

'Lessons for Health & Safety Practitioners from Organisational Development (OD)'

Les Wright, Assistant Director Human Resources, Workplace Wellbeing,
University of Birmingham



Our Guest Speaker, Les Wright went on to give a very interesting lecture drawing upon the social science discipline of organisational development (OD), and outlining how safety professionals might be able to influence organisations. Les has been Assistant Director of Human Resources responsible for Workplace Wellbeing at the University of Birmingham over the past year. He has also worked in consultancy for a number of

years both here and abroad and was at Sheffield Hallam University in charge of H&S for 8 years.

Human Resources & Organisational Development:

Les has long been observing how organisations engage with health and safety, and has developed a model to challenge the culture within organisations, believing that there are specific rules and expertise to apply. Les maintains that there is a relationship between Human Resources (HR) and OD, and that OD is in fact, a hybrid. Les commented that there is no single set of dominant beliefs across the field of OD. And if we look at history, we can see how OD becomes more and more relevant. As far as health and safety is concerned, Les believes that OD has a shared heritage with health and safety.

Management Styles & OD:

Insecurity, in terms of management style, (e.g. Taylor's Scientific Management), came in with car manufacturing, and the old models espoused by Harvard Business School etc. were soon shown to be ineffective, suggesting that we need to look beyond the obvious. Economists of the 50's and 60's looked at issues scientifically whereas lately, human factors have been introduced and people have been put at the 'centre'.

Maslow, Herzberg and McGregor:

Reference was made to the theorists Maslow, Herzberg and McGregor whose tools help us to understand behavioural characteristics, and Les explained that it

was necessary to challenge these theories and not to believe in them absolutely. He questioned whether we, as H&S professionals, have followed these early thinkers as far as we should/could? We make legislation, we tell workers what it is and we expect change to take place. But is this really what happens?

One very good tool, in Les's opinion, is HSG65 which provides a good fit between H&S and OD and this, plus HSG48 and the Management Regulations are useful references to assist the safety professional in making a difference.

Organisational Culture:

Organisations are more complex and dynamic than they first appear, with formal and informal structures (which aren't written down) and their own culture. A point made by the audience was that cultural values cannot be imposed but that they evolve. Attempts to impose cultural values can sometimes become counter-productive. And job descriptions do not necessarily reflect the roles that people perform. In fact their rigidity can often stifle the flexibility required in today's environment. The rapid development of some organisations means that the structured processes are sometimes unable to keep pace and can become out of date. This leads to "chaos management".

Organisational Change & Leadership:

It is often the worker and not the manager that determines the fate of organisation's, and the world of work is likely to change dramatically over the next 10 years with people expecting to have greater autonomy. Relationships will change between the employer and the employee and either for the better or for worse! Les suggested that leadership will be very important and that good safety leaders are critical to the organisation. Leaders will come and go but it will be important to invest in the followers, to distribute power and to appreciate the workers' perspective.

'Authentic Safety Leadership':

Les went on to talk about 'Authentic Safety Leadership' and the mantra 'Do as I Say, not as I do'. This is where the manager claims that he stands for good safety practice and then goes on to the building site without a hard hat.

The benefits of Safety Committees and risk assessments are well known but people need to understand them and apply them in context as they relate to their own roles.

Resistance to Change:

Les suggested that resistance to change may be something that is:

- Behavioural
- Emotional
- Political

It nevertheless needs to be understood and countered. Although there is often a resistance to change, it is necessary for survival. Facilitators of change or 'change agents', through process management, will help people to diagnose and solve their own problems in the future. And this 'self-diagnosis' and self-

resolution approach is far more successful than if it is left for the health and safety professional to identify the problems and implement the solutions alone.

Double Loop Learning:

Les said that we need to challenge underlying assumptions. He referred to **PLAN DO CHECK ACT** and with double loop learning you don't fall into the trap of thinking that you know it all. You challenge, check, reflect etc.

Stress:

Social scientists are now aware of phenomena that are difficult to measure or prove but which may be making the organisation dysfunctional, such as work related stress and how it affects an individual. Everyone will have a different experience and react to internal and external stimuli in a way that is unique to them.

It should be remembered that behaviour at work is an extension of life that takes place within organisations. We need to understand people's motivations, give them respect and enable them to collectively resolve issues.

Command and Control Model:

It is now believed that the command and control model probably doesn't represent the most effective form of leadership, but we cannot dismiss it as in emergency situations this is the best method. However, to attain the right balance in the future, we need to blend the transactional and the transformational ways of leadership.

Members' Questions

David Hughes, Honorary BHSEA Member, commented that culture is key. David reflected on his own work experiences and his personal insights. David believes that the partnership between the worker and the manager is vital to forming a positive organisational culture. He said that we should never underestimate the value of simply talking to workers on the shop floor, and using it as a means of finding solutions. Les agreed with David and added that engaging with people on an individual level is crucial for good safety management.

Anu Spratley, EHS Manager at Cathedral Hygiene, mentioned the WISH (Waste Industry Safety and Health <http://www.hse.gov.uk/waste/wish.htm>) Forum, has developed a leadership tool. Anu said that she could see the similarities here regarding leadership and engagement.

George Allcock, BHSEA Council Member, asked about the value of formal management systems e.g. 18001 and 14001. Les suggested that these systems provide a formal framework that can be used to take that organisation to somewhere that it wants to be.

Tim thanked Les for his excellent presentation and wished him the very best with his dissertation.