Hearts and Minds in winning the Battle of Safety Engagement

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Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) compliance is not just about management systems, or policies, it’s about employee engagement. Yet unfortunately we still see people following the old fashioned notion that a manager has to be independent, strong and stand back from his workers to get respect; otherwise they will be seen as weak and unable to control the business.

There is still a tendency to believe that knowledge is ultimate power so why should we involve others, especially those at the lower level of an organisation. However in reality it is the very opposite, top managers or leaders are those who openly engage at all levels and encourage emotional and social involvement within an organisation. It’s all about winning hearts and minds.

We have to remember that leadership is based on engagement and inspiration. Failing to recognise the basic needs of employees can and will produce negative outcomes. This is especially relevant when it comes to quality and safety performance in the workplace. Failing to engage employees will ultimately result in lack of trust and a tendency to question or view change as a negative process.

Engagement in the Workplace

There is no doubt employees will only get engaged if they feel the work environment enables them to openly participate. Employees should be inspired to come to work fully engaged. The challenge for any organisation is to create the conditions that will enable engagement to happen in a proactive manner. Safety compliance and employee engagement are top priority issues for senior managers all over the world.

In any organisation it is critical that a trenchant approach is taken in defining a policy that makes management responsible for creating conditions at work that will facilitate employee engagement. Otherwise business failure is just waiting around the corner.

Winning Hearts and Minds

The term “Winning Hearts and Minds” is well known strategy approach used by the military in many countries. In addition we see the same strategic elements within other public and governmental organisations. However the complexity of a hearts and mind approach in the commercial world is dependent on an organisations OHS maturity and present cultural understanding. It is based on simple rules of getting alignment and engagement from people, to what you want to change within an organisation.
When we look at basic human nature which is often defined as “The general psychological characteristics, feelings, and behavioural traits of humankind, regarded as shared by all humans” then we can easily associate the “Hearts and Minds” approach to management engagement. We need to appreciate the basic needs of people to relate and socially interact with others, and accept that building relationships at work is one of the general cornerstones in developing a robust safety or OHS management culture.

Managers who care about the safety of people and visibly demonstrate a caring attitude will ultimately gain the respect and trust of employees. They will be viewed as true leaders inspiring others to be motivated to perform at the best of their abilities. By managing in line with basic human needs of integration, acceptance and recognition, the working dynamics of employees can be significantly improved, helping to set the foundation of the entire organisational safety philosophy.

Transforming your organisations Safety culture

Leadership and culture are intertwined elements of a safe workplace. Adopting simple behavioural traits in line with a hearts and mind strategy you can start to transform your organisation. By taking the fundamental aspects of human nature of being involved, and feeling valued, you can and will see changes. We have often seen what 2 simple, yet powerful words “Thank You” can do to someone when it comes to an individual’s motivation, yet unfortunately those two words are not often used appropriately in the work environment.

There is no need to complicate management or employee engagement with fancy safety gimmicks or superficial promotions. It’s about making sure people are feeling valued and creating an atmosphere at work that will cultivate a safety environment and help shape behaviours of people. People do not follow safety rules just because the procedures manual say’s they should, they follow rules because they believe in them, and value the reasons behind them.

The 3E’s to winning Hearts and Minds

In order to move forward in OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) we need to ensure that we adopt the simple 3E approach, which will help us to shift people’s mind-set.

1. **Empowerment** - Giving people the authority to act and take action will build trust and ultimate respect for others in the workplace.

2. **Engagement** – Participation in decision making processes and engaging people in meetings and OHS systems development, or training delivery.
3. **Encouragement** – People need to know that they can put forward ideas and participate in the running of OHS. Encouraging employees to be open and acknowledging people’s skills and achievements.

Taking the journey of safety transformation from one level to the next can be seen as daunting for many organisations. The question of too much time and financial investment is often used as an excuse to trundle along doing the same thing and accepting risk. Yet this approach often becomes a costly commercial mistake by the organisation and can result in major losses.

It’s about identifying where you are today as far as corporate maturity and employee engagement, and then creating a realistic framework for OHS change. The priority should be given to engagement of employees around strong leadership and management involvement. By taking the “Heart and Minds” approach to employee engagement organisations can develop simple and cost effective solutions, which will generate a genuine return on investment.

**Summary**

There is no excuse for any organisation not to have safety management strategies in place within their workplace. It comes down to keeping things simple, understandable and most importantly that it encourages and expects involvement at all employee levels.

So before you start any future safety promotion or new Safety management system, take a step back and ask yourself 3 simple yet vital questions;

1. Will it engage people at all levels within the organisation?
2. Will it inspire people at all levels to make sustainable changes?
3. Will it be easy to implement and manage?

If the answer is “No” to any of the above questions then you will need to go back to the drawing board and start again. Otherwise all you end up doing is costing your organisation time and money, and achieve if lucky very minimal results.

**About the Author: Wayne J Harris**

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