

Competence – A Leap of Faith

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Introduction

A competent worker is skilled, authoritative and in control of his work. What then are the social mechanisms he needs to support him in that function? And what role does the OSH professional have in this bold new venture. McAleenan and McAleenan (2007) examined competence and the matrix of authority and discussed various emerging ideas from across the globe. The authors posited that the core tenet of competence is the natural instinct to survive and that that principle, when applied to the workforce, is threatened when a third party interferes and stymies the development process. In the US safety management standard, ANSI/ AIHA Z10 – 2005, it states “...safety responsibilities must be recognized as a part of each job at every organizational level”.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) in the 2001 occupational safety and health management systems standard stated that “The employer should have, or should have access to, sufficient OSH competence to identify and eliminate or control work-related hazards and risks and to implement the OSH management system”.

Considering the ILO and the ANSI/ AIHA Z10 statements together it could reasonably be concluded that employers are duty bound to employ competent people and to further develop that competence to meet the ongoing needs of the worker and the company. This competent assistance, often mistaken for the need for a single OSH competent person is not something that is within the realm of the few, but rather the whole. The leap of faith, therefore, is the one that realises that competence within everyone’s domain is inherent and that with the proper authority and resources it can grow to the benefit of the individual and his employer.

In building a sustainable business there can be no future for the old style OSH professional taking charge of safety matters while the ‘real work’ is carried elsewhere. Workplace operations and safety are inextricably linked and lie firmly within the province of the workforce and the management team. The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (2004), reported “...it can be concluded that OSH practitioners would gradually work themselves out of jobs as workers and management became sufficiently competent and resourced in OSH”, recognizing that the time has come to be creative about the future roles. At the World Congress on Safety and Health (McAleenan, P, 2005) and again at the Ireland IOSH 25th/ 40th Anniversary conference (McAleenan, C, 2007) the challenge to delegates was to work themselves out of a job. It is time for the worker and his employer to be sure that there are no redundant roles, creating barriers to safe working practices.

A New Social Order in the Workplace

In the early years of the 21st century the dichotomy between management and operation continues to be problematic. However, one company, Semco in Brazil, turned the economic crises of the 1990s to their advantage and, re-engineering in a way unlike everyone else, were able to create new business models and work structures that took the company from near liquidation to being one of the most successful businesses in Latin America. Semler (2003) stated that;

“Accepting that there is no such thing as a ‘special worker’ perfectly suited for one company means accepting worker individuality. And once you do that, you set the stage for making the most of that individuality by encouraging workers to tap their inner reservoir and find a balance between their aspirations and the company’s.”

Two things worked for Semco. Firstly after working with traditional departmentalised management structures, the company gave engineers their head and allowed them to explore and develop new product lines. This extended to setting up satellite units to develop, produce and market the products. Secondly, in the face of bankruptcy, workers and managers agreed to wage cuts in exchange for a greater share of the profits on condition that they too were given a free hand in approving every item of expenditure. This led to the workforce performing many roles compared to what they traditionally played; they became knowledgeable about all aspects of the company, including its finances; they made decisions about who to employ, what to buy in the supply chain, when to buy, who from, even what to manufacture, to what standards, and how it should be marketed. The company succeeded.

The success of the company was due to the second innovation, the recognition that the workforce are competent to receive and understand information about all aspects of the company, are competent to make the critical decisions about how the company is organised and run, are competent to make decisions about what is produced and how it is produced, and finally the competent workforce does not require, in fact may only succeed in the absence of a multi-layered hierarchy and its concomitant redundant functions

Sir John Egan (1998) reporting to UK's Deputy Prime Minister stated that;

“If the industry is to achieve its full potential, substantial changes in its culture and structure are also required to support improvement. The industry must provide decent and safe working conditions and improve management and supervisory skills at all levels”

What Egan was talking about was the establishment of a competent and sustainable construction industry, achieved through commitment at all levels in the industry, which means that;

- Clients and their designers work in partnership with the contracting industry, the health and safety enforcement agencies and fellow client bodies,
- Board members' commit to making safety work for all their staff and for all those affected by their work,
- Business strategies and objectives are prefaced with a commitment that goals will be achieved in a manner that does not cause harm to workers or end-users,
- Companies go beyond compliance where OSH is critical, and
- Individuals workers and employers will act as they would expect others to act, i.e. competently.

Education – A means for Social Change

In a number of Latin American countries there have been remarkable developments in how technical institutions certify their students. Labour and Education Ministries are looking towards certification processes that recognise the real and proven capacities of workers regardless of how they were acquired. In this perspective the outputs of the worker are the critical factors in determining competency, rather than the inputs.

The ILO has welcomed the analyses of competencies in Latin America and the Caribbean “as a breath of fresh air in the pedagogy of training” and recognises that along with knowledge and skills, competence includes the capacity to analyse, to solve unforeseen problems, and a commitment to the objectives of the job. Competence is more than the ability to repetitively carry out an activity with skill and to a specified standard. Properly resourced and with knowledge and understanding of what is required, it is the ability to control the work task and the environment within which it takes place to achieve a desired outcome. Remove any of the above elements and competence is compromised, even negated.

Freire, the Brazilian educator's concepts that education [in the workplace] is a dialogue between student and teacher where the student is given the tools to allow them to reach a critical consciousness of the main goals, where applied, allows education to achieve its profound purpose. In a new era of workplace education with clear and precise objectives the barriers of the past can be broken down and workers, properly educated, with the correct tools; physical and mental, can deliver a consistent and correct product without unnecessary interference.

OSH Professionals: The Final Chapter ...

OSH professionals considering their role into the future can look towards education as a means of delivering complete independence for the employer. Education in this style of approach can be a force removing the crutch that props up an ailing system.

Across the world OSH professionals are still selling products, services, training and compliance programs to ensure that safety violations are a thing of the past; so what is the problem? Certainly there is the intellectual and technological capability to ensure that these failures should not have happened, so does it mean that the issue of compliance falls to employee and management competence? It would be wrong to suggest that workers or their employers are not competent to do their job, or that employers are just plain greedy and

uncaring about their workforce. Safety properly exercised will not cost a company, rather it will reap plenty of benefits. So what prevents the exercise of competence? The most likely answer is that the person carrying out the job does not always hold the decision-making authority. There is a dichotomy between those who do the work and those who decide what is to be done and how it is to be done. In those circumstances there arises confusion at best and a direct conflict at worst between the doers and the deciders, which results in failure and that in turn leads to injury and fatality. What is important is that those OSH professionals who produce goods or deliver the services should know where the problem lies and provide guidance to their clients on these issues.

Epilogue

In a new social order where workers and employers recognise and engage with each other's competent status;

- Workers have authority, resources and responsibility for decisions that affect their livelihood,
- Education is the tool for delivering positive changes,
- Workplaces have become virtually injury-free and the OSH laws have begun to lose prominence, and
- OSH professionals having helped to guide the change then faded out.

That is the vision and the challenge for today's OSH professionals. Are you up for the challenge?

By

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14th April 2008

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