Our thoughts on safety culture

Organizational silence: the best enemy of safety

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Organizational silence is a situation where important information (for example regarding safety) is available in the field but stays there, and cannot be taken into account in strategic decisions.

The mechanisms of organizational silence

Many mechanisms contribute to organizational silence. Some are psychological, some relate to how groups work, others have organizational causes.

Psychological mechanisms

When an individual is placed in a difficult situation that they cannot change, they unconsciously change their perception of the situation to make it more bearable. This is how employees that are placed in a hazardous situation, which they have no control over, can convince themselves that there is no risk. This defence mechanism can lead them to deny the hazards, and to take risks. This attitude can be encouraged by the group or even, in some cases, by the organization.

Managers can adopt similar defences, if they are faced with contradictions between the information that flows down from their senior managers, and information that flows up from the field. They can, unconsciously, break the flow of feedback upwards to protect themselves against this contradiction. By doing so, they contribute to organizational silence.

Individual psychological functioning also depends on the experience and training of each individual. The history of some employees may mean that they do not know how to process risks, and they simply do not perceive that a situation is abnormal and should be reported.

Group mechanisms

It is very difficult to be the first to provide information, make a report, or propose an idea, when you are a member of a group where silence is part of the culture – for example because of a history of very directive management.

Organizational mechanisms

Several organizational characteristics can feed organizational silence:

- **managerial illusions:** managers can believe that the situation is under control, simply because of the number of procedures. They can also believe that the only possible mechanism that can produce accidents is the failure to follow a procedure. This discourages feedback about situations where procedures are difficult or time-consuming to implement, or inadequate.
- **managers don't understand the situation in the field:** an employee will be reluctant to report a hazardous situation if the manager lacks the technical knowledge and experience needed to be able to understand the subtleties of a problem.
- **normalization of deviance:** when there are so many rules that it is impossible to follow them all, it becomes realistic to break one of them. The boundary between the normal situation and the degraded situation becomes blurred and deviations become mundane.
- **when what is prescribed is incompatible with day-to-day reality,** most actors in the field take refuge in silence. In this way,

they can maintain the room for manoeuvre they need to be able to do their job at an acceptable human cost.

- **sanctions policy:** if, in some case, reporting hazardous situations or errors is punished, it is likely that a wall of silence will soon follow. Different reactions between managers and in different situations are a particular problem.
- **lack of a response:** why continue to provide feedback if nothing is done about it? Or (which applies equally to employees) if the action that is taken is not communicated to the person who made the report?

Breaking organizational silence

If the company's actors want to fight against organizational silence and the risks it brings with it, they must tackle all of these mechanisms.

The managerial hierarchy must encourage a questioning culture: they should allow room for doubt, rather than being certain that everything is under control; stress the importance of paying attention to the detail of operations; increase management presence in the field; and encourage shared vigilance. The root causes of adverse events, which go well beyond the usual search for human error, must be identified and shared. A few key rules (the Golden Rules) that cannot be broken must be clearly identified.

To encourage employees to have confidence in their managers, the response to a reported deviation must be consistent. The company must therefore work on a clear, shared, policy of recognition and sanction (in the rare cases where this is justified). This is the challenge of developing a 'just culture'.

Various systems for reporting and processing information about deviations and hazardous situations can be put in place. Priority is given to the introduction of short loops, where the local manager collects reports, discusses them with the team, processes those that are within his or her area of responsibility, forwards others up the hierarchy, and informs the team of the response.

Senior management must welcome the feedback provided by local managers about problems that cannot be resolved locally, and provide answers.

There may also be a need for more formal reporting systems and protection mechanisms for whistle-blowers.

The fight against organizational silence implies recognizing that no individual has all of the information needed to ensure safety, and that everyone must contribute: production staff and managers, but also support services, bodies representing staff, and contractors. Disincentives to share information must be identified and addressed for each of these channels.

Particular attention must be given to the management of interfaces: when an adverse event occurs, the challenge is not to find the guilty department, but to foster transverse cooperation, with a view to the analysis and processing of the problem that arose, in order to prevent it happening again.

Ultimately, all of the components of the company's safety culture must be brought into play to prevent organizational silence.

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