



The Importance of Board Leadership for Health and Safety

Hello and welcome to our latest newsletter. The last time I wrote to you, I covered the important topic of the Normalisation of Deviation, and I was delighted with the feedback I received on its usefulness. If you didn't have the chance to read it, you can do just that by clicking [here](#). The key point in that article was ensuring that the right approach to health and safety is embedded throughout an organisation, from top to bottom, and continuously reviewed, so bad habits never become an accepted practice. As with most corporate responsibilities, it starts at the very top, so today I'm going to focus on just how critical it is for those in the boardroom to truly own health and safety. It can never just be a tick box exercise; it has to be much more.

Protecting the health and safety of employees and members of the public is an essential part of risk management and must be led by the board. Any failure to meaningfully include health and safety as a key business risk in board decisions can have serious and often devastating consequences. There are far too many examples of where failure has been rooted in a lack of leadership, often resulting in large fines, imprisonment and disqualification for board members.

The costs of poor health and safety

Suffice to say there are many, most of which you will no doubt be aware of. Significantly, according to the Health & Safety Executive, a worker is fatally injured almost every working day. Whilst the human cost is all too apparent, the cost for organisations, their reputations and their future success is often not given the due consideration and upfront proactivity it requires. It is no exaggeration to say that poor health and safety can often result in a business ceasing to trade. Yet, rather than view it as a necessity, health and safety in its best form, can be an enabler.

The benefits of good health and safety

We are all aware that the very words health and safety have, for so long, been tarnished with negative connotations. Yet, ironically, it is anything but. It's actually a tool for leadership and the board to drive good business performance. With the right policies, monitoring and reporting, its benefits include:

- Reduced costs and risks: employee absence and turnover rates are lower

- Fewer incidents: a greater focus means fewer accidents and less legal action
- Reputation: providing a far greater standing among suppliers and partners
- Increased productivity: employees are healthier, happier and more motivated

Asking questions

One of the fundamentally important parts of good governance is to ask questions. In my experience, the best boardrooms challenge and ensure that every element of a subject has been interrogated and provisioned for properly. Interestingly, asking questions is a method I like to take when I meet with board members to understand their approach to health and safety. Here's just a few of them that help the process:

- Do any of your behaviours as a leader suggest, even unintentionally, that fatalities or injuries are acceptable and part of doing business?
- Do your systems and processes help you comply with the spirit of the law to protect health and safety, or are they there to simply demonstrate compliance with the letter of the law?
- What leading metrics do you track to ensure that your injury prevention mechanisms are robust?
- Does your company maintain a sense of vulnerability to accidents or is it becoming complacent?

I think the last question is critical. Complacency, much like the normalisation of deviation, is the enemy of best practice. There's no doubt that board meetings are often intensive sessions with a lot on their agendas. It's all too easy to accept that things are fine because a report and the data



says so, and not really dive into the detail. But do they show the real story? Have they been sugar coated? Can you unequivocally say you know they represent the true and accurate picture? Whilst data and clear reporting is unquestionably needed, you're only really likely to find the answers to these questions and seek assurance away from the boardroom table.

Beyond the boardroom

Whilst the importance of health and safety being a standing agenda item in any board meeting should never be underestimated, what happens outside of this is where the real weight lies. I have no doubt that being seen on the shop floor, evaluating practices (and of course following them yourself) and constantly asking questions is a good way to demonstrate both the overall importance of health and safety and that it is a core value for leaders.

Many organisations also appoint a health and safety champion from the board, who makes it part of their role to constantly check on practices, track previously agreed actions and see for themselves, first hand, that what the board report says is a true reflection of what happens on the shop floor. Perhaps, if you make this a regular activity, you can take a new board colleague each time, further enhancing their knowledge and assurance. You may also consider a separate health and safety committee who are able to meet more regularly than the full board, ensuring complacency never becomes part of an organisation's approach.

This also has the added benefit of not allowing creep between board meetings. All too often, a discussion is had during a meeting, with actions set out, and then the next meeting comes around and leaders find that, for some reason, the action has not progressed. Someone will need to check what's happening and report back at the next meeting. This can often spiral and before you know it six months has passed without anything really changing.

A true health and safety culture

When it comes to your people, ensuring they know how much importance you place on health and safety truly embeds its value. When you recruit, consider making previous health and safety performance part of the process. When you carry out appraisals, they should include an assessment of the individual's contribution to health and safety, further reinforcing the importance you and the organisation place on it. All this adds up to show that more

or less every decision made, should be done so with a view to the health and safety implications. It becomes your culture.

It's more than just making sure no-one is killed

One final point that's worth making is that, in my experience, a good number of boards put far too much weight on what might cause a fatality and ignore the fact that issues like mental health and disease are also concerns for health and safety. It's not as visible as things that present a clear and present danger, but that doesn't mean they can be ignored. Putting practices in place that look beyond what your eyes can immediately see is undoubtedly the right approach.

In conclusion

It's clear that health and safety is something that needs to be very high up on the leadership agenda. It cannot ever become something that just needs to be done. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Proactive leadership that embeds the right culture and the right checks and balances is not only morally correct, it also helps create a business with valued employees and one that is sustainable for years to come.

PS. Please familiarise yourself with the Institute of Directors and Health & Safety Executive guidelines for board members and directors. It's an incredibly useful document to help you ensure you are knowledgeable in all of your responsibilities. You can find it by clicking [here](#).



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