

The Psychology behind Safety - Workers and Leaders

Key concepts:

- Performance Indicators
- Psychological contract
- Managerial priorities
- Organisational justice

On 26th April 1986, the world experienced the worst nuclear power plant accident it had ever seen when the Chernobyl power plant suffered a meltdown. When a test of the new voltage regulators required the station's power output to be dropped, delays and misunderstandings resulted in the station being configured unsafely, with safety systems disabled for the experiment. History, the landscape and the Russian nation bear the scars of the consequences of that error.

Catastrophic failures in safety are nothing new in the history of commerce, but Chernobyl is a stark reminder of how such failures can occur in even highly regulated environments. From the perspective of occupational psychology, such failures have three key players: the worker, the manager, and the workplace culture. Understanding why and how these happen—and what can be done to help prevent them—can assist you in avoiding safety failures.

How individual thinking affects safety

Individual people are the core of most businesses; in a way the individual is the building block. And the primary reason people are used rather than machines is for our brains! With this in mind - below are areas that can alter how individuals feel safe, how they react to safety breaches, avoid unsafe behaviours and then continue to embrace safe work practices. Employers need to assess these prior to hire and during work to establish beliefs and attitudes on safety matters.

- **Conscientiousness** – a degree of how much attention to detail one puts into their tasks. A highly conscientious person may be more likely to see potential dangers before they arise.
- **Neuroticism** – tendency to become anxious, moody or envious. A neurotic person may become more easily upset or paranoid which can affect their care for procedure.
- **Stress tolerance** – includes the ability to stay calm and continue to abide by procedures during certain difficult changes.
- **Cognitive awareness** – being aware of different thoughts and attitudes, of one's self and also others. One who is cognitively aware may be able to tell when certain attitudes lead to danger.
- **Locus of control** – the extent of how one believes that they are responsible for certain changes. If a breach in safety does occur, a person with a high locus of control takes responsibility and believes they are able to make more of a difference.
- **Risk avoidance** – a general tendency to avoid doing things differently to the norm.
- **Spatial understanding** – a general grasp of how ones movement is affecting and can affect physical surroundings.

Systems or processes that fail to accept these limitations and factors can themselves become unsafe.

For individual thinking, perceptions of safety affect both the potential for safety breaches before they happen, and how safe they consider their workplace after they happen. Safety can be compromised in three main ways: if the individual is distracted, forgets something, or makes a physical error (Chen & Wallace, 2005). After a safety breach, an injured individual is less likely to consider their workplace safe or perceive their supervisors as being caring about safety (Gaston & Harrison, 2012).

Safety from Culture - Justice

Both in the workplace itself and in the wider industry and community—is the environment where individuals work and leadership operates. Part of how safe an employee feels comes from wanting their employer to be 'just'. This organisational justice can be focussed on how resources are made available (distributive justice), how decisions are reached (procedural

justice), whether individuals are treated equally (interpersonal justice), and whether information is shared fairly (informational justice) (Gaston & Harrison, 2012).

Safety from Leadership – the psychological contract

A leader's role in safety is to create a safety-aware culture while simultaneously being aware of the limitations of the individual. Leadership affects the perception of the safety of work and workplaces, through their ability to meet the individual's perception of the unwritten agreement between worker and employer, known as the 'psychological contract' (Gaston & Harrison, 2012). From a practical perspective, there are four key considerations for leadership to improve safety:

- **Equipment:** avoiding safety problems such as through avoiding trip hazards, through to personal protective equipment in industrial environments
- **Practices:** identifying activities or actions that are safety risks and changing them to safer practices
- **Communication:** ensuring that all individuals have access to, understand, and can follow safety guidelines, that written and verbal channels are available and clear
- **Expectations:** ensuring that individuals can and do comply with not just their safety responsibilities but also their rights

The typical workplace is not a nuclear power plant, it doesn't even have to be a factory, but the lessons from Chernobyl are a stark reminder of the importance of a culture of safety which informs how individuals, whether workers or leaders, are provided with the structures necessary to work safely even when distractions or other problems affect us. The ongoing feeling that "I am safe, my employer and co-workers care for my safety" also goes great lengths to improving work output in all industries. By accepting the limitations of the individual, creating failsafe structures that constantly feed information back and forth between workers and leaders, and accepting the role of the leader in workers' perspectives on safety, workplaces can make sure their safety systems are not simply followed but also open to constant improvement.

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