



Executive Leadership - Walking the Talk

As an Executive Group, we spend time on site completing Leadership Health and Safety (H&S) Tours. So why are they not having a bigger impact on improved H&S performance?

Many organisations have introduced the idea of completing some form of H&S tours. They may have different names in different companies and countries but the motivation on the surface is broadly the same. Get out, see what goes on, praise the good, challenge the not so good and, in doing so, spot those all-important safe and unsafe behaviours along the way. We are clear that our colleagues must have “Felt” our behaviour and we must be “Visible” as Leaders for H&S.

The “why are we doing this?” challenge is often skirted over, missed or forgotten, so the full value of what could be a real asset to the H&S programme and the development of a strong overall business culture is therefore not achieved. There can be a perception that activity is taking place and therefore, by default, that has to be good and performance will automatically improve.

In my experience, the main reasons for the failure of such programmes include: lack of communication of purpose, inadequate skill set of participants, the absence of colleagues to speak with and no meaningful follow-up. This failure is further compounded at a senior management level by the high expectation of these programmes; a sense that they are somehow the magical solution to a safety performance plateau created by the existing H&S arrangements.

Without meaningful consultation and subsequent communication, there may be a lot of trepidation from the person who sees themselves as on the receiving end of these H&S Tours. What if they are doing or say the wrong thing, is it a negative performance review and what are the consequences? Do your colleagues know why H&S Tours take place and what they can achieve when done well?

Competence is a much used and much misunderstood word when it comes to H&S. We know that it includes knowledge and experience and those ‘soft skills’ we are told are essential. Reflect on the impact of your personal style and approach in a H&S Tour situation. What is the brew room discussion afterwards? Is it likely to be “who was that suit from head office? What do they know about what we do?” Or will it be “They really listened to what our day-to-day challenges are. We’ve agreed a good solution.”

It is really important that we do not presume that every director and manager is automatically well equipped to complete highly effective H&S Tours. I have often discussed the challenge of ensuring that the “H&S Tour” does not become the “H&S Inspection” i.e. the old-fashioned approach of walking around, kicking some tyres and writing a long list of broken things. Simply put, if there are no colleagues to speak with, return to the office and do some different valuable work!

Regardless of whether you identify unsafe acts or conditions, the important thing is that the workforce is engaged in a dialogue, that something changes and there is consensus on the change from those involved. There must then be a follow-up to ensure the value of the people interaction, and any physical site improvement, sticks and lives to improve another day.

H&S Tours can make a valuable contribution to the H&S Culture of any organisation, however they are not the silver bullet that will turn good (or poor) to great. Quantitative graphs of tours completed or “actions closed out” may have limited value. Meaningful measurements of qualitative safety tour performance would add much greater value but are not so easy to create.

Quality time and effort spent on H&S tours is a strong contributor to high levels of H&S performance. However, when conducted in isolation, or without considering the points raised above, much of their potential value is lost. The factors that make an organisation successful are much more complex than the behaviour (positive or negative) of front line employees alone.