHS to enter the playing field and be a stronger, integrated part of the core business activities. Yet, the professionals have to negotiate access to the field, and access is rarely granted just by flagging OHS but rather by asking how to help the other players achieve the core goals of the organization. Managers may not even think that the OHS professional has anything to offer for achieving core business goals.

Lean Management

One example of pursuing an integrated strategy is participation in lean management implementation. The concept is disputed as it can intensify work and be detrimental to health. Yet, it is an open concept that can improve OHS as well as productivity³. Rather than insisting on "safety first," the strategy is to join the lean project and assist in involving workers and creating suggestions for improvements. Such a lean strategy has proven successful in sectors such as the garment industry in developing countries and hospitals in industrialized countries. Worker involvement will, in practice, create suggestions focusing both on productivity and OHS, and positive achievements from lean implementation can pave the way for OHS integration in daily practice. Furthermore, worker involvement improves the meaning of work whether it is in removing persistent quality problems in manufacturing or improving the quality of patient care in hospitals. Participation itself increases well-being and mental health.

However, no reason to naively believe that focusing on core business goals will always pay off. There will be conflicts between operations and OHS. However, joining the playing field opens new possibilities for improvements in OHS, which can rarely be achieved from the sideline. Being on the field (and not in a sidecar) creates respect and trust, giving a stronger platform for collaboration when conflicts pop up. It's a win-win for achieving business and OHS goals.

References

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