

The reliability of safety policy

With some regularity we introduce new safety policies and methods. Even with limited support, we assume that a limited policy is better than none at all. For example, in the Netherlands the industry has introduced a Safety Certificate Contractors. This includes a number of obligations whose usefulness is not always endorsed by management. For reasons of certification, the requirement for a monthly safety walk is taken for granted. This article argues that the introduction of a policy with only limited management support is of little use and can even have a counterproductive effect on the safety of an organization.

Behavior as a factor of safety in an organization

The current safety issues are mainly related to unsafe behavior. In two-thirds of all incidents, unsafe behavior is regarded as an important factor. The safety policy should therefore focus primarily on strengthening safe behavior. Research shows that, in particular, the behavior of the first line supervisor is an important influencer of the safe behavior of employees. The more credible the supervisor shows himself to be, the greater the chance that the employee will follow him.

Say and do

Credibility is strongly related to the manner of communicating. The employee analyzes (on an unconscious level) the messages of his supervisor. Important here is the overlap of saying and doing. If words and actions go hand in hand, we call this congruent behavior. The communication theory states that congruence of word and behavior is important for trustworthiness of a message. Congruence thus has an influence on compliance with policy.

Matrix of saying and doing

Behavior leader		Doing	
		gives the good example	gives the bad example
Saying	talks about safety regularly	A	B
	hardly talks about safety issues	C	D

We can schematically divide the safety behavior of a leader into two channels. This creates a quadrant. The columns say something about the actions of the leader, the rows about his words. The left column stands for the leader who acts safely and makes decisions that guarantee safety. The right column represents the leader who does not adapt so closely with safety and may even behave unsafely. The top row represents the leader who regularly talks about safety issues with his team. The bottom row represents the behavior of a leader who does not explicitly deal with safety in words or even criticizes safety policy. Each act of a supervisor can be placed into one of these four categories.

Highest added value

The behavior of the leader in each quadrant has a different influence on the behavior of the people. Quadrant A has the highest added value for the organization. It stands for the congruence between giving a good example by means of behavior and emphasizing in words that safety is important. This creates a strong message that employees respond to.

Say or do?

More interesting is the question of which quadrant then has the most added value. Most people opt for quadrant C. What we see others do is more important than what we hear others say. That is in line with our knowledge of the brain. At least 10 times more brain cells are involved in the process of looking compared to listening. We judge people more on their actions than on their words.

Congruent or not?

Two quadrants now remain, B and D. What can we say here about the added value for the organization? Opinions differ here. Some people say that behavior in quadrant B gives a wrong example, but that there is still talk about safety here. That seems better than D because safety is not mentioned at all in that quadrant. Others argue that B, due to the tension between saying and not doing, is incongruent and provokes unbelievability. The confidence in the management weakens due to this type of behavior.

Congruence creates trust

The communication theory supports this last view. The behavior in quadrant B is detrimental to the credibility of the leader and therefore also to the policy he propagates on behalf of the organization. It gives the employee the opportunity to question the entire safety policy. "They say that safety is important to them, but I do not see anything". By communicating policies without executing it themselves, many safety messages lose their value. In the end, the credibility of the entire safety policy will be called into question.

Blind spot

If asked, everyone knows examples of behavior in quadrant B. These almost always concern the behavior of another leader, another department or another organization. People hardly recognize it by themselves. Sometimes people do have some good intentions but poor performance. They judge themselves more on intentions than on acts. Other times they do not believe in the policy themselves, but still promote it in the naïve assumption that others do not notice this. The talent for great acting is granted to only a few. The result is that quadrant B is a blind spot for most people. As we all know, blind spots are difficult to change.

Examples

An ideal breeding ground for quadrant B is an imposed safety policy of which one cannot discover the meaning. Unfortunately, there are many examples such as:

- 50 pages of appendix to a work permit under the assumption that a (foreign) mechanic will then be well informed. Everyone knows that the technician really does not have the time (and sometimes the capacity) to read those documents.
- Mandate an LMRA at the start of each assignment and ask to fill-in the check boxes on a card as proof. Everyone knows that such a card does not have any added value and is just there for bureaucratic reasons.
- Organize a daily safety session for all hired employees during a Turn Around, even though it is known that more than half of them cannot understand the presentations due to language problems.
- A system of "Reporting Unsafe Situations" without a clear follow-up of the reports, as a result of which employees doubt the support from the management.

Clean up policy

Employees can easily supplement this list with safety policies that will never work in practice because there is no real management support. There is a lot of work to do for both policy makers and management. It must be determined from each rule whether it offers a solution to a potential problem. Understanding the added value of a policy is the beginning of convincing others. If that belief is lacking, one must abolish the rule. If the belief is there, one has to ask himself how this can best be transferred to the employees.

In summary

The pillars of policy compliance are formed by the credibility of the policy itself and by those who implement this policy. Wrong and misunderstood rules damage this credibility. This has a radiation effect on the entire safety policy. That is why the statement "Even if it does not work, it does not harm" does not stop. We have to be cautious about setting up a companywide safety policy because the problems differ per location. We would do well to critically review the complete safety policy again. It must be clear for each rule and tool what it is for. As long as we cannot explain for what problem a rule provides a solution, we create a new problem. On the other hand, if management believes in it, the employee will see the benefit and adjust his behavior accordingly. That's where a strong safety policy starts.

Juni Daalmans

post@BrainBasedSafety.nl

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