March 2016 – influence of risk perception on behaviour

The management of risk and the associated legislative requirement to risk assess activities to eliminate risk, or at the very least introduce control measures to reduce the risk to as low as reasonable practicable, is something we are all familiar with.

The process of risk assessment is subjective and relies upon individuals who will all have a different assessment of exposure, probability, consequence and overall risk. Organisations focus on context; providing the right equipment in a safe working environment to deliver safety. This neglects the human element which we know does not derive individual perception of risk based solely upon the physical environment.

How do we address the issue of perception of risk to ensure a consistent and best practice output from the risk assessment process?

First of all we need to understand that as a human, our behaviours are influenced by many factors external to the work environment, not least our parents and childhood, the experiences we have been exposed to in and out of work, stress, family, etc, etc. Our 'natural instincts' that have remained with us through our evolution are also a factor!

Beliefs
↓
Expectations
↓
Attitude
↓
Behaviours

When undertaking risk assessments and considering how to encourage safe behaviours in the workplace, we need to keep in mind the following factors:

Experience:

I'm sure we've all received a response to a question in the work environment "I've been doing this for 30 years and never had an accident"! Our natural instinct is to repress memories of traumatic experiences and to assume the accident will always happen to 'someone else' (ie we are indestructible).

Through open questions, we need to get the individual to acknowledge the risks faced in carrying out the task ("what could go wrong?") and for them to identify the control measures to be implemented (they can almost always identify the appropriate control measures).

Personal experience of injury increases an individual's motivation to work safely but we can't rely on that fact to deliver a safe working environment!

Peer pressure:

"A tidy site is a safe site" is a phrase often used. If the organisational and leadership culture 'demands' high standards and consistently delivers on these expectations, the people working in that environment quickly understand the desired behaviours and conditions.

Leadership is not defined by position in the organisational hierarchy. Do you understand who the key influencers are amongst your workforce? If you can identify the natural leader(s) in a group and work with them so that they become advocates for a positive health and safety culture the impact will be much quicker and easier to sustain.

Knowledge:

People who take risks are not necessarily less knowledgeable than those who do not take risks. "A little knowledge can be dangerous" is a well-known phrase – the danger is that people can utilise information to inform and reinforce a decision they have already sub-consciously made.

A recommendation from many incident investigations is to provide more training. The assumption is that an organisation of experts will be a safer organisation without identifying the root causes of the incident, particularly culture and human factors.

There are many more influences over behaviour and decision-making in the work environment. We need to focus on the internal and external factors that combine to influence our perception and decision-making when undertaking risk assessments. Bureaucracy is not the only output from the risk assessment process – real added-value comes from a focus on safety leadership and creating a culture where health and safety is a core value.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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