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## Positive Psychology and the Company Man

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### Abstract

This discussion paper concerns the critical role leadership plays on safety behaviour in the innately hazardous environment of oil and gas installations. It has been demonstrated on a number of occasions that safety culture is a major determinant of either positive or negative safety behaviour. In turn it is clear that managers at all levels on a rig can determine the safety culture through the emphasis they place on safety in all that they do. It has also been shown that transformational and transactional leadership styles are much more effective in developing a positive safety culture than authoritarian and passive styles. Positive psychology is a relatively new concept in psychology that emphasises an optimistic view of people and the world, of possibilities and what can be done. The approach provides a number of easily learned techniques that can improve leadership style and safety culture as part of the essential war on fatalities and injuries.

### Safety Climate on Oil Rigs

It is reasonably well understood that an oil and gas rig, land or sea based, is a potentially unsafe environment in which to work. According to the International Association of Drilling Contractors there were, world wide in 2009, 32 fatalities, 1089 medical treatment incidents, 716 restricted work incidents, and 744 lost time incidents, recorded by 125 participating companies. This is a total of 2581 recordable incidents equating to a frequency rate of 6.12 per 1,000,000 person hours of work. If transportation and other activities not directly associated with drilling or production are included, then recordable incidents and fatalities rise. For example, with these inclusions there were 99 fatalities in 2009 and 94 in 2010 according to the International Association of Oil and Gas Producers. The 2010 figures include the 11 workers killed in the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and 21 killed in a plane crash in Pakistan. It is encouraging that the rates of recordable incidents in all categories have declined over recent years and certainly since the Piper Alpha and Valdez incidents in 1988 and 1989 respectively, galvanized the attention of the industry. Nonetheless, as the 2009 report from the International Association of Drilling Contractors noted, even though there has been vast improvement in safety over the years, 32 fatalities is too many.

According to Turner and Pidgeon (1997), most industrial accidents involve a causal chain of organizational conditions and human error. Decreasing the likelihood of equipment failure will and does decrease the possibility of accidents in inherently dangerous work. Similarly, improvements in HSE management systems, resources, competence training, integration of HSE into business and operational safety (Curlee et al, 2005) are essential. Hase and Phin (2012) indicate several areas that provide a focus for improving safety on onshore and offshore installations. These include: adequate resources; daily rig safety (housekeeping, state of the rig, equipment, reporting near misses); process systems (JSAs, after action review, use of observational tools, policies and procedures); quality of induction and follow-up; and continuous improvement.

Improving equipment, automation and effective policies and procedures are one thing but humans still have to use the equipment, monitor events, pay attention to data and make decisions. Hase and Phin (2012) contend that the abovementioned factors essential for rig safety are all dependent on leadership. Human factors may cause up to 70-80% of accidents in high-hazard industries (Reason, 1997). For example, it has been long recognized that men, particularly those under 30 are prone to reckless behavior. For probably biological reasons the centre in their frontal lobes responsible for making judgments about risk

is under developed (Choudhury, Blakemore and Charman, 2006). Young men tend to have more accidents than older men and certainly women of comparable age WHO, 1997). There is a situational awareness that is critical in assessing risk in potentially hazardous situations (Sneddon, Mearns and Flin, 2006) that may not be at an optimal operating level in men.

The inherent risk factor of just being a male on an oilrig has been studied by Ely and Meyerson (2010) who looked at the problem of masculinity on rigs and found that improvements in safety occurred with a lessening of 'masculine' behaviours. These behaviours are related to the tough individualism that has a long historical tradition in the industry. Tellingly, they found that it was the toughest of the group that became the leader, the driller. Masculine behavior is primarily about being a risk taker and aggressive. A role reversal is required that includes the avoidance of risks, seeking help from others, examining failure (Ely and Meyerson, 2010) and as Hase and Phin (2012) include in their safety leadership model, teamwork and continuous improvement.

Organisational climate has been identified as a critical element in the level of safety behavior, risk and accidents in workplaces including oilrigs. Of particular concern are the potentially competing imperatives of production and the need for safety that was identified by Zohar who first introduced the concept of safety climate in 1980. The demand to increase or maintain production but at the same time prevent accidents by careful planning, stopping the job if necessary and apparently slowing progress creates a cognitive dissonance in workers. According to Zohar, these cognitions are dependent on the attitudes and behavior of management and observed management commitment to safety (Reason, 1997). In fact, Zohar (2002) went on to show in a controlled study that safety behaviour improved and minor incident rates went down when managers reinforced their commitment to safety over production, as well as their safety interactions with workers.

The report on the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE), concluded that a major reason for the event was the drive towards production that caused critical warnings to be ignored. It found that employees were rewarded for productivity but not for safety. Sadly, this is not an isolated incident only found in the oil and gas industry but in other hazardous industries. Hase and Phin (2012) discovered in their research that even though the message about the value of safety might be constantly reinforced on a rig workers and contractors do not believe it. Their long-term experience is that when the chips are down production will ace safety. So, a lot needs to be done by senior management to convince workers that they are indeed genuine when it comes to safety behavior.

Richardson, Watkiss and Brown (2000) claim that it is possible to improve safety climate through active involvement of senior management. It is a well-known maxim in change management theory that change and organizational culture are driven from the top of the organization (Kotter, 1995). Fin and Yule (2004), for example, demonstrated that senior managers have a crucial affect on safety culture through their commitment indicated by the time spent on safety matters: walking the talk seems to have considerable weight. Wu, Chen and Li (2007) showed not only a link between safety culture and safety behaviour but also that, in turn, management behavior effects safety culture.

We can conclude this section with the observation that an oilrig is a combination of potentially hazardous preconditions that needs careful management. In fact it requires inspired leadership, positive leadership and it is to that issue that we now turn.

### **The importance of Leadership**

Tellingly, the website of the peak health and safety watch dog in the UK, the Health and Safety Executive, states that leadership is their major priority for 2012 ([www.hse.gov.uk/offshore/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/offshore/)).

A number of studies (Shannon et al., 1997; Hale and Hovden, 1998; Flin et al., 2000; Guldenmund, 2000) suggest that democratic, participative management behaviours facilitate better safety outcomes and a more positive working climate. Participative management behaviours involve open communication, autonomy in teams, respect for workers and their work, shared decision making, consultation, and an understanding that humans are motivated when they have an active involvement in determining what they do and how they do it. However, O'Dea and Flin (2001) found that 57% of the OIMs they surveyed preferred an authoritarian style even though they were aware that a participative style more effectively promotes safe behavior. OIMs were also more likely to attribute fault for accidents to the person rather than job related or organizational factors, suggesting an abnegation of responsibility.

Positive attitudes towards managers by workers on offshore rigs has been shown to predict better safety behaviours compared to negative attitudes (Conchie and Donald, 2006). Zohar (2002) demonstrated that transactional and transformational leadership styles mediated positive safety behavior. Similarly, Kelloway, Mullen and Francis (2006) found that transformational leadership styles had a more positive effect on safety consciousness among team members than a passive style. Transformational and transactional leaders are largely consultative and participative, encourage open communication and enable people to take control of their own work. They tend to have a more positive view of people, are inspirational

motivators, influential and care about the individual. Clearly, these behaviours on the part of managers encourage positive feelings on the part of workers and, it seems, compliance.

However, as we have seen the preferred management style on oilrigs is often authoritarian and there is a tendency for managers with this style to overestimate their power to influence (O’Dea and Flin, 2001). This style is contrary to what we know about the value of transformational and transactional leadership behaviours that positively affect safety climate and behavior. Einarsen, Aasland and Skogstad (2007) have identified several destructive leadership styles, which include authoritarian approaches, all of which reduce motivation, job satisfaction and compliance with organizational goals.

That effective leadership is critical for safety climate and safety behavior on oil rigs is summed up by Lord Cullen in his report into the Alpha Piper Disaster, “...the quality of safety management by operators is fundamental to off- shore safety. No amount of detailed regulations for safety improvements could make up for deficiencies in the way that safety is managed by operators.” (Cullen, 1990, p. 301).

The reference to the ‘Company Man’ is a reflection of the long-standing description of the operator’s senior man on board (oilrig) or at the worksite. The company man represents the interests of the operator and, historically, was seen as a driver of performance. The company man today is still recognised as the key decision maker at the worksite.

### Positive Psychology and Leadership

Positive psychology is concerned with the conditions under which people and organisations flourish. It explores the interaction of positive emotions, positive character and positive behaviour. Positive psychology is also interested in how to improve these dimensions using techniques from cognitive-behavioural psychology, which has a long established record in effectively changing behaviour. According to the tenets of positive psychology there are six main areas that are central to improving the human condition all of which have corresponding behaviours. These are shown in Table 1 below adapted from Seligman (2005, p. 412).

**Table 1: Areas of Development in Positive Psychology**

1. Wisdom and knowledge: Creativity, Curiosity, Open-mindedness, Love of learning, Perspective.

Definition: Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge. Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience Thinking things through and examining them from all sides Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge Being able to provide wise counsel to others.

2. Courage: Authenticity, Bravery, Persistence, Zest.

Definition: Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal. Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way *Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain Finishing what one starts Approaching life with excitement and energy.

3. Humanity: Kindness, Love, Social intelligence

Definition: Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way *Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain Finishing what one starts Approaching life with excitement and energy.

Interpersonal strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others. Doing favors and good deeds for others Valuing close relations with others Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others.

4. Justice: Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork.

Definition: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life. Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen Working well as member of a group or team.

5. Temperance: Forgiveness, Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation.

Definition: Strengths that protect against excess

Forgiving those who have done wrong Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves Being careful about one's choices; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted Regulating what one feels and does.

6. Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty and excellence, Gratitude, Hope Humor, Spirituality.

Definition: Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning. Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life. Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen Expecting the best and working to achieve it. Liking to laugh and tease, bringing smiles to other people Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

It is easy to see the relationship between the behaviours associated with each of the areas described in Table 1 and participative, transactional and transformational leadership styles mentioned earlier. Leadership and positive psychology are both concerned with optimal human functioning. It is our contention that leaders can adopt aspects of positive psychology to get the best out of their people and, ultimately, improve success and, in the context of this paper, improved safety behaviour.

There is evidence that developing the behaviours associated with positive psychology can increase the likelihood that organisations and the people in them become enhanced (e.g. Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Seligman, 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder, 2000; Snyder and Lopez, 2002). Luthans (2001) in particular has proffered the notion of positive organisational behavior and what he calls PAL or Positive Approach to Leadership, drawing on the fundamentals of positive psychology. The emphasis in PAL is on realistic optimism, intelligence (especially emotional intelligence, confidence and hope. In their review of the literature Luthans et al (2001) show that behaviors associated with these factors improve leadership effectiveness. Correspondingly, in their review of the literature, Reid et al (2008) conclude that where the full range of transformational leadership behaviours are demonstrated there is a corresponding increase in performance and safety.

In their rather compelling review of the literature about what we know about leadership Kaiser and Hogan (2005, p.173) identify a number of competencies that have been shown to be essential to good leadership and, ergo, good organizational outcomes. These are: Influence and team-building skills, providing direction, support, and standards for accomplishment; communicating a compelling vision; caring about, developing, and challenging direct reports; hiring and staffing strategically; motivating others; building effective teams; managing diversity. They also conclude that overwhelmingly good leadership makes a difference to organizational effectiveness.

Kaiser and Hogan (2005) also point to five major components of organizational effectiveness all of which can be sheeted home to good leadership. These are: talented personnel; motivated personnel; talented management with the competencies described above; a strategy for outperforming the competition; and monitoring or feedback systems that enable leaders to keep in touch with talent, motivation and performance of staff. We contend that these factors can be applied to safety behaviour as an organizational outcome in and of itself.

Finally, the important feature of positive psychology is that the competencies or capability described above can all be learned. In fact there is a vast psychological literature in the positive psychology and the cognitive-behavioural psychology realms that describe the techniques and strategies to accomplish a change in behaviour. Cognitive-behavioural psychology or CBT as it is more commonly called, is widely used to help people with psychological illnesses and problems. Its main focus is on learning new ways to think and behave and is soundly based on research evidence. Positive psychology has adopted many of the techniques used in CBT to assist people to change their behavior to increase well-being and optimum functioning.

We haven't delved here into the issue of personality, which is relatively impervious to change, and its relationship to leadership. However, Judge et al (2002), for example, showed that all of the major personality traits (the Big 5 as they are called) all correlate positively with effective leadership. These traits are: high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, low neuroticism, high openness to experience and extraversion. In short this means that effective leaders were good at getting along with people, were outgoing, positive, had high attention to task, were low on anxiety and were flexible in their outlook. Whether these personality traits are open to change through experience and learning is yet to be ascertained. However, they could well be considered when recruiting or advancing personnel into management positions. It might be noted too that there is a strong relationship between these traits and the aspirational behaviours of transformational leadership and the domains of positive psychology.

## Conclusion

Leadership effectiveness is critical to the development and maintenance of a positive safety culture on oil and gas installations. There is also evidence to suggest that leaders who exhibit a transformational leadership style are more effective in influencing

safety behaviour than more passive or authoritarian styles, which may in fact be counterproductive and de-motivational. Positive psychology has emerged over the past 15 years or so as a means to developing human potential and has become increasingly popular among those involved in organisational and leadership development. Many of the dimensions with which positive psychology is concerned are related to the transformational leadership style and what we know works in terms of leadership effectiveness. Most importantly, positive psychology provides a number of cognitive and behavioural techniques that can be learned and then applied in any organisational setting. It is our contention that positive psychology, its strategies and techniques, can provide a great deal to the development of leaders on oil and gas installations, the promotion of a positive safety culture and a decrease in fatalities and injuries as a result.

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