

FACILITATING FOR CULTURAL CHANGE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM A 12-YEAR SAFETY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

ANNIKEN SOLEM

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU Social Research Ltd, Loholt Allé 38B, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

TROND KONGSVIK

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU Social Research Ltd, Loholt Allé 38B, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this paper we will present and discuss a safety development programme conducted in the period from 2001 to 2012, involving offshore service vessels and the petroleum company that contracts them. In this period there has been a considerable reduction in serious personal injuries and collisions. We present and discuss the underlying approach of the programme and how it could have influenced the positive safety results. There are different views on the extent to which safety culture can be influenced and changed. Researchers with a functionalist perspective regard cultural change to be possible through different management interventions, whereas researchers with an interpretive perspective see culture as more of an abstraction of deeply rooted conceptualizations of meaning and world views, created and recreated by all members of an organization. Consequently, culture is regarded as a concept beyond direct control, although to a certain extent it can be influenced indirectly. The approach applied in this project had an interpretive perspective as a starting point, using group facilitation as an aid in safety improvements. Facilitators are usually neutral outsiders, and their main task is to help a group increase its effectiveness by improving its process and structure. We established an arena (Captain's forum) where captains and personnel from the petroleum company met for two days once a year, where we facilitated open discussions on safety issues. The group facilitation approach and connected activities are presented and discussed, as well as the potential influence such an approach could have on changing aspects of the safety culture.

Keywords: safety culture, group facilitation, action research, dialogue conference, seafarers

1. INTRODUCTION

Our research group was engaged by a major petroleum company in 2001 as a part of an effort to improve the safety on contracted offshore service vessels. The number of personal injuries on the vessels had increased during the preceding years, as well as the number of collisions/contacts between the vessels and the installation. We established the safety development programme "Improving Vessel Safety" in 2001, and in the subsequent years there has been a considerable reduction in personal injury rates and in the frequency of collisions/contacts.

Although it is difficult to relate these positive results to the programme, results from different studies give indirect evidence of its contribution: every second year, all crewmembers on the vessels working for the petroleum company have completed a working-environment survey. The longitudinal results indicate an increase in the level of trust towards the operator and in attention to and prioritizing of safety during the programme period (Fenstad, 2008). Furthermore, other studies have concluded that the programme has improved the communication and cooperation between the petroleum company and the vessels. Some of these changes can be linked to an improvement in the safety culture on the vessels (Antonsen et al., 2007).

The hub of the development programme has been the Captain's forum, which is an annual workshop where captains from the different service vessels meet representatives from the petroleum company over two consecutive days. Different research projects covering relevant organizational and human conditions, also conducted within this development programme, have been completed and presented at the forum as a basis for discussion.

Both authors have been a part of the research group responsible for the Captain's forums and the associated research projects. Thus, the data and information about the safety development programme is obtained by participant observation and the various research activities. Our engagement has been based on an action research perspective (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This perspective implies a joint venture between researchers and stakeholders, who together define, explore and try to find ways to solve problems and challenges.

The main objective of the Captain's forum, seen from the researchers' point of view, has been to establish an arena where it is possible to facilitate and lay the foundation for cultural change and thereby the safety results. This implies establishing some common ground for the stakeholders, or "common modes of interpretation and shared understandings of experience" (Smircich, 1983: 55).

This paper aims to illustrate how the method and principles of facilitation could support changes in aspects of safety culture, while recognizing that such change can only be arranged, not implemented. In the next section we will present some key theoretical concepts followed by a review of how facilitation has been applied in the Captain's forum. Then we will discuss the extent to which one could facilitate cultural change.

2. KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

2.1 Safety culture and change

The safety culture concept has its origin in theories on organizational culture. It involves the social aspects of work, and is, as such, a part of "the third age of safety" (Hale & Hovden, 1998), adding to an earlier focus on technological defences and on human/individual factors. Safety culture was first used as an explanatory factor in accident investigations (e.g. the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the *Exxon Valdez* shipwreck and the Texas city refinery explosion), and was soon taken up in the general safety research discourse.

Although safety culture is now widely recognized as an important construct for safety, many different definitions and conceptualizations exist (Guldenmund, 2000). This can partly be explained by the adoption of the concept by researchers from different disciplines, e.g. anthropology, psychology, sociology and also engineering, which have diverging ontological starting points, and thus apply the concept in different ways. Although the variety of definitions has led to some doubts about the value of safety culture (Clarke, 2000; Rosness, 2001), it still remains widely used as an analytical tool, made evident by the many articles published on the subject in safety journals to date.

In the variety of conceptualizations of culture in organizational research, Glendon & Stanton (2000) distinguished between the functionalist and the interpretive perspective. Within the functionalist perspective, culture is regarded as a management tool that can be controlled for "top down" strategic purposes and interests. Culture is often "factorized" and described in terms of simple predictive models. Within the interpretive perspective, culture is, by contrast, regarded as an emergent framework for cognitions, whereby collective identities and beliefs are interpreted for all members of an organization. As a "bottom up", complex phenomenon, it is regarded as difficult to manage and control.

In the years since the introduction of the concept in investigations, much effort has also been put into the development of principles, ideas and methods for the **development** of safety cultures. Different approaches have been put forth, reflecting the divergent views on safety culture, here exemplified by the works of Reason (1997), Hudson (2007) and Haukelid (2008).

In his now classical contribution, Reason (1997) described how safety culture could be socially engineered by assembling four internally dependent components into a consistent whole. He describes some principles regarding how (1) a reporting culture, (2) a just culture, (3) a flexible culture and (4) a learning culture could be engineered and how together they produce an informed culture. With his emphasis on how safety culture can be managed and engineered, his approach can be placed within a functionalist perspective.

Hudson (2007) addresses the issue of how a safety culture could be developed in an international company, involving thousands of employees and a broad range of activities in different national contexts. The model used in the intervention, the HSE cultur ladder, describes five cultural steps (pathological, reactive, calculative, proactive and generative). By use of a marketing-inspired strategy, the goal was to create a demand for the "product" (an advanced safety culture), and arrange for an intrinsically safety-motivated workforce. Different "micro-tools"

were developed as aids for development towards a generative culture. These tools were used in workshops provided by local management, and local action plans were created for cultural development. Although Hudson describes the programme as a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach, and an alternative to traditional command and control initiatives, it seems to be more based on a functionalist rather than an interpretive perspective on culture. To set out to change the culture in a complex organization, such as an oil and gas multinational, presupposes a view where culture can be managed and, at least partly, controlled. However, Hudson recognizes that the work done locally is difficult to control, and that changes must happen at the local level in order to achieve the desired cultural state.

Culture is a key concept for anthropologists, and a representative like Haukelid (2008) criticizes the instrumental way it has been used by management and organizational theorists. He speaks for a more nuanced view of culture in safety research, involving different levels, from the manifest, linguistic level to a “taken for granted” level. He claims that cultural change is difficult, especially at the deeper levels, as cultures are created and recreated not by leaders, but by all of the organizations’ members. Management initiatives that are not found meaningful could easily be met by countercultures, made visible by resistance and also sabotage. So, a common anthropological view on cultural change is that culture is a concept beyond direct control, although to a certain extent it can be influenced indirectly.

This was also the starting point for this project. By means of facilitation and common reflection processes, we arranged for the possibility of challenging current structures of meaning, without trying to control the content of these processes. This will be elaborated later in the paper, but first we will present group facilitation as a concept and method.

2.2 Group facilitation

In their evaluation of cultural interventions initiated in order to improve safety, Hale et al. (2010) concluded that interventions with the best success rates emphasized the significance of “*feedback and learning systems to feed and exploit the dialogue between shop floor and line, with staff support, as the motor of improvement*”. The terms “feedback and learning systems” and “dialogue” are also highly relevant for group facilitation as a methodology, which concretizes how this actually might be achieved.

Group facilitation may be described as “a set of functions or activities carried out before, during and after a meeting to help the group achieve its outcomes” (Bostrom et al., 1993: 147). These functions and activities build on values and principles for how facilitation should be conducted. In his book *The Skilled Facilitator*, Schwarz (2002) describes what he calls “the skilled facilitator approach”, which is based on four core values. These are (1) valid information, (2) free and informed choice, (3) internal commitment and (4) compassion (ibid: 9). Also, the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has prepared a statement of values and code of ethics for their members. The statement is intended to “recognize the complexity of our roles, including the full spectrum of personal, professional and cultural diversity in the IAF membership and in the field of facilitation” (IAF, 2012). This is the IAF statement of values: “As group facilitators, we believe in the inherent value of the individual and the collective wisdom of the group. We strive to help the group make the best use of the contributions of each of its members. We set aside our personal opinions and support the group’s right to make its own choices. We believe that collaborative and cooperative interaction builds consensus and produces meaningful outcomes. We value professional collaboration to improve our profession” (ibid). As shown by these two examples, the principles and core values are often expressed in broad statements, intended to provide a framework for a particular situation, not dictate conduct for the individual facilitator. It also implies that the facilitator must meet the participants on their own terms, and not serve as an instrument for the management or contracting companies, or the facilitator’s own agenda.

One of the first and main tasks for the group facilitator is, if needed, to build trust between the different parties present. We agree with Schiefloe (2011: 316, our translation) who says, “Generally speaking, trust is about having positive expectations towards others’ actions in situations which are difficult to control, and where there is a possibility for a negative outcome.” Group facilitation is well suited in such situations, owing to both the principles and values that group facilitation is based on, and on the role the facilitator is meant to have. One important distinction in relation to trust is whether the facilitator is external or internal to the group. Most definitions of facilitation focus on the neutrality of the facilitator as a key factor, in the sense that the facilitator is someone from outside the group or organization, an external. This is also apparent in one of the most cited definitions (Schwarz 2002: 5): “Group facilitation is a process in which a person whose selection is acceptable to all the members of the group, who is substantively neutral, and who has no substantive decision-making authority diagnoses and intervenes to help a group improve how it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions, to increase the group’s effectiveness. The facilitator’s main task is to help the group increase effectiveness by

improving its process and structure.” By being external and neutral, a facilitator may arrange and conduct a meeting so the different parties are more inclined to have positive expectations towards the other party’s actions.

Group facilitation is also well suited to situations where involvement and anchoring are important issues. Facilitators draw on a diverse range of competencies in their attempt to generate a positive participatory climate. Wong (2005) lists these competencies: a diverse set of communication skills, cognitive skills to be able to follow the discussion, leadership skills to manage diversity in order to transform tensions and conflicts into creative energies, competencies in maintaining neutrality, and competencies in managing a positive climate (Wong 2005: 183). In addition, Wong points to the fact that a facilitator not only focuses on the process, “[...] but also plays an important role in helping to clarify the objective to make sure it is attainable and agreed upon by all group members”. Hence, a facilitator must, to ensure doing a good job, seek to integrate different views and interests from the participants.

The facilitator may also use the structure, which in this context means both the sequence of elements on the agenda and the physical arrangements of the meeting, in his/her aim to reach the goal of the meeting. Ravn (2011) differentiates between a facilitator and a chairman based on the attention the facilitator gives to the structure of the meeting. The sequence of elements on the agenda must ensure variation and maintain the participants’ interest. Furthermore, as Tuecke (2005:77) points out, the meeting room arrangements must entice participation. She lists three key physical elements that must be considered: the size and shape of the meeting rooms, the physical arrangements of the furniture, and the “feel” of the space as people walk into the room. If given sufficient attention, she continues, “the physical setting becomes a comfortable and safe container in which the facilitated discussions, consensus decision making and win-win solutions occur that engender ownership and commitment and move a group into action”. However, the physical settings are, of course, not enough to ensure this comfortable and safe container.

The use of different intervention methods or techniques could be necessary during a discussion. Wong (2005), indirectly points to the fact that a facilitator might need to intervene in a situation by saying: “A facilitator has the expertise to manage the process of information exchange and interpersonal dynamics toward an appropriate or desired goal”. In practice, an intervention is any statement, question, or nonverbal behavior designed to help the group. Furthermore, to intervene means entering the group’s conversation to help it become more effective (Schwartz, 2002).

There are several triggering factors for when the facilitator feels it is necessary to intervene. Some revolve around participants’ actions, other around the topic(s). Some common examples related to participants’ actions are when somebody is confronting another person in an unpleasant manner, when one person dominates the whole discussion, and when the facilitator wants to ensure that everybody has been given an opportunity to voice their opinions (Jacobs et. al., 2009). An intervention may also come about because there are several other topics that need to be covered, or the topic currently being discussed is a side track. In either situation, the facilitator intervenes to ensure the best result for the goal of the meeting and/or discussion. On the other hand, it is not always feasible to intervene. For instance, the facilitator may think that to get the best outcome a heated discussion is needed, or that the new topic that was presented would be more relevant.

When deciding whether or not to intervene, the stage of the group and the meeting is an important element to consider. Both a group and a meeting may be thought of as going through a beginning-, middle-, and closing phase (Jacobs et. al., 2009). When a group is in the middle (or working) phase, Jacobs et. al. says the job of the facilitator is to focus on how the members could be learning and deriving maximum benefit from being in the group. Sometimes, to await the atmosphere and direction of a discussion is one way to do this. One could say that a group is in the middle phase when the first anxiety of the participants is over, and the level of trust is higher than in the beginning phase.

To show the complexity of factors that must be taken into consideration when deciding to intervene, it would be useful to look at how Heron (1999: 6) divides group facilitation into six dimensions. The dimensions are: The planning-, meaning-, confronting-, feeling-, structuring-, and valuing dimension. Each dimension calls attention to a basic issue of how the facilitator may influence the (learning) process. In addition, each of the six dimensions could be handled in three different “modes” regarding who should make decisions about how to handle the situation; hierarchical mode, co-operative mode and autonomous mode (Heron 1999: 8). Thus, within Heron’s description, in any given situation, the facilitator must decide on an intervention based on where in an 18-part grid the situation seems to fit. The six dimensions and the three modes constitute an 18-part grid, shown below:

	Planning	Meaning	Confounding	Feeling	Structuring	Valuing
Hierarchy						
Co-operation						
Autonomy						

Within each of the 18 cells, the facilitator has several opportunities on how to proceed. Now we are looking into the parts of group facilitation where the facilitator must rely on his or her intuition of how to handle a given situation, based on learned intervention techniques, an understanding of the current group process and what could move the discussion forward, and his or her experience. Nonetheless, one solution, often used in situations where there might be trust issues, is to let the facilitator take different, and sometimes contradictory, stands in the course of the discussion. This is done to move the discussion in a direction more in line with the goal of the meeting.

3. THE CASE: CAPTAIN'S FORUM

To illustrate how group facilitation may be achieved in a safety context, we will present the underlying presumptions of the Captain's forum. The Captain's forum is an arena where the captains could meet face-to-face and exchange experience and knowledge, and pass this on to the decision makers in the petroleum company contracting the vessels.

3.1 The starting point

Due to a considerable increase in serious-injury rates on board service vessels and the number of collisions with installations in the period 1997-2000, the development programme "Improving Vessel Safety" was initiated by a Norwegian oil company. Our research group was given the task of leading the programme, which included carrying out research and designing the interventions in the petroleum company's logistics chain.

As a first activity, the research project aimed at mapping the situation, by means of a survey sent out to all crewmembers on the service vessels working for the petroleum company. The results from this survey pointed to several human and technological conditions, including the interplay between human and technological conditions, as the causes for the increase in the rates. One of the main conclusions was that increased activity, combined with efficiency demands, had caused greater strain on the seafarers. Hence, the level of trust between the captains and the petroleum company had been suffering. Therefore, the establishment of an arena to meet and discuss safety-related issues face-to-face was considered a necessary starting point. This arena was named the "Captain's forum".

3.2 The organization of the forum

The Captain's forum has been arranged annually since 2001, as a two-day consecutive conference. There have been approximately 50-80 participants at each conference. Three groups of participants are always present: captains, representatives from the petroleum company's maritime administration department, and representatives from the petroleum company's traffic surveillance. On several occasions, participants from other groups have also been invited, such as drillers, crane operators, supply base employees and trade unionists. In addition, the research group has always been present at the forum.

The unbalanced power relation between the captains and the oil company representatives, due to the fact that the captains are representatives of a commissioned party, has been taken into consideration when planning the forum. The researchers have taken the responsibility to provide an arena where each captain may speak his¹ mind about safety issues without fear of reprisals. This has been an important premise through the whole process of planning and arranging each forum, and in planning, conducting and presenting each of the many research projects associated with the "Improving Vessel Safety" programme. Ensuring the researchers' neutrality, thereby enabling the captains to trust them and therefore speak freely, has been of major importance.

¹ There has never been a female captain present, and we have never been told of any female captains.

3.2.1 Preparation and planning

In the start-up phase of the development programme, a thorough research project (survey and interviews) gave results on which to build the interventions. In the continuation, this closeness to the seafarers' experiences has been maintained. Hence, various research projects have been conducted to give a greater understanding of the different aspects of the situation on board the vessels. These studies have been based on rich empirical studies, thus providing the department at the oil company with the opportunity to learn more about the situation from the seafarers' perspective. These projects have also been presented at the Captain's forum, as a basis for discussion. Deciding which research topics to investigate has been done in collaboration with representatives from the petroleum company.

As mentioned in the previous section, the first research project was to carry out a mapping of the situation through a survey. Thus, the aim of the very first Captain's forum was to discuss existing hazards and find feasible solutions to improve vessel safety. In the search for these solutions, a carefully prepared agenda was presented to, and accepted by, the petroleum company representatives. Over the years, the agenda has more or less been built on the same principles as the first one. There has been a mix of presentations of results from research projects (completed on behalf of the petroleum company), discussions (regarding cooperation and safety both in group and plenary discussions) and a more open part (with invited speakers or safety-related films). In the next section, we will present how the Captain's forum has been facilitated in more detail.

3.2.2 Completion – during the forum

The introduction and opportunity for informal interaction has been given special attention when planning the sequence of the elements on the agenda. After the main facilitator (the researcher leading the forum) has welcomed the participants, everyone presents themselves. This round of presentations is needed because several have never met face-to-face. The participants are also given several opportunities for informal interaction, by ensuring that the agenda includes several breaks over the two days.

The agenda has been designed to allow the captains to voice their opinions. Thus, the discussions are first held in smaller groups, each in a separate room with a dedicated facilitator. Afterwards, the groups meet in the plenary room where the main points from each group are discussed in a plenary assembly.

In the first years of the forum, the petroleum company representatives did not participate in the group discussions to stimulate open discussions. The petroleum company representatives would, in the plenary discussion, be presented with the captains' understanding of the situation, and often in a confronting manner. In recent years, however, the petroleum company representatives have taken part in the group discussions as well. This has not produced negative comments on the evaluation form handed out at the end of the forums.

Each group has had a dedicated facilitator, whose main task has been to guide the discussions and take notes. This has ensured documentation of the discussion for later reporting, and has worked as a reference slip for the captains during the plenary discussions. Furthermore, the facilitator needs to make sure everybody gets to voice their opinions, and to stop anyone from dominating the discussion.

When the groups return to the plenary room, the seating arrangements have been altered from classroom seating to group tables. This is done to symbolize that there has been a shift from presentations to discussion and dialogue. In the break before the plenary discussion, the facilitators look at the notes from the group discussions and note similarities and differences between the groups. This is the starting point for the discussion. During the discussion, the facilitator makes sure that all groups are invited to comment on their group discussion topics. Moreover, the facilitator asks for additional comments from the other groups, and may also ask for comments or explanatory input from the petroleum company representatives.

The aim of the forums is to develop mutually agreed action proposals to improve safety in the activities. These proposals are linked to the different themes of the conferences. The actions are, for the most part, directed at the petroleum company, although the shipowners and the crews themselves are also assigned follow-up activities. However, for the most part it is the responsibility of the petroleum company to implement the suggested actions.

3.2.3 Follow-up

One of the important principles in the "Improving Vessel Safety" programme has been to always feed information and research results back to the seafarers, not only to the petroleum company. All research projects have resulted in reports and presentations, available for anyone who is interested. In addition, we have often made shorter summaries of the survey results, which have been sent to all the participating vessels. Also, each Captain's

forum has been documented in a report, made accessible on request or at the next Captain’s forum. The report from the Captain’s forum includes a summarized presentation of the agenda, and the input from the group’s discussions has been analysed and commented on. In addition, all the group discussion reference slips are shown in the appendix, together with a list of participants.

Information about ongoing and planned research projects and results from the completed projects have also been presented in a magazine (*Poseidon*) distributed to all crewmembers, on a special website (“The logistics portal”) and in newsletters from the petroleum company. The reports from the research projects and from the Captain’s forum have been used as a basis for the daily work being done at the petroleum company.

Twelve years have gone by since the very first Captain’s forum was arranged. During this period, the level of trust between the involved parties has increased, according to the longitudinal results of the working environment surveys (Figure 1). Also, the number of serious incidents has declined from 7 in 2007 to 1 in 2011, and the number of collisions between vessels and offshore installations has been reduced from 12 in 2000 to 0 in the period from 2009-2011.

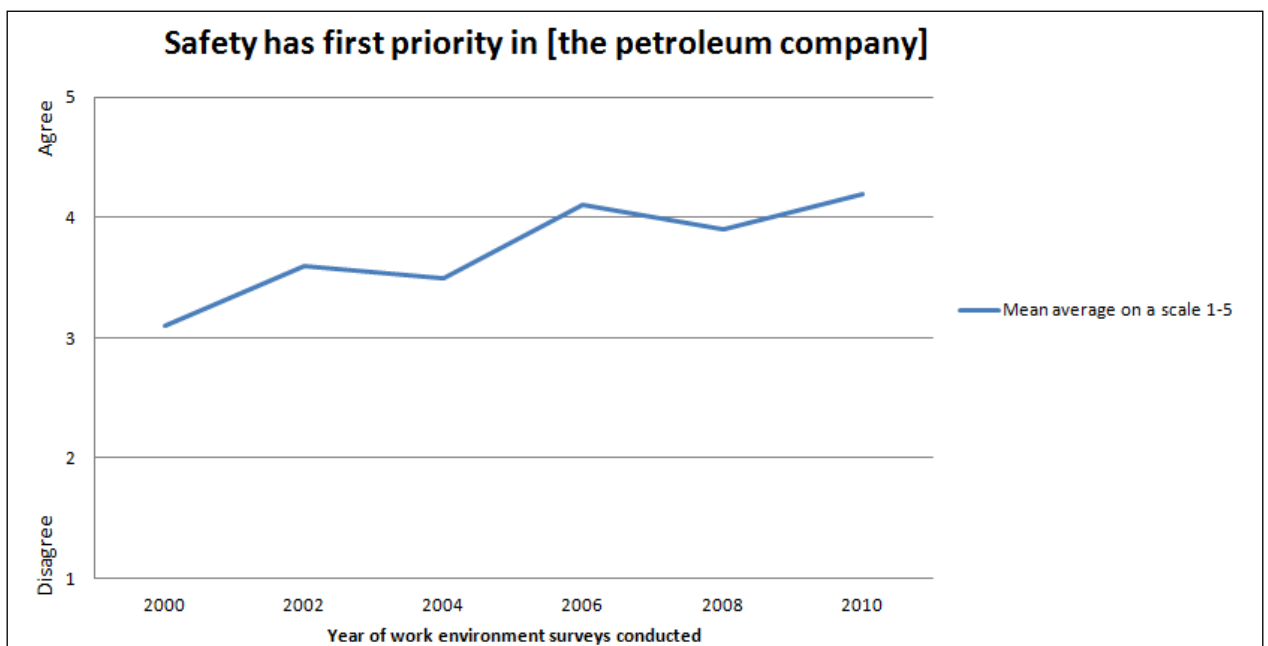


Figure 1: Safety has first priority in [the petroleum company]

Some examples of initiatives that have been defined in Captain’s forum and later been put into action include:

- Introduction of regular resting time periods at shore during the vessels’ four week working schedule
- Establishment of a maritime traffic control unit in the petroleum company, serving as a single point of contact for the vessels
- Definition of weather criteria (maximum wind/waves) for loading and unloading operations alongside offshore installations
- Introduction of ‘comfort class’ requirements for new ships, resulting in better noise reduction in cabins
- Introduction of a requirement for two navigators on the bridge when working within the installations’ safety zones
- Use of simulators in co-training, where the actors on the vessels and installations could experience each other’s work situation

We see these and similar initiatives as important explanations for the expanding trust that was observed during the programme period. The time and effort spent by the participants led to concrete results, signaling that the petroleum company had a real safety commitment.

4. DISCUSSION

Interaction between the actors in a social system is a basic premise for cultural development and change. If there is no interaction, no common ground or shared patterns of meaning can be established, and different “basic assumptions” (Schein, 1992) cannot be verbalized or challenged. The Captain’s forum provided an arena where different views on safety in this particular context could be presented and discussed.

Group facilitation was applied as a methodology that supported the development of trust and a positive participatory climate. The common development and testing of different safety-improving measures continued for 12 years. In parallel, there has been a considerable reduction in the number of serious incidents related to the vessels’ activities.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine whether there has been a cultural change in the logistics chain, and whether the improved safety results can be attributed to such a change. Changes in what Haukelid (2008) calls the “taken for granted” level, i.e. the deeper level of culture, are beyond direct measurements. Interviews conducted in the different research projects indicate, however, that a change has occurred at least at the manifest, linguistic level. A common view among the crewmembers is that cooperation with the petroleum company has improved considerably, and that safety has gained a much higher priority in recent years. In addition, the results from the working environment surveys and the eager participation at the Captain’s forum indicate that a counterculture has not been established, as can happen if management initiatives are not found meaningful.

The group facilitation carried out at the Captain’s forum has contributed in several aspects. The most important aspect in the beginning was the establishing of an arena where the participants could speak their mind freely. This was done by arranging for several opportunities to voice opinions, not only in a plenary session. By letting the participants sit in different a room during the group discussions, at their designated group table during the plenary session, and having a volunteer spokesperson address the issues on behalf of the group, the “comfortable and safe container”, in Tuecke’s (2005) words, was established. But, to ensure that the participants would talk about their thoughts on safety issues, it was not enough to arrange for group discussions. The captains also needed to trust the facilitators in each group.

Having a neutral facilitator acknowledged by the different actors is especially important in a situation where conflict and different priorities exist. In group facilitation theory, neutrality is often dichotomized as external/neutral or internal/non-neutral. When working with a client for more than ten years, the line between external and internal could appear to be more blurred. From the captains’ point of view, the neutrality of the facilitators could have been questioned due to the renewed contracts and long-lasting relationship with the representatives from the petroleum company. Because of this, we have clearly stressed that we are external and independent of the client, thus neutral. In the start-up phase of the development programme, when no representatives of the petroleum company were present in the group discussions, we assured the captains that they could speak their mind freely in the group discussions, and that voicing their opinions in the plenary sessions was voluntary. We saved the content of the group discussions for later usage through flip charts and notes taken by the group facilitators, thus we were able to give the oil company the input from the captains anonymously. Another reason why the captains trust the facilitators could be the fact that we have conducted several research projects where we have ensured their anonymity, thus gaining their trust. In addition to this, the facilitator leading the plenary discussions has always been somewhat critical of and challenging towards the oil company representatives, showing the captains that we truly intend to be independent, and, again, that they can trust us.

In recent years, some of the petroleum company representatives have joined in on the group discussions, without causing the content or the atmosphere of the discussions to be altered. This suggests that the level of trust between the two groups of participants has increased. This could partly be due to the willingness to open up for critique shown by the representatives of the petroleum company. Also, the fact that they decided to continue the initiative, despite the heated discussions in the early years, has added to the notion that the petroleum company are truly interested in making the seafarers’ work safer. It is reasonable to believe that the prolonged commitment that was demonstrated by the petroleum company has been an important factor for the positive results obtained in the programme.

To ensure the relevance of the Captain’s forum and not lay the foundations for a counterculture to emerge, the petroleum company must be ready to set in motion measures that could demand resources and effort. If the discussions lead nowhere, with the same challenges appearing year after year, it could be demoralizing for the captains. The conducted surveys show that the captains do not feel this way, quite the opposite: they feel a greater level of trust in the petroleum company regarding safety issues. Having a willingness to listen to and involve the seafarers, through the ability to withstand critique and the longevity of the development programme, has probably

contributed to this increased level of trust. As an extension to this, we have utilized the ability of the facilitator to shift between stands when discussing tense topics.

The role of the facilitator is a demanding one in this regard, because he/she has to both arrange for an atmosphere supporting constructive dialogue *and* take a critical or challenging stand. At the Captain's forum this has mainly been done in – referring to the 18-part grid of Heron (1999) – the confronting dimension with a hierarchical mode. This means that in the plenary sessions, the facilitator has had control of the direction of the discussion, and by taking a critical stand on behalf of the captains the facilitator may act as a buffer between the petroleum company representatives and the captains, thus ensuring that any potential irritation at the answers from the petroleum company representatives is directed at the facilitator. Through this, the facilitator is also contributing to revealing (potentially) different underlying interpretations and understandings, as a first step towards proceeding with “common modes of interpretation and shared understandings of experience” (Smircich, 1983). In this situation, it requires the facilitator to intervene and act in accordance with the principles and values that facilitation is based on (Schwarz, 2002; IAF, 2012) and use the competencies listed by Wong (2005) to show that he/she is not serving as an instrument for the management.

Despite the efforts of the facilitator to create an atmosphere of cooperation, the unbalanced power relation between the captains and the petroleum company still remains. The actual implementation of the measures is still in many cases in the hands of the operator. Continued trust rests on the operators' ability to actually deliver. Thus, trust must be continuously recreated by actions. The petroleum company controls much of the resources needed for change and is therefore a key actor, although the actual implementation demands a mutual commitment and efforts from all parties. Because group facilitation is an approach with numerous possibilities of variation, both in structure, topic and process interventions, it is well suited for situations where trust is of great importance. More generally, group facilitation is an approach well suited for changing culture

5. CONCLUSION

Hale et al. (2010) identify effective safety intervention strategies as those which support constructive dialogue between shopfloor and management. In this paper we have illustrated how facilitation can be applied as a methodology to achieve such a dialogue, emphasizing the building of trust between different actors. There is also some evidence of changes in aspects of the safety culture, at least on a manifest level, made possible through the longevity of the development programme, by the use of facilitation principles, and close collaboration and involvement with both the seafarers and the petroleum company representatives.

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