Discussion

Reply to King

Andrew Hopkins

Australian National University, School of Sociology, Building 22, 0200 ACT, Australia

Justin King’s comments highlight the fact that there are conceptually two different purposes of management walk arounds that need to be distinguished, but often are not. The first is to elicit at first hand any concerns that staff may have, particularly concerns about safety. This is the purpose that King advocates. It is also something that I have advocated.1

The second purpose is to engage in some type of informal auditing, to ensure that people understand safety requirements and are complying with them. This is explicitly the purpose of many management walkarounds in the petroleum industry. It enables senior executives can get some sense of whether the more systematic processes of supervision, monitoring and auditing are having the intended effects. My article took this as a starting point and argued that if that is the purpose, then the informal auditing activity should be focussed on the control of major hazards, not just the hazards that generate relatively minor personal injuries. This distinction is known in process industries as the distinction between process safety and personal safety. It may not be particularly relevant in healthcare, although I imagine the distinction between patient safety and staff safety has certain parallels. What was happening on the Deepwater Horizon was a bit like hospital executives wandering around focussed on staff safety and ignoring completely the issue of patient safety.

Given that walkarounds can have these two distinct purposes – eliciting staff concerns and providing executives with some assurance that controls are working as intended – the question arises as to whether the two can be met simultaneously. King fears not. If he is right, senior executives should decide beforehand which is their primary purpose, and behave accordingly. However it seems to me that it is quite possible to do both on the same visit. It may even be possible to achieve both purposes in the same discussion, if executives are clear about what they are doing.

There may also be circumstances that dictate which strategy to use. For example in many multinational companies executives and workers do not have a common language and it will be impossible for executives to elicit staff concerns by talking to them. However it may still be possible to audit some of the major hazard controls that are supposed to be in place, by other means, for example by talking to more senior site staff, or simply watching what people are doing.

Finally, let me dispose of a couple of minor points. I agree that violations and mistakes by the rig crew on the day in question were not the only causes of the Deepwater Horizon accident. And I agree that casual auditing by senior managers is no substitute for more systematic auditing. I don't believe I said anything to the contrary.