engage
EHS

GROWING

SAFETY ENGAGEMENT IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Contents

1. Introduction

The ISO 45001 standard includes a statement about Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) that we probably already knew:

"The success of the OH&S management system depends on leadership, commitment and participation from all levels and functions of the organization."

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) had realised for a long time that alongside "compliance activities" based on legislation and approved codes of practice, there is a need to consider the safety culture of an organisation.

A key element of success has been identified as "workforce participation and ownership of safety problems and solutions."

Recognising the benefits of participation is not new. The 1918 annual report from the British chief inspector of factories and workshops explained that "if a real reduction in accidents is to take place, it can be affected only by the joint effort of employers and workers."

Whether looking at your OH&S management system from the perspective of standardisation or of culture, worker participation and engagement is therefore an essential component.

But what is safety culture, and whose job is it to change it?

If it's not just a feeling, but about people doing the right thing, is behaviour-based safety the answer? And does all of this just mean more work for over-worked safety professionals?

Key Terms

Engagement

To be invested and enthusiastic

Participation

Involvement in decision-making

Safety Culture

The commitment to, and style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management

ISO 45001

The internationally agreed standard for occupational health and safety (OSH) certification

2. What is - and is not - 'engagement'?

There has been a historical division between those who decide what needs to be done, and those who do the work.

The land owner says plant corn on Monday, the farm workers plant corn on Monday; Mr Ford says assemble this part of the motor car, workers assemble the parts of the motor car assigned to them.

So, having determined that to stay safe workers should lift carefully, wear goggles and hard hats, and wait until the power is off before removing a guard, why don't they just do it?

Many consultancies take this attitude in selling Behaviour Based Safety (BBS) programmes to make workplaces safer.

Read some of their claims on the right:

"One way to improve safety performance is to introduce a behavioural safety process that identifies and reinforces safe behaviour and reduces unsafe behaviour."

www.thinkactbesafe.co.uk

"80 of every 100 accidents that happen in the workplace are ultimately the fault of the person involved in the incident…

Workers are not taking the proper precautionary measures before working, or they are simply too lazy to be bothered with it."

www.safetypartnersltd.com

"Over 80% of injuries at work are a direct result of decisions made by people, which is why we really need to understand why people behave the way they do!"

www.behaviouralsafetymentors.co.uk

The Behavioural Based Safety approach assumes that "organisations" are getting it right, so all we need to do now is "fix" worker behaviour. Reinforce workers if they wear goggles and hard hats and punish them if they cut corners.

This is rather like setting a rat in a maze. If the rat heads to the left, it will get an electric shock; if it heads to the right, it will get a lump of cheese. It learns to head to the right;

Shall I do the right thing or shall I harm myself? The BBS view of workers
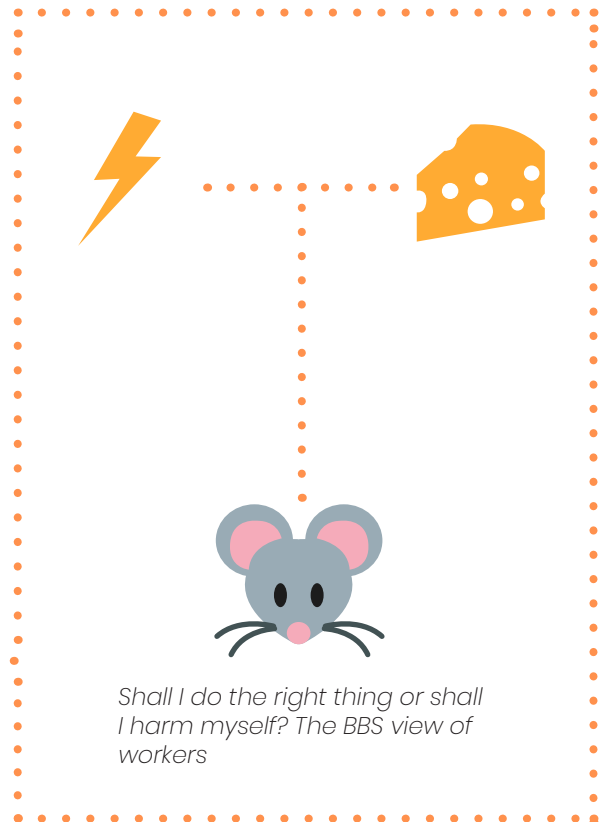
There are many problems with this way of treating workers. First, it assumes that the employer is already doing enough – that "most organisations do the physical and systems parts of safety well."

Even if you had it right a few years ago, workplaces change.
Are our systems adapting quickly enough to new ways of working?

Can any of us, hand on heart, say there is no room to improve our systems?

The late, great Professor Trevor Kletz, known as the founding father of inherent safety, summed up the attitude. "Managers and designers, it seems, are either not human or do not make errors."

The second problem is that BBS ignores the fact that people are not rats.

"Managers and designers, it seems, are either not human or do not make errors."

Professor Trevor Kletz

3. Barriers to engagement

The reality can be more like the second maze, where the preferred procedure is harder to follow, and has short-term negative consequences, whilst the "dangerous" option is reinforced – until an accident occurs.

It turns out, even rats think about the problem in a more complex way than the behaviourists believed.

In one study rats were given a lever which, as well as providing them with food, caused another rat to receive a shock.

The rats stopped pressing the lever – sacrificing their own reward for the sake of the other rat; other rats learnt to press a lever just to help another rat in a water trap.

If a lab rat can do more than behave, and can think about a problem, why would we treat people as though they were just a box that responds to inputs?
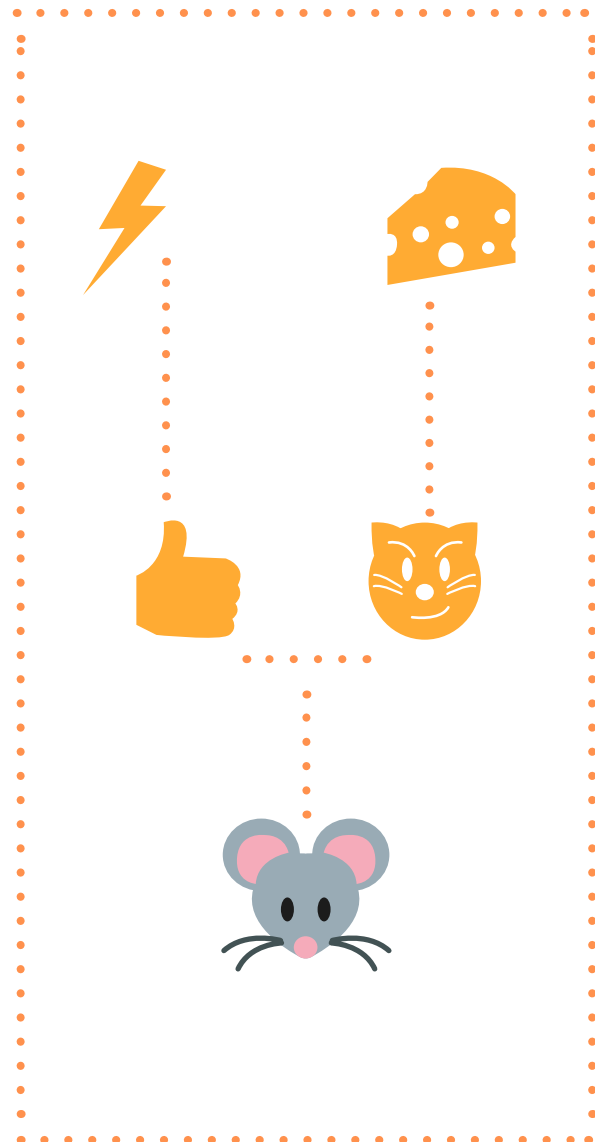
"(BBS)…does not address the question of who makes the decisions about work speeds, productivity levels, shift patterns and how they relate to safety"

www.TUC.org.uk

Not only does BBS ignore the organisational problems, it can have the opposite effect on behaviour to the one intended.

It can drive reporting underground, meaning that the very information you need to make the workplace safer is hidden from sight.

Or imagine for a moment that it works – that you could train people to behave as obedient lab rats at all times, regardless of other social or practical factors.

What would happen when flexibility of thinking was needed, to solve an unusual problem, or to avert disaster?

Do we want workers who follow instructions, to the letter, or do we want a workforce which can adapt as situations change?

The workers need to see what the maze looks like from above. You want people to do the right thing when you're not watching, and to feel able to explain without fear of punishment when they can't do the right thing.

You want them to use their own knowledge and experience to make suggestions when they believe they know a better way of doing something.

If you want the right things to happen, you need the right **SAFETY CULTURE.**

"The tendency is to focus on individuals and fail to address management behaviour thus excluding activities that have a significant impact on safety performance."

www.thinkactbesafe.co.uk

"Everyone, and that includes you and me, is at some time careless, complacent, overconfident, and stubborn…

Because all these traits are fundamental and built into each of us, the equipment, machines and systems that we construct for our use have to be made to accommodate us the way we are."

www.safetypartnersltd.com

"Beware Behavioural Safety: Fix the hazard don't blame the workers."

www.behaviouralsafetymentors.co.uk

4. Growing employee engagement in H&S

In an ideal world, safety leadership comes from the top. ISO 45001 declares that top management are responsible for "developing, leading and promoting a culture in the organization that supports the intended outcomes of the OH&S management system."

But if they don't, does that mean you should do nothing? And if they do lead, what is your role in supporting that process?

Other managers will use the workers as the excuse – they just don't want to participate. Is that true? Or have they stopped participating because they felt no one was listening? Or worse, because they feared what would happen if someone listened?

ISO 45001 (Clause 5.4) suggests that barriers to participation include "failure to respond to worker inputs or suggestions, language or literacy barriers, reprisals or threats of reprisals."

If workers can raise concerns or make suggestions when it's convenient for them, perhaps they will participate more. If they get great feedback as a result of their participation, perhaps they will continue to participate.

OPTION 1

Shorten the communication path between the people who witness the difficulties on a daily basis, and those who are in a position to do something about it.

Result:
The decision makers and frontline staff communicate directly.

OPTION 2

Invite employee representatives to management meetings.

Result:
Can delay information sharing if everything is saved up for the monthly safety meeting.

OPTION 3

Have "trained observers" who are taught to make observations.

Result:
"I'm not a trained observer" could be a great excuse for apathy, leaving it to someone else.

4.1 Tips to growing engagement

1. Listening to your employees

Feedback from your employees is vital to growing your safety engagement. Getting honest feedback can be tricky – just because your checklists are coming back with no problems doesn't mean that there aren't any. In a work setting, you may be told what you want to hear.

Informal meetings may work better – talk about what is important to your employee, don't talk at them.

2. Act on the feedback that you receive

Don't just collect employee feedback and let it sit there. You have to listen AND take action. You can start with small changes (barring any urgent safety issues), showing employees that they are being listened to. It can be seemingly minor things that annoy people – ill fitting PPE, old or out-of-date equipment, unclear or contradictory safety processes.

Tackling these issues can start to show managements receptiveness to employee feedback.

3. Building Trust

You need to explain to your employees the reason behind your information gathering. Let them know that it is alright for there to be problems. You need to communicate effectively with your employees about whey you are gathering information, what the benefits for them are, and listen to their reactions. If employees fear blame or backlash, they will not engage.

Beliefs are hard to change – your success is dependant on how you -effectively communicate, and how senior management display leadership and accountability.

4. Technology

Technology can be a fantastic support to employee enagagement in health and safety. The scope of safety technology is constantly changing, with wearable and mobile technology making massive advancements. A place where mobile technology is particularly useful is in mobile hazard spotting and incident reporting.

5. Using technology to drive engagement

If the workforce start to fill in observation cards by hand and post them into a box for you to collect, or they start sending you observations by email, text or even Twitter, you will be overwhelmed.

Wouldn't it be great if workers could report issues directly, with the minimum of effort, using the phones they always have with them?

Imagine that the worker can snap a photo to explain the problem, with the location, time and the name of the reporter automatically included. That they can pick a category from a list so that the report is automatically copied to the right people without waiting for you to get out of a meeting and forward it.

And then imagine if it's so easy that instead of just reporting problems, people start reporting suggestions which not only improve safety, but perhaps increase productivity, reduce waste, or save time?

Imagine you have this app and people are reporting both hazards and suggestions for improvement. How would you like to manage it all?

Perhaps you'd start with a simple summary of everything that's going on – like a dashboard provides a summary of all the complex processes going on under the bonnet in a car.

Capturing hazards with the Engage EHS app
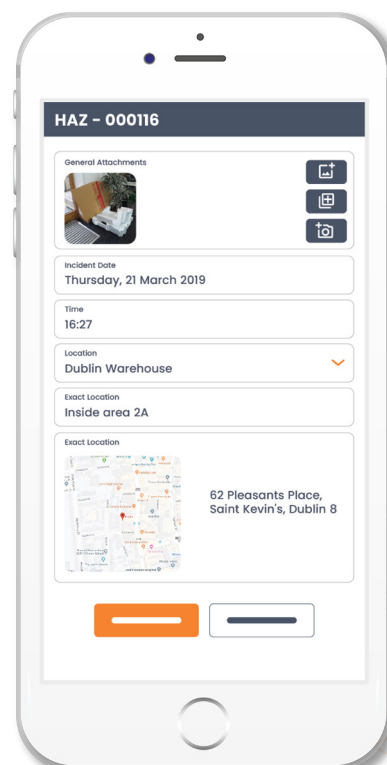
6. Conclusion

Amidst the listing of virtues in the ISO 45001 definition of culture were some useful levers – in particular, "your activities and the management system you are responsible for".

If you want to drive safety culture up and down the chain, perhaps you need to review your activities, and get some new tools to support your management system.

Tools that engage workers by treating them as participants not maze rats - and engage senior management by providing them with information they can't ignore.

What the software can't control is how your organisation responds to reports. If someone admits to falling asleep on the job, of needing to brake too sharply, or of forgetting a critical step in a procedure, will they be punished? Or will someone consider whether shift patterns are causing fatigue, whether automatic speed limiters would be effective, or whether a procedure is too complex?

Staff must believe that there is a just culture, where the response will concentrate on the learning opportunity rather than disciplinary action.
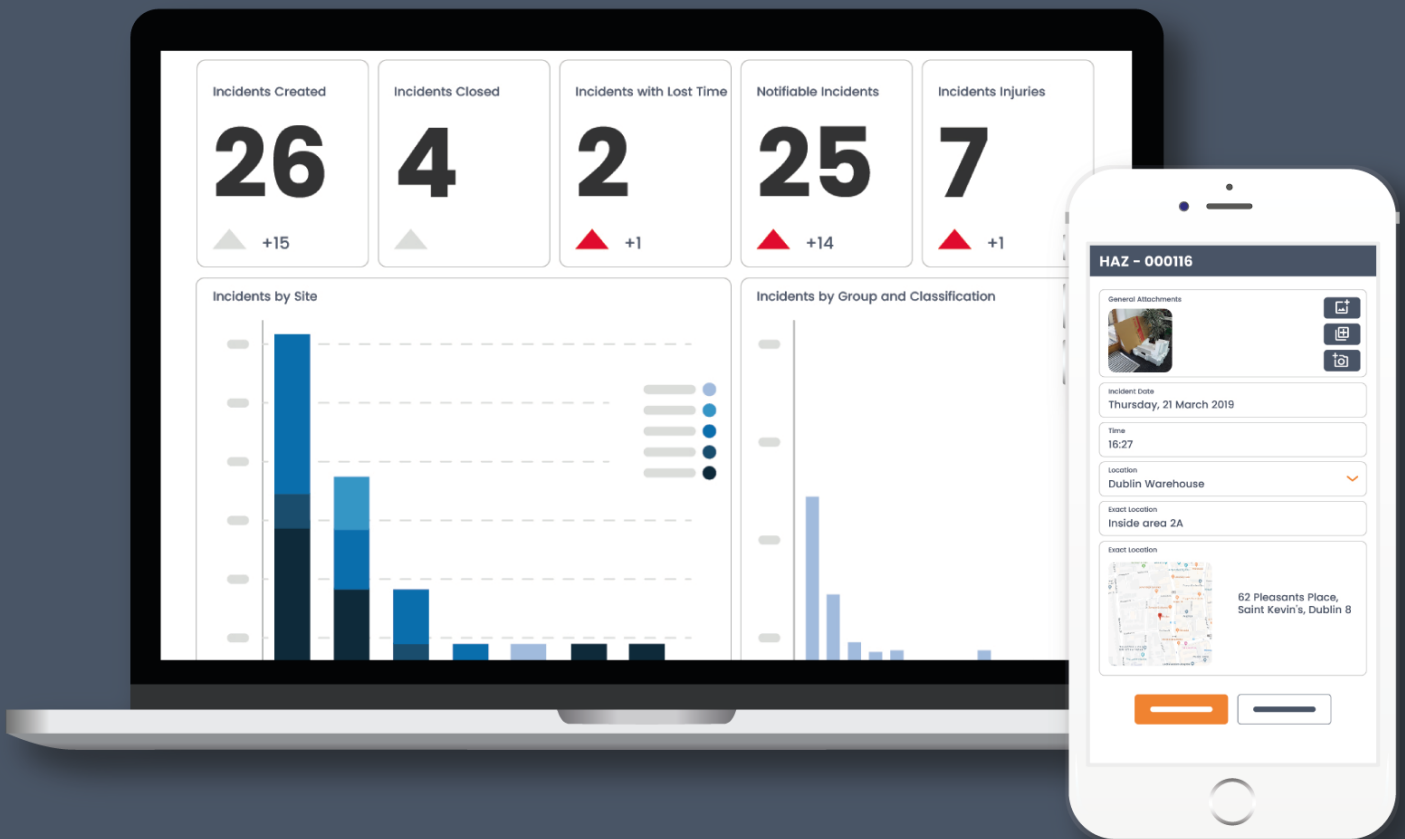
As ISO 45001 describes it, safety culture should be "founded on mutual trust."

"Processes for the receipt of suggestions can be more effective if workers do not fear the threat of dismissal, disciplinary action, or other such reprisals, when making them."

ISO 45001

Want to know more about how we can help you to engage your workforce in H&S?

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