

Developing a leadership behaviours programme

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ABSTRACT

Highways England has engaged in an ambitious evidence-based programme to address the behaviours of their leadership teams with regards to health and safety. The training provides them with a tool kit to deliver more effective safety leadership. This paper will explore how the programme was developed and what decisions were taken to ensure the content was effective.

KEYWORDS

Health and safety, leadership, behavioural safety

Introduction

Highways England has produced an ambitious 5-year plan to deliver significant improvements in its health and safety performance. 122 separate actions were identified in the plan. Action 5 identified the need to develop a health and safety leadership and behavioural safety programme to support the key facets of a positive safety culture. Elements should include:

- Defining the safety behaviours expected at all levels: senior leaders, management and operators.
- Safe Behaviour Discussions, to correct unsafe behaviours and reinforce positive behaviours.
- Health and Safety Vision Statements, to help the business understand the health and safety focus.
- Establishing a ‘Just Culture’ Model which balances learning from incidents with accountability and helps to establish a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The aspiration to develop a Just Culture was part of a wider change, as the Highways Agency moved from being a Government Agency to become Highways England, an organisation entirely separate from central Government.

Eurocontrol defines a Just Culture as “a culture in which front-line operators and others are not punished for actions, omissions or decisions taken by them which are commensurate with their experience and training, but where gross negligence, wilful violations and destructive acts are not tolerated.”

There are many strands in the development of a Just Culture. One of the most important is to explain to leaders in the organisation what a Just Culture might look like and provide these leaders with the tools to support the development of a Just Culture.

The organisation decided that a training programme, targeted at ‘leaders’ would be one of the tools to deliver the Just Culture message and to drive organisational change.

The course

Highways England decided to develop a bespoke training course that would be delivered to all 'leaders' within the business, regardless of their seniority or role. The organisation recognised that leaders were drawn from all levels of the organisation and had a variety of roles and responsibilities. The course had to be specific and engaging, it needed to encourage and support behaviour change, and it had to meet the needs of the business as outlined in the 5-year plan to "deliver an organisation that is safer to work in today than yesterday, whilst tomorrow will be safer than we are today". The challenge was that many of the health and safety courses that the organisation identified were modelled on the idea that managers need to know about health and safety law, how to undertake risk assessments or how to implement very specific behavioural safety programmes containing ideas that were subject to copyright.

Highways England wanted to produce a course that would allow leaders to identify and explore what good looks like, to understand the practicalities of behavioural safety and to go away with a tool kit that they could use back on the day job immediately after the training. It was clear that delegates would also require support post-course to implement some of the techniques and that rate of change might well be slow.

The organisation recognised that the function of training is to change behaviours, so delegates had to leave the course and do something different as a result. The success of the course would be measured by how effectively Highways England was able to deliver a just culture. The organisation also has an ambitious set of reactive targets around minimising injury to anyone affected by its undertakings. The course needed to contribute to that target also.

Ultimately, the course needed to become embedded in the organisation, delivered to a high standard by Highways England colleagues, and be sufficiently flexible that as things change, the core principles might remain, but the course itself could evolve.

Design

We considered four sources of information when designing the course. The first was a literature search of both primary sources (research papers on what is effective) and secondary (grey) sources such as textbooks and magazine articles. We also interviewed various professionals in organisations who were similar to Highways England or who were running health and safety leadership training programmes. Thirdly, we reviewed publicly available material on commercial training and leadership programmes in health and safety. Finally, we consulted with the people who would have to attend the course within Highways England to canvass their views and to make sure that whatever we produced would deliver.

More than 30 organisations and over 120 academic papers contributed when defining the content of the training course. A condition of organisations participating in our study was that they would remain anonymous. The organisations were located in Europe, the Far East and USA. They shared common characteristics in terms of size, complexity, use of contractors, type of risks faced, etc.

We required a minimum of eight of the nine common characteristics¹ to be true before we included them in the study.

Apart from the external organisations, we conducted one-to-one interviews with all the organisation's executives. We interviewed a range of leaders and ran a series of workshops

¹ The characteristics were: make extensive use of contractors; engaged in construction projects; employ people who work alone for long periods; staff regularly interact with the public; use deployed resource; operate multiple sites; manage dynamic situations; are regulated; have staff exposed to significant risk (reasonably foreseeable worst case impact one or more fatalities in multiple tasks).

involving in excess of 250 delegates looking at behaviours in one part of the business to gain an insight into some of the challenges we faced.

We distilled the attributes of effective leaders that appeared most relevant to Highways England. This was based on a review covering domains such as healthcare, oil and gas, and construction. Barling et al (2002), Cooper et al (2005) and Nielsen and Eid (2011) provide typical examples. Our aim was to provide a range of tools to support the development of each attribute. This would allow leaders to review their strengths and weaknesses and to develop a more effective approach to delivering health and safety leadership.

We recognised that there were three overarching characteristics of effective leaders. Firstly, they needed to be authentic. Leaders needed to develop a sense of trust in their colleagues. They needed to be seen as transparent and self-aware. They also needed to be transactional, that is, they are able to effectively supervise, deliver compliance by ensuring that their team understands the ‘rules’ and that these rules are followed. Finally, they must be transformational, that is, they drive change, promote a positive culture and encourage others to develop from followers into leaders. It was apparent that all three characteristics needed to be applied in an organisation that was ‘just’. The development of leaders who could deliver change within the organisation was very dependent upon the organisation’s willingness and ability to develop a Just Culture.

There was a strong emphasis on:

- Personal commitments: leaders needed to be encouraged to make personal commitments that were shared with colleagues. The organisation needed to commit to providing additional support to individuals if they needed this to deliver their commitment.
- Leadership (safety) tours: leaders needed to be visible. The safety tour must represent a way of engaging with the workforce and cannot rely upon the leader understanding the intricacies of every safe system of work. The leader needs to be engaging and enquiring, and there must be a way of using the information gleaned on the safety tour to drive improvements.
- Training: being an effective leader is not an intuitive skill. You can train to become a leader. As one commentator noted: “If it were not possible to train leaders, what has the British Army been doing for the last 300 years?”
- Organisational support: you cannot train leaders unless the organisation allows them to lead. The organisation must be capable of learning and changing.
- Identifying and solving problems: leaders must be given tools to allow them to identify and solve health and safety problems.
- Creating meaningful metrics for leadership qualities: effective Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) around health and safety leadership can help drive the right behaviours. KPIs that measure the wrong things can have a very negative effect such as driving misreporting and under reporting (see the Baker Panel report (2007) of BP’s refinery explosion at their Texas refinery. This cites a lack of understanding about how KPIs were used: “If companies are not measuring *safety performance* effectively and using those data to continuously improve, they will likely be left in the dark about their safety risks.” (Ponting (2012))
- Engagement of all stakeholders: a leader within an organisation as complex as Highways England might need to engage and lead other stakeholders such as those in the supply chain, road users, or other interested parties.
- Communication and collaboration: improving the skills of leaders around health and safety communication and collaboration is important.
- Overarching values and a clear vision: we must ensure that all leaders understand the direction of travel, what values we believe to be true and what our ultimate aim is. It is best

if this aim is not anodyne and can be challenged to promote different thinking about how health and safety can be most effectively delivered.

We reviewed publicly available training materials, including training in safety leadership for leaders, executives, operational managers and line supervisors. The content of such courses seemed to emphasise the importance of bespoke rather than off-the-shelf training and ensuring that the training is supported within the organisation. Each training course had a series of Unique Selling Points (USPs) often supported by a copyrighted approach to intervention or measuring safety culture or climate.

Finally, we produced a draft content that we presented to a wide number of Highways England personnel and to a smaller number of Highways England contractors (we ran sessions on the content at workshops attended by more than 200 Highways England leaders and more than 40 contractors).

As the training was central to the 5-year plan, there was a consensus on the themes of the training and a lot of views on what the training could not be. Although based in the classroom, it had to be very engaging and practical, and there was considerable concern about the tendency to produce didactic and autocratic training with limited interaction with delegates and no room for discussion. There was concern that the organisation was very diverse and its risk profile varied from directorate to directorate, and also that unless the most senior leaders in the business engaged, then no matter how good the training was, it would not be effective.

After a widespread consultation exercise, we recognised that we needed to offer a one-day version of the training for leaders in lower risk environments. In July 2017 we produced an e-learning package that flags the leadership programme and is used for all new entrants and those promoted to leadership roles.

Based on this four -step process, we were able to produce a draft content for the training and agreed that we would run a live pilot, allowing delegates the opportunity to comment after each session and to help direct us to produce a more effective end product.

Content

We identified three broad themes:

1. **Access:** provide leaders with information and tools that increased their knowledge and allowed them to practice understanding what drives behaviour, who is accountable for health and safety, what we mean by safety culture and climate, and tools to measure and improve it.
2. **Manage:** understand how to identify and describe health and safety risk; be able to prioritise and communicate about risk to other stakeholders; measure and reward effective health and safety performance.
3. **Relate:** understand leadership styles and attributes; develop and share a vision for health and safety leadership; improve communication about behaviours, vision and leadership.

It was clear that we needed to emphasise the overarching vision for Highways England to develop a Just Culture and that the tools and techniques we taught would have to allow leaders to deliver a Just Culture to their teams.

Our original lesson plan envisaged a week-long course, however it became apparent that this was impractical, so we structured the course as a three-day session with a gap between Day 2 and Day 3 of at least four weeks.

Structure

The course was designed to be as andragogic as possible. We were conscious of the audience and the need to support adult learning in the most effective learning environment possible. The course was built around a series of exercises and videos that allowed delegates to familiarise themselves with the main tools and challenged their assumptions about how safety leadership should be delivered.

The themes of Day 1 were around leadership versus management: the attributes of great leaders; what good looks like; accountabilities to deliver; a model of behavioural safety; and a practical examination of safety climate and culture and what a Just Culture would look like.

Day 2 developed ideas about health and safety risk: vision and values; errors and accidents; and developing a robust understanding of what to do when things go wrong. We required all delegates to make a commitment to do something different to improve leadership in their part of the business, which was written in the form of a specific action. We recorded the action and followed up after about three weeks to see how the delegates were progressing, and if they needed additional support.

The gap between days 2 and 3 allowed us to follow up individual course delegates by email, phone or face-to-face. This allowed us to see how easy it was to use the tools in the workplace, to determine if additional support was required and to identify which tools were viewed as the most important by delegates.

Day 3 began with a review of what worked and what didn't in the workplace. We then ran sessions on safety tours, improving engagement, dynamic risk and finally, on wellbeing. We concluded in the same way as we did in Day 2 with a commitment to act. Again, three to four weeks after the end of Day 3, we followed up delegates to see what worked and whether additional support was required.

Findings

We ran the pilot course in April 2016. Two trainers, both of whom were experienced in delivering adult learning, presented the course. One was an expert in health and safety, the other in human factors and human behaviour. This allowed delegates access to trainers who could speak authoritatively about some of the issues raised during the training, as well as knowing how to find the answers to questions that were more complex.

It quickly became apparent that delegates were uncomfortable with the accountabilities section of the training. They were conscious of the change in legislation and sentencing guidelines as well as the Crown Censure and wanted to learn more. This became the least interactive part of the course. It also occupied considerably longer than the originally designated 30-minute slot. It was clear that the Crown Censure was a significant driver of attendance on the course (as may have been intended when issuing the Censure?). We also found that delegates were able to share a lot of ideas and materials that allowed us to tailor the material even more. Videos that illustrated main teaching points were produced and delegates were happy to share interesting challenges as to why and how people behave, such as the recovery of an unconscious owl from a busy motorway or dealing with two sisters with profound behavioural problems on a fast-flowing carriageway. These examples and videos allowed us to bring the course to life. We also found that some of the tools landed particularly well with delegates and seemed to meet a need that the delegates had.

There was little resistance to the idea of the training lasting over three days. Some of the most senior leaders were the most supportive. One director attended the training twice and was present on each day of subsequent training in his region. Many delegates were surprised by the approach to the training and the emphasis on leaving the session and having an action to do something.

Conclusions

We were able to adopt a very user-centred approach to the training programme. This was supported by an organisation that had a hunger to develop an evidence-based programme that supported delegate learning and promoted behaviour change.

It is clear that the issue of behavioural safety and leadership is exercising a lot of minds. Whilst we identified common themes and ideas, there is no clear, single 'right' way.

We deliberately did not adopt a uniform model or approach to the main ideas, steering away from any material that could not be freely used by the organisation. We are now beginning the process of cascading the training for delivery by other Highways England colleagues.

We continue to flex and develop the course as we are presented with more examples and challenges. If there is one overall conclusion it is that developing a Just Culture is a significant challenge that requires considerable effort – in both resource terms as well as adjusted thinking. We are starting to see measureable improvements in some of the lag indicators but have yet to undertake a Kirkpatrick Level 4 evaluation to assess how well we are embedding the tools and techniques and how people have changed. A review and evaluation of the training course is contained in Philp and Heaton (2018).

References and further information

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