Discussion

Letter to the editor regarding Management walk-arounds: Lessons from the Gulf of Mexico oil well blowout

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To the Editor,

The article by Andrew Hopkins in issue 49 of your journal claims that ‘informal auditing’ by visiting executives could have detected and prevented the disastrous explosion on the Deepwater Horizon (Hopkins, 2011).

This assertion is a theoretical possibility and it is tempting to look at the executives’ actions on that day. The author proposes that executives should have become involved in real-time engineering decisions, but this misses the point. The report of the National Oil Spill Commission (2011) cited decision making weeks and months prior amongst its root causes.

Hopkins states that executive walk arounds should include targeted informal auditing and cites healthcare as a field where walk arounds are advocated. It is worthwhile to consider what effect an auditing approach would have in this field.

The core aims of executive walk around programmes in health are to obtain information direct from care providers and improve safety culture (Frankel, 2008). The approach invites executives to ask a series of broad, open questions designed to elicit the concerns of the staff first hand. Unlike the process on the rig in question, walk arounds in health do not include any form of inspection or observational auditing.

Studies of executive walk arounds in health have shown a significant improvement in safety culture, including staff views such as “The senior leaders in my hospital listen to me and care about my concerns” (Campbell and Thompson, 2007; Thomas et al., 2005). If a surveillance component was added, it may be perceived negatively as checking up on, rather than listening to, staff. This would change the dynamic, affecting culture and at worst restricting the information provided to executives.

Open and honest feedback allows the executive to understand the effect their strategies have on safety at the frontline. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon, the health approach may have exposed the organization’s leadership earlier to the true impact of time and financial pressures on local decision-making and risk-taking. The executive are the principal staff in an organization who can manage the sources of such pressures.

Behavioural non-compliance with procedures that could lead to catastrophe should be audited, but this deserves a more structured and comprehensive auditing strategy than an infrequent, ad-hoc visit undertaken by the executive. The leadership do not need to be involved in auditing to be aware of the results.

Decision making under time and financial pressure, at the forefront of technological innovation, challenges healthcare and oil rig workers alike. Executives in such industries need to create an environment where staff feel comfortable raising their concerns and take them seriously. They should not compromise their brief dialogue with frontline staff by conducting ad-hoc audits.

References


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