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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the findings of two large studies conducted during 2005/06 that illuminated the role of managers as change agents. We draw the findings together to conceptualise and model the leadership styles and behaviours that appear to be successful in reshaping organisational safety culture. The first study identified the instrumental influence that managers have on the safety culture within organisations. The second study revealed the influential role of managers as change agents during a cultural change initiative when they applied a flexible approach using formal and informal agencies of change. The paper situates these two studies in the broad context of transformational leadership and manager behaviour as pivotal factors for safety culture change.

Keywords: managing change, change agents, safety culture, transformational leadership.

Practitioner points

- Manager behavioural attributes that facilitate organisational safety culture change are modelled.
- Comparison and blending of the findings of two research projects that used a qualitative methodology.

Introduction

This paper uses the findings from two large studies conducted in 2005/06. Study One explored the value placed upon improving safety culture by managers in the construction industry in Western Australia. Study Two investigated the change management practices during a merger between two state government departments in Western Australia. Both studies modelled managerial behaviours and attributes that facilitated successful change. The results of these two studies in terms of industry implications and management learning have been published elsewhere.^{1, 2} In this paper we propose a change agent model directed at organisational safety culture change and aligned with transformational leadership qualities. To provide a context for the conceptual modelling that emanated from the data analysis of the two studies and our emerging change agent model we first present a brief review of the literature on organisational safety culture change, transactional and transformational change, and change management commitment.

Organisational safety culture change

Safety is often associated with regulation and compliance. However, safety culture is often seen as separate from organisational culture. Safety should be situated at the core of the organisation's overall culture. Gherardi and Nicolini (p 11) noted that there is a misconception of the notion of safety culture in that, "safety culture is not something possessed by an organisation" but it is in fact an "organisational act".³ While organisations prescribe the roles, resources, legitimate actions and meaning of safety within the workplace, in their everyday actions managers translate this culture through their discourse, interactions, and sanctions and rewards that shape safety culture.⁴ However, as with all human interactions there is the possibility of mistranslation or diverse translation throughout an organisation in terms of the messages they receive and the priority that safety is given.

The success of any culture change is often determined by the level of commitment or the value that managers place on the initiative and their actions as change agents.⁴ In their research with a British steel company Donald and Young found a positive correlation between safety values and safety performance.⁵

However, in his study on effective safety communication, Leith found that there needs to be clear communication between shop floor workers and managers in order to elicit a safety culture change because the respective values of these parties may differ in relation to production priorities and working safely.⁶ For example, managers may exert pressure to get the job done and place this before working to the letter of safe work procedures. All managers have an important role in developing and nurturing employee safety values together with their own. A clear communicative and collaborative working style between managers and employees encourages value exchange and facilitates change.⁷ ⁸ To this end, goal setting and feedback can be used to produce significant improvements in safety performance.⁸

The safety culture displayed and valued within an organisation results from managing the competing forces of production pressures and operating according to safe work procedures. Reason determined that there was no long-term conflict between production and safety⁹; however an organisation may "look good" with safety systems that may not correctly represent the practices on the shop floor.¹⁰ Beck and Woolfson (p 15) argued that by attempting to enforce a workplace culture within an organisation, there may be, "competing and sometimes conflicting views about the nature of existing problems and their practical solutions"¹¹ Even though employees may accept the safety values expressed through the corporate ideology, these values may not be demonstrated in the day-to-day manager and employee behaviour patterns, because the employee may not understand how to act upon the prescribed values.¹² ¹³

In order to improve organisational safety culture, a change in behaviour from both managers and employees is needed. Increased commitment is one demonstrative action by managers to increased safe behaviour and productivity. Providing employees with a clear idea of the rationale underpinning the change and a demonstration of how they are expected to act is another.⁸ How managers manage their employees is directly influenced by their personal safety values.¹⁴ ¹⁵

Transformational leadership and change

Research has shown that the extent to which managers exhibit transformational and constructive leadership styles is an effective predictor of the rate of injury within an organisation, directly influencing the improved safety behaviour of group members.¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸

Avolio, Bass and Jung defined transformational leaders as those who possess ideals and values that arouse the higher order motives of their followers.¹⁹ Transformational leaders lead the discourse to assert collaboratively the value of safety. The core safety values become the "truth" for that workplace.²⁰ It is the gradual internalisation of these values through reflexive debate and actions that produces the resulting behaviour patterns; a shift from "doing" to a shift of "being" that creates a safe, or unsafe, workplace culture.²¹ ²² While leaders shape their organisation they also shape themselves.²³ ⁵ In this way the

battle to privilege safety values over competing production values that occurs continually as managers develop their leadership is then reflected within their teams as they listen, observe and generate a safe pattern for their workplace activity. Managers play a pivotal role in changing the culture through their transformational leadership actions of collaboration, clear communication and trust within relationships.

No matter what the origins of the mobilisation process, change is not accommodated by the organisation and subsequently institutionalised unless numerous change agents within the organisation become an active part of the process.²⁴ Change as a form of organisational development is therefore neither rational nor consensus-based, rather a plural political struggle.²⁵ It engages multiple actors within organisations both by their actions and individual sensemaking to embed the change process.²⁶,²⁷,²⁸ Ford et al (p 362) stated that change agents are reported in the literature as those that are “doing the right and proper things while change recipients throw up unreasonable obstacles or barriers” that block the change process.²⁹ While this view polarises what is a continuum of positions within the organisation, often the conversion of change resisters is a critical process event. With a somewhat cynical voice, others describe change agents as undeserving victims of the irrational and dysfunctional responses of change recipients.³⁰,³¹ Ford et al went further by describing three sides to the change “resistance story” as voiced by change agents.²⁹ First; resistance to change may be viewed as a self-serving label given by change agents in a reaction to recipients resisting change. Second; the change agent’s own behaviour can promote resistance, by for example breaking the trust of their colleagues³²,³³ and personal relationships³⁴ Third; the resistance to change may be a positive contribution to the change process,³⁵ promoting dialogue, investigating the rationality of the process and vision, to improve the change activity.

Change agents act as translators of the change process and can act as inhibitors.³⁶ The script is invariably diversely interpreted as each manager reads and hears through their own value filter. The sensemaking process is complex and difficult, with each manager effecting a slightly different translation²⁶,²⁷,²⁸. While this may add vibrancy to the process and indeed produce improved contextualisation for each unique workplace, it simultaneously produces inequity within the organisation as actors see the change enacted in different ways. Managers’ assumptions about how to lead within the organisation along with the diversity and orientation of their inter-personal skill sets are critical factors that mediate the success of the change process. This is particularly our position in terms of effecting change to the safety culture of an organisation where production values may compete with the value placed on always working safely.

Research method

The empirical component of this paper is based upon two studies that tracked, analysed and then conceptualised the role of managers during a culture change process. Study One was a three-year research project (2005–2008) that investigated the value that managers placed on working safely over producing more rapidly in the civil construction industry in Western Australia. This study focused on determining the relations between organisational values and work health and safety (WHS) practices in the WA civil construction industry. The study collected injury data as well as conducting in-depth interviews with WHS managers, injured employees, and other key stakeholders. The results of this study have been published elsewhere.¹,¹¹,³⁷ Study Two was a two-year investigation (2004–2005) of a major state organisation in Western Australia where the human resources (HR) department was in the midst of a realignment of values and culture after a politically determined merger. The results of this study appear in a forthcoming paper.²

Sample

The Study One sample comprised 91 civil construction companies in Western Australia. In the first phase of this study, 24 businesses with 4,948 employees supplied their incident data for analysis, with a total of 3,882 incident reports between January 2001 and December 2006. The second phase of this study involved 39 interviews conducted in 2006 with managers, WHS managers, supervisors and injured employees

in businesses that spanned from large to micro in size.^{*} A further 11 interviews were conducted with supporting and legislative bodies (such as WorkSafe WA), insurance companies, and registered training organisations.

The Study Two sample consisted of a survey of almost 5,000 employees, with more than 60 interviews conducted in September and October 2004 and 24 executive interviews conducted during February to April 2005. Five divisions were represented in the sample within eight locations in Perth, Western Australia.

Findings

Rhetoric versus action

The preceding review established how management leadership style is instrumental in influencing, determining and embedding the practices within organisations. Study One^{*,11} described how two distinct managerial leadership change attributes emerged. Managers either led by example or they adopted an autocratic compliance style, with often their subsequent actions appearing dysfunctional. It was evident from the organisations analysed for this study that these two management styles produced organisations with differing safety culture maturity. For example, those organisations with managers who acted as they said they would, incorporating safety practice integral to their culture, appeared to have improved workplace understanding of the safety culture. These organisations' employees conducted themselves in a safer manner than did those in other organisations within the industry, generating fewer recorded incidents (34% injured employees over the six-year period). Furthermore, they did not require the continual threat of sanctions for non-compliance with company policy and legislation. Managers who displayed more transformational leadership qualities had "safer" organisations. On the other hand those managers who used safety culture rhetoric whereby 'you do as I say, not what I do', managed safety in their organisations as a separate and detached activity, with the intention of meeting regulatory and legislative requirements. These managers governed transactionally through the use of fines and sanctions, and these organisations had a higher level of unsafe behaviours that produced a larger number of recorded incidents (51% injured employees over the six-year period). Although it could be argued that the approach taken by managers is not the sole reason for the level of incidents, managerial leadership qualities did appear to be a significant influence.¹¹

Managers who enacted safety culture change transactionally used systems such as quality assurance, risk management practices (eg job safety analyses), incident management, inductions, policies and procedures, and machinery design in order to comply with legislative requirements. To the governing legislative bodies these organisations may "look" safe and indeed when employees follow these systems completely it can be argued that safe practice occurs. However, organisations that engage transformational leaders are more likely to effect change that permeates the culture, encouraging safe work practice that is supported by documented processes. Their values form the emerging "truths" within the organisation. These organisations will also use safety systems (such as risk management systems); however, rather than using them as a compliance method, they use these systems to enact safety policy as an intrinsic part of everyday activity. They reward and recognise safety behaviour improvement that is assessed regularly through training and observing individuals' competency to carry out their work tasks.

The Manager's role

A manager's role in terms of culture change is onerous, continual and complex. Managers are involved from the first hours of an individual's employment to acculturate employees and to instil managers' espoused safety values.⁴ There is no simple direct transfer; the words on the page that appear in regulations for example, have to be reconstructed in conversations and through actions in the workplace.²⁹ They need to be contextualised and even more challengingly, retranslated into meaningful discourse that can be understood by a diverse range of employees.¹⁴ It was evident from this research that statements about safety alone do

not result in a change in employee behaviour. The resulting behaviour at work is a product of the employee either:

1. *Resisting* the formal and informal safety culture change in that they heed their own set of values. *"I wouldn't know where upper management's safety values are at. On my sites what I say goes"* (Supervisor, medium-sized organisation).
2. *Incorporating* the formal and informal safety culture change, taking on board and accepting the way we do things around here; and making these values part of their own. *"I'm lucky that I have a fairly stable core crew. They're the ones that are driving safety"* (Supervisor, medium-sized organisation).
3. *Complying with* the formal and informal safety culture in that they are "seen" to be using the values without actually accepting them as a part of their own personal values. *"I think there's also an issue in safety being given some sort of lip service as well in that everybody knows what the right thing is to say but does that actually get translated down through in the workforce I think is very questionable"* (Key stakeholder legislator).

These three examples from the first study illustrate the importance of relationship building between manager and employee.⁸ The transactional leader fights an uphill battle by privileging the organisational face and "looking good" while allocating less value, time and emphasis to instilling the safety values into the culture and the minds of staff. When ticking organisational boxes is primary behaviour, ensuring that the safety values are translated into workplace practice is marginalised.

Relationship-building

In Study Two the focus was again on changing values, in this case within an organisation undergoing a merger. In this study the extent the new values were being embedded in the newly merged entity and the strategies that had the greatest utility in achieving this objective were investigated. The findings were interesting because when scoping the project the research team was focused upon determining which Human Resource strategies were having, and could have, the greatest impact. However, while the interviews confirmed the trauma of the change process they also uncovered voices that indicated the inadequacy of managerial skills.³⁶ The interviews with some participants also revealed a wide range of formal and informal agencies of change being used by some managers within the organisation. In some cases managers were actively making the change happen and in other cases appeared to be resisting or confused by their role in the change process.

Some managers recognised the value of building up relationship capital with their staff, and worked actively to augment it using formal and informal agents of change. Formal agents of change consisted of promotions, secondments and transfers confirmed by existing organisational structures. Informal agents of change consisted of additional duties, acting roles and project team leadership and were individually negotiated within the workplace team. Other managers were less aware of the importance of strategic relationship-building activities, and did not recognise how they both contributed to restructuring the new work activity and reflected visually the more flexible approaches exemplified in the new organisational values.

The analysis identified three emerging types of managers in respect of their relationships with their employees. These varied managerial responses to relationship-building were derived from the responses provided by the employees as they described their experiences of the change process, their managers, and their engagement with formal and informal changes at work. The three types of managers as change agents are detailed below, and depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Manager change agent leadership attributes

[Figure 1: Manager change agent leadership attributes](#)

The **Type one** manager tended to use relationship-building strategies and actively sought to build strong relationships with all the employees in their teams.³⁶ Thus in being active both as managers and as leaders,

whenever new mandates arose, their whole team tended to give an equivocal willing response to the informal “additional duties and projects”. There was almost universal inclusion of staff within the informal agencies of change, dispersing the value of employee flexibility through the team by using work activity as a participative demonstration of this value. In dealing with their employees, such managers tended to recognise the boundary between formal authorities over the employee, and to respect the point at which employees’ discretion began. Negotiation was a major tool⁹, and evident to staff as a pattern of engagement. To negotiate the areas beyond their formal authority, the managers tended to use their leadership charisma and influence to gain staff trust and to motivate staff individually. Their staff individually responded positively, and voluntarily cooperated with the informal mandates. The employees and teams in turn, tended to work better together, to cooperate willingly, optimise their productivity, and to report a positive “experience of change”.

In this study it was evident that another set of managers applied the same approach but did so either with less ability or more restrictively. These **Type two** managers used a selective approach to relationship-building, by strengthening alliances with only particular employees and using a different approach with those outside their preferred domain. They had a tendency to consistently fall back upon their stronger alliances when new work mandates arose and ran their team with a differential approach. Those in favour were included in negotiated outcomes, while those outside the circle were subject to directives, rather than dialogue. Team harmony could be shattered when only some members appeared chosen for the “developmental” additional duties and projects, while others in the team tended to get the “routine and repetitive” tasks. What worked at the start, gradually created a two-tier team, which demonstrated that some were valued more than others and that the new discourse of flexibility was being inequitably distributed. While such a manager would have a clique of staff who cooperated with his/her critical informal demands, others would be assigned non-critical and less demanding informal tasks. While the “chosen” reported positive perceptions of their manager, and experienced their manager also as a leader, the rest reported negative perceptions of the same manager and reported poor relational skills. Thus, positive and negative experiences of change could arise from two employees who experienced similar formal experiences, but dissimilar informal experiences of change. Managers who practised this approach exuded inconsistency in their relations with staff and this not only created subsequent relational problems but also failed to role model the new values of the organisation²⁶.

The findings also produced evidence that some managers were operating in a third way. These **Type three** managers preferred to minimise their relationship-building, and instead dominantly applied formal approaches to managing both the formal and informal agencies of change, using authoritative delegation networks. This may have been because of their limited managerial experience, their inability to change to a more flexible style of working, or simply a reaction against yet another public sector change process. For these managers, their strategy was to use formal management authority to achieve the mandates of their formal and informal portfolio. They tended to be unaware of the difference between managing and leading employees. They saw all of their actions in terms of using their authority to get things done and invested little energy in the everyday discussion of work and in trying to influence their staff. They also tended to fail to distinguish between the formal and informal participation of employees. The use of formal authority to pressure employees to take on roles, which should have been negotiated and where staff had discretion about such allocations, set the stage for clashes between management and staff, and prepared the scene for a series of unpleasant experiences with change for both parties. These managers modelled an authoritarian approach to change and work allocation and failed to see that their actions were contrary to the new values of flexibility within the organisation. They saw flexible responses to the new organisational challenges as something that could be forced and made to happen, and yet failed to recognise the irony of their actions and assumptions.

Their employees in turn began to question the extent to which they could be held accountable for informal roles that they did not volunteer for and indeed in many cases actively resisted. When no satisfactory answers could be found, tensions between the team and these Type three managers escalated. The perceptions of informality, voluntariness and even spontaneous fun that other leaders were able to generate from organisational change remained lost to both these Type three managers and their subordinates. In addition to creating friction-based work processes, the work relationships tended to degenerate and further

corrode what was already very low relationship capital within the team. Naturally some employees looked around at the experiences in other teams, with some moving to more equitable and flexible teams. In fact the staff movement between departments, locations and managers became an effective barometer of a manager's capability and culture change leadership. The flexible approaches of the Type one managers attracted staff from other areas and retained staff who valued the more fluid environment and the vibrancy of the team. This categorisation of manager behaviours was developed from a large sample taken across a large organisation over a significant period of time. The majority of managers were operating within the Type two behaviours, with less than a third of managers maintaining the traditions of Type three transactional mode management; with a minority of Type one managers the exception. These managerial behaviours generated a change in the culture and led the organisation towards a different interactional dynamic where changing roles and responsibilities were the norm.

Discussion

This managerial typography, while unique to this particular organisational study, supports and extends several other well-known managerial models. Leader member exchange theory (LMX) or vertical dyad linkage theory³⁸, emphasises the importance of the exploring the different leader-subordinate relationships in order to understand how a manager is operating. The typology emerging from this study supports this assertion and indicates how the different relational patterns established by managers define their leadership activity. Blake and Moulton³⁹, in their managerial grid position managers according to their emphasis upon people or production. The typology emerging from this study echoes their modelling with the Type three managers focused mainly on production, Type two managers trying to blend the two managerial imperatives of production and people, and the Type one managers achieving the ultimate goal of the "team" culture. Similarly, the typology also reflects the transition in organisational culture noted by Likert⁴⁰, with the Type three managers languishing in traditional authoritative modes, Type two managers exploring consultative behaviours, while Type one managers introduce a more genuinely participative pattern of staff engagement. In addition, the outcomes of this study reflect the work of McGregor⁴¹, who proposed that managers base their organisational behaviour on theory X, that the team is inherently lazy, or theory Y, that the team is full of potential. In this case Type three managers base their actions on theory X while Type one managers base their actions on theory Y.

Conclusion

In Study One we identified two types of safety culture change agents and categorised them within the definitions of transactional and transformational leaders. In Study Two we presented portraits of managers who fell within three categories: Type one had strong relationships with all subordinates; Type two had selective relationships with some subordinates and Type three had minimal relationships with all their subordinates. The purpose of this paper is to combine the conceptualisation that these two studies have produced and to add to our understanding of how managers may play a positive role in changing safety cultures within organisations. This paper has established the critical nature of the safety culture to each manager, the employees and the organisation. Our intention is to draw up a framework that those orchestrating a change in organisational safety cultures can use to support their managers, drive the change and reduce incidents in the workplace. Our framework, built from the evidence of these two studies, develops a more detailed description of managerial leadership attributes and their relationship to culture change, and specifically safety culture change.

In Figure 1 we display this new modelling. By combining the conceptualisation from the two studies and the key literature in the field we have produced a developed typography modelling of the leadership attributes managers exhibit as change agents. Type one is the ideal manager who facilitates the culture change process using transformational leadership abilities. This manager develops strong relationships with their own subordinates to guide and nurture them through the change process. As Caldwell suggested the manager who sits at the heart of the change process has a pivotal role in guiding the change process.³⁶ This manager identifies the strengths and weaknesses and personal goals of subordinates, tailoring them to the

emerging goals of the new culture. This manager leads by example; “walking the talk” and asks those under his management to “do as I do”. Ford et al maintain that it is the specific actions or inactions of a manager to facilitate change that have a direct effect on the resultant culture.²⁹ Change is viewed as a process that both manager and employees negotiate and shoulder together. Conversely the Type three manager uses force to enact culture change through sanctions and penalties. This manager does not develop relationships with any of the employees who report directly to him. This manager is unaware of employees’ personal goals and does not provide opportunities for improvement. This manager does not lead by example and demands of those under his management to “do as I say” The change process is viewed as a ‘top down’ mandate that is resisted by employees as no consultation or communication is forthcoming. Managing acts appear to be detached from the values of the change process.

The Type two manager sits between Types one and three, but she/he is often on a continuum using both forms of strategy from time to time. What sets the Type two manager apart from either of the other two is that this type of manager selectively applies both strategies to smaller selected groups of the work team. Some of the practices are transformational as the manager develops relationships with selected employees. However, this is viewed as divisive and creates poor morale among employees who have not been selected. The personal strengths and personal goals of these selected employees are rewarded and addressed; whereas the other employees are ignored. This manager applies selective leadership and asks those under his management to “do as I say, not as I do”. Change is viewed as a confused drawn out process with some employees in support and others in strong resistance. It is likely that these managers’ approach to change will begin positively, but will also sow the seeds of nepotism within their workplace, and their two-tier team will increasingly reflect the managers’ attitude to change, with the selected few in support and the marginalised others ceasing to move with the flow.

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