

Leading behaviours in Highways England

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ABSTRACT

As part of a 5-year health and safety plan, Highways England has embarked upon an ambitious leadership and behavioural safety Programme. We provided leaders with a wide range of tools to try when they went back to work. We found that the most popular tool in these leaders' action plans is COM-B, a model used to explain behaviours. Leaders also adopted other tools to support the development of a just culture, improvements in wellbeing, and mapping risk at a local level. The training programme has improved the self-evaluations of key management areas and appears to have driven safer behaviours. Overall, we have found that if leaders are equipped with tools and understanding of the problems they face, are followed up, and are offered on-going support, they are willing to make real changes to the way they work and approach health and safety.

KEYWORDS

Behaviour, safety, leadership

Introduction

Following the 2012 death of a traffic officer, Highways Agency (now Highways England) received a Crown Censure from the HSE. Highways England has since embarked on an ambitious step change in the way they approach safety across the organisation. In order to tackle the behavioural and supervisory issues that were highlighted through this incident, Highways England has turned its attention to behaviours, leadership and culture within their organisation. These themes are heavily represented within its '5-Year Plan', a strategic outline of how the organisation intends to reach its health and safety objectives between 2015-2020.

Highways England developed an accredited training programme based on providing leaders at all levels in the organisation with the tools to get better in terms of delivering effective leadership in health, safety and wellbeing. The course was accredited by the International Institute of Risk and Safety Management and has been running since April 2016. The delegates all have leadership roles in Highways England and are required to attend as part of their commitment of health, safety and wellbeing. The programme combines traditional health and safety with modern techniques and an applied approach to influencing human behaviour. It covers major elements of health and safety practice, techniques that can be applied back in the workplace and a wide range of tools based on evidence as to what works in practice.

The course is designed to drive behaviour change. As such, delegates are required to commit to make a change in their work. The programme's success relies upon the willingness of leaders – operational and non-operational – to make such changes and challenge perceptions of their role in health and safety.

The problem

The Crown Censure identified failures in supervision and embedded unsafe behaviours. It was clear that organisation-wide change was necessary to prevent another tragedy. However, in such a vast,

Days 1 and 3 Leadership Quiz

At the start of the course, delegates complete a short ten-question ‘leadership quiz’. Developed with Highways England, it contains ten topics covered throughout the course and asks delegates to rate their own confidence in each topic out of ten. It is a reflective exercise of their own competencies, rather than an evaluation of the organisation. Delegates are also asked to provide evidence through an example or supporting comment. The quiz is then repeated on Day 3 to assess progress.

Table 1 – Leadership Quiz totals data

	Day 1	Day 3
Total mean score	66.32	76.86
/100		

Table 1 shows the mean total scores of the quiz (out of 100) on Day 1 and Day 3 increased by 1.54.

The mean score for every one of the ten statements increased by a minimum of 0.77 (max. +1.23) between Days 1 and 3. The average difference was +1.07. These figures are encouraging as they show that delegates’ perceptions of their understanding have improved across all ten areas during the course. The areas that showed the greatest improvement were leading risk management and knowledge of own risks, understanding accountability, and leading culture change.

We have tested the results using the non-parametric sign test (2-tailed, $p=0.01$). The p -value is 0.0016. This is significant at $p<0.01$. This implies that we can be confident that the course successfully improved the perception of delegates’ ability to manage (as identified by the ten topics).

Action Plans and Follow-ups

On Day 2 delegates were required to make a SMART commitment to do something differently as a result of the course so far. They were then asked to write it down and verbally share with the rest of the group what that commitment entailed. The data was captured through photographs of these action plans. There were common themes within these plans, with the most popular themes being behaviour (48% of plans), culture change (42%) and risk (37%), respectively. Delegates were followed up approximately three weeks later by a phone call or email prior to their Day 3. The majority of those who responded were happy to be contacted (although this is likely self-selecting) and felt positive about their progress.

This was repeated on Day 3, and delegates were asked to form a new plan. The same procedure was followed in terms of sharing and photographing the action plans, but this time delegates were able to opt in to additional follow-up communication if they wished. When this was made non-compulsory, 64% of delegates still requested on-going phone calls, suggesting they felt a benefit of the support. On Day 3, the most popular themes were wellbeing (47% of plans), behaviour and engagement respectively.

Resolution of the problem

Through this approach we have seen that leaders at multiple levels in a complex business are willing and able to make effective changes to their safety leadership, and that the tools we provide them with can become embedded in the organisation. We are seeing a fall in the Accident Frequency Rate of the area that was an early adopter of the programme and where specific personalities have committed to and pushed the programme personally. One particular example involved a leader gathering together the ‘worst performing’ (in terms of reporting) of the on-road team and running workshops with them using the COM-B behavioural tool (Michie et al., 2011) to

investigate their reluctance to report. The session prompted constructive discussions about current systems and some easy fixes were agreed and have been implemented. All involved regarded the session as successful. Although we cannot make cause and effect judgements with the data we have, it is encouraging to see this correlation with 'real-terms' safety objectives. As the programme continues, we turn our attention to bedding in what we have introduced in pursuit of a lasting change across the organisation.

Impact and implications

This long-running project has shown us that employees of a large, diverse and complex organisation are willing and able to make tangible behaviour changes. When provided with tools and on-going support, leaders seem to be proactive and positive. The action plans, which are entirely the leaders' conception, show that these leaders are able to offer a valuable source of ideas for making improvements, and do not appear to show signs of inertia or aversion to change. The secret to tapping into this resource may prove to be the use of publicly-shared implementation intentions, the on-going support, or both. Alternatively, the very action of spending three days out of the business, spread over the course, may put health and safety in the spotlight in a way that these leaders have not experienced before, and provide the nudge to do something consequential.

We believe that the approach could be replicated with other organisations. Highways England's ambition to drive behavioural changes to improve health and safety is shared by many other organisations. We have demonstrated that providing a wide range of tools allows different leaders to adopt interventions that suit them or their teams. It is not clear which of the interventions are the most effective, though the most popular interventions are those that are simple to apply and outwardly intuitive. It may be that change requires the full range of tools to reflect the complexity of the problem or the personalities of the delegates.

Whether it is one component of the training or whether it is a combination of lots of tools and explicit organisational commitment, the effects of the programme have been exciting and encouraging. We are already seeing real world improvements in AFRs, there is evidence that some senior leaders have bought into the programme and evangelically driven for their teams. We have also seen some regions with very high attendance rates, with one senior leader appearing on three successive sessions. We have been able to integrate some of the tools into other initiatives within Highways England and are hoping to develop a closer relation with both contractors and other parts of the business.

Whilst we cannot make cause-and-effect judgements on the data, it is an encouraging correlation that the areas that have the highest attendance rates appear to be (reactively) performing better. The programmes continue to run within Highways England and we continue to gather data on what works and what is less effective.

It is, however, imperative that the organisation continues to support the programme and the delegates to continue to drive positive change. Organisational factors such as the locking away of resources, high staff turnover, and a lack of senior management support can derail even the most tailored and comprehensive intervention. The organisation must engage with all levels and be receptive and active in response to suggestions in order to keep up momentum. Ultimately, the successful development of a genuine just culture should ensure that capital is made available to fund reasonably practicable interventions in response to safety concerns that are risk based and evidenced.

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