

# MANAGING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY IN EXPERT ORGANISATIONS

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*In expert organisations, the work is highly labour intensive, and the core of the business springs from the expertise of the personnel. By establishing good working conditions, managers can help the personnel to achieve their targets in challenging work settings. The objective of this study was to discuss the management of occupational health and safety (OHS) in expert organisations. The results are based on the interviews with line managers. The most important contributors to the successful OHS management are enabling the personnel to succeed in their work, helping them with work-related difficulties, and sustaining and promoting a positive work culture.*

*Keywords: Occupational health and safety, competence, expert organisation*

## **1 Introduction**

### *1.1 Justification for managing occupational health and safety*

To promote the innovations, well-being, productivity, and competitiveness of organisations, occupational health and safety (OHS) management of all personnel in the organisation is important. Managing OHS is one component of management responsibilities in organisations. Successful OHS management depends on fulfilling regulatory requirements to sustain the physical and psychosocial well-being of all the personnel (D 89/391/EEC). At the same time, organizational-specific safety procedures and a safety culture should be supported by management practices. (Tappura & Syvänen 2013, Tappura & Hämäläinen 2012)

A properly functioning work community, cooperative structure, and safety leadership have a positive effect not only on OHS outcomes but also on the quality of the employee's working life and the efficiency and productivity of the organisation (Tappura & Syvänen 2013, Syvänen 2010, Syvänen & Loppela 2013). According to Finnish studies (Tappura & Hämäläinen 2011, Eskola et al. 2009, Syvänen 2010), legal OHS responsibilities of the managers, fair treatment and workplace rules should be emphasised in organisations. In addition, work-related stresses and strains should be assessed as a part of the OHS issues.

Developing OHS management can achieve positive and long-lasting effects throughout the organizational levels (Hannah et al. 2008). Increased recognition by supervisors of subordinates' interests and concerns, including the work stresses and strains they face,

will enable them to provide better support and encouragement. In addition, they can better create and sustain the work community where taking care of employees' well-being is part of the work process. (Canadian Centre for Management Development 2002)

Transactional and transformational leadership styles (Bass 1985) have raised interest among safety researchers. Transactional leadership involves the leader establishing goals (e.g., safety-related goals), actively monitoring the employee's performance with regard to these goals, and providing rewarding or corrective feedback about the employee's performance. Transformational leadership achieves results by increasing the employees' acceptance of the goals, for example, safety-related behavior. Leaders serve as role models, inspire commitment to achieving the goals, show an active interest in the individual employee, and challenge the employees to overcome obstacles that prevent them achieving those goals. (Kapp 2012, Barling et al. 2002)

Managers often lack management and OHS training (Carder and Ragan 2005). Lack of management and leadership skills may impede the overall improvement and performance in the organisations. Thus, the managers' OHS and management competence should be improved in order to promote employees' health and safety. (Tappura & Hämäläinen 2012)

### *1.2 Managing expert organisations*

In expert organisations, the work is highly labour intensive and oriented toward complex problem solving. The core of the business springs from the expertise of the personnel. Expert organisations are typically made up of professionals who have a strong need for autonomy, achievement, and fulfillment of their talents and potentialities (Løwendahl 1997). According to Ropo and Parviainen (2001), the bodily presence of leadership is especially important in expert organisations. It enables face-to-face communication, listening, and discussion, which are also important in assessing work strains and psychosocial risks faced by the employees.

Leadership in expert organisations needs to allow room for employees to reveal their expertise and to excel. Leaders should listen, encourage, support, and discuss with employees before decision making. Designated leaders should actively interact with subordinates and support social interactions among them, but not intervene in the work of the experts (Ropo & Parviainen 2001). By establishing good working conditions and a good working environment, managers can help the personnel to achieve their targets in challenging work settings.

In their studies, Ropo and Parviainen (2001) as well as Syvänen (2010) and Syvänen and Loppela (2013) concluded that shared and collaborative leadership leads to positive outcomes in expert organisations. These leadership styles reflect the challenges involved in leading expert organisations: the question of individual and collective responsibility, the negotiation of processes and outcomes, and the simultaneous need for both a bodily presence and distance in the workplace.

Dialogic leadership offers the necessary preconditions for employees' well-being and enhancement of their work capability (Syvänen et al. 2012). According to Isaacs (1999),

the central principles of dialogic leadership are appreciative and respecting interaction, listening, voicing, suspending and reflecting as well as equal participation of all employees. The theory of dialogic leadership and dialogic decision making presents four phases of dialogue - polite monologue, skillful conversation, reflective dialogue and generative dialogue. At the fourth phase the nature of the dialogue between the various participants is a fruitful ground for the creativity and innovations. Generative dialogue is possible by the support of servant leadership style.

### *1.3 Occupational health and safety management in expert organisations*

Universally, changes in people's working lives have led to emerging psychosocial risks equal to traditional physical, biological, and chemical risks. Psychosocial risks may be defined as the risks arising from the work design, the organisation and management of work, and the social and environmental contexts of the employees' psychological, social, or physical health. For example, workplace problems, work-related stress, violence, harassment, and bullying may cause psychosocial risks. There is evidence that stress is related to higher absenteeism and increased accident rates, in addition to poorer performance and difficulties in coping with the demands of work. (The Committee of Senior Labour Inspectors 2012)

Given the above-mentioned characteristics of expert organisations, OHS management should pay more attention to potential psychosocial risks. Traditional physical risks in the workplace are associated with, for example, a static working posture, display screen work, commutation, or the microclimate of the office, which have mostly been incorporated into OHS management.

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## **2 Objectives**

The objective of this study was to define and discuss the management of OHS in expert organisations based on the literature and interviews with the line managers of a Finnish expert organisation. The research question was: what kind of leadership has a positive effect on OHS of the employees in expert organisation based on the experiences of line managers.

## **3 Methods**

The results are based on a case study conducted in a technical expert organisation in the fall of 2012. In all, 18 line managers were interviewed. The interviewees were mostly senior, very experienced managers. They had all participated in a recent organisational-specific management training program, but this program had paid little attention to OHS.

To chart the organisational-specific procedures and needs, a group interview was held with the OHS committee. Individual, thematic interviews with the line managers were

based on OHS management practices reported in the literature and the results of the group interview. The interviews were open and confidential. This facilitated profound and reflective discussion about the OHS role and the responsibility of the managers. The results of the interviews were analysed qualitatively. The results were presented to the management group of the organisation.

#### **4 Results**

Based on the experiences of the line managers in the expert organisation, the most important contributors to successful OHS management are enabling the personnel to succeed in their work and helping them with work-related difficulties. In addition, sustaining and promoting a positive work culture is important. The line managers cited particular factors they considered important in promoting the OHS of their subordinates. These are classified according to the characteristics of transformational and dialogic leadership as follows:

- Open and approachable
  - being present
  - having an open-door policy to enable subordinates to discuss relevant issues when necessary
- Giving help and support
  - creating prerequisites for working efficiently
  - asking how they feel
  - offering help proactively
  - encouraging them to contemplate solutions along with their supervisor or colleagues
- Appreciative and caring
  - believing in their expertise
  - speaking respectfully about them
  - accepting differences in personalities
- Good example
  - treating all employees well and even-handedly
  - complying with organisational procedures and rules
- Dialogic
  - accepting different kinds of expressions
  - asking them for their interpretations
  - broaching discussion on conflicting issues and working out the problems

The results of the interview were discussed in the management group. The ideal OHS leadership style of the organisation was agreed and included in the subsequent management training program.

#### **5 Discussion**

In this article, managing OHS in expert organisations was defined based on the literature and empirical results. The main characteristics of OHS management in expert organisations are open, help giving and appreciative leadership style, which are also expressed related to transactional, transformational, and dialogic leadership styles. By creating a goal-oriented, supportive, and positive working environment, the managers can promote the well-being and productivity of the employees. Knowledge of the

characteristics of successful OHS management is useful when developing the competence of managers, as well as their orientation and training. Managers' OHS competence and commitment affect the overall performance of the organisation.

The limitation of the study is that the results are based on the managers' self-evaluation. They might view their management in a more positive light than their subordinates would. The subordinates' perspective was not considered in this study. However, the aim of the self-evaluation was to encourage the managers to reflect on their OHS management process and to promote their learning in this way.

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