Safety Culture and Power in the Workplace

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The New England Consortium

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Safety culture and the issue of power

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ABSTRACT

Issues of power and conflict in organizations are rarely addressed in safety culture research. Much safety culture research thus rests upon a harmony model of organizational life. This, it is argued, is a fundamental shortcoming of the existing research. The article discusses the relationship between power-oriented and cultural approaches to organizational safety. The accident with space shuttle Challenger is used as a case, since this accident has been analysed through both approaches.

The article argues that issues of culture and power are so intertwined that safety culture research should incorporate perspectives of power and conflict. This is necessary in order to be able to give a realistic account of the dynamics of organizational life. Introducing a more power-oriented view on safety culture can also serve as the basis for important ethical considerations regarding the improvement of safety culture.

Finally, it is argued that a safe culture is not necessarily one which is homogenous and free from conflict. Having conflicting views on safety can in fact be a safety resource by serving as a kind of requisite variety that facilitates learning.

Most of the information presented here comes from Antonsen's article.

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Safety Culture and Organizations

- No clear definition of the term "safety culture", but usually it will refer to
  - "...a set of safety related attitudes, values or assumptions that are shared between members of an organization."
- He notes that this suggests organizational unity

Unity or Different Interests?

- Cites organizational development literature
- "Organizational life is characterized by differentiation, conflicts over scarce resources and the exercise of power.
- ...some researchers see organizations as coalitions of persons and groups with different and sometimes conflicting interests, rather than a unified entity"

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Power in Organizations

- [A Bug's Life - why the ants have to be kept in their place](#)

Charles Perrow – Normal Accidents, 1984

- 'I have not written anything explicitly on the culture because I doubt its utility. It wasn't 'shared values and beliefs' that overruled safety engineers at Ford and Firestone about dangerous tires; it was top management's concern for profits that hid the data from US government and lied about it (. . .) Of course there are 'cultures' (note the plural) in companies, but on issues of risk and safety I think the issue is really power.'

- Quoted by Antonsen

And Power in Organizations

- [Ants stand up to the grasshoppers](#)
  - Up to "bad grasshopper, go home"

How to consider culture in light of power?

- Safety culture research and practice is improved when power is acknowledged

- Definition from Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations (UK)
  - '(...) the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization's health and safety management' (ACSNI, 1993:23).

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Limits to this

- Antonsen is critical of this – it reduces safety culture
  - "...to an 'entity' that can be fairly easily measured, described and changed."

- How is culture established?
  - the question of cultural differentiation is ignored.
  - ...there may be multiple sets of 'individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies and patterns of behaviour'
  - these may be more or less incompatible.
  - These are not likely to "...be the same in different parts and on different levels of an organization."

Creating Culture

- Are cultural meanings shared across divisions?
- Conflict and power have roles in
  - Creation of cultures
  - Determining how subcultures relate to one another
- Creating culture requires sharing of
  - Language (vocabulary)
  - Work routines
  - Understandings of the group's activities
  - And more

Steven Lukes – Three Dimensions of Power

- First based on one or more of:
  - Position Power
  - Information and expertise – power of 'know-how' and 'know-what' - the power of being irreplaceable
  - Control of rewards and resources
  - Coercive power – ability to constrain, block, interfere, or punish
  - Alliances and networks – power of 'know-who'
  - Personal power

As presented by Antonsen

Lukes 2nd

- "Covert tug of war where groups or actors struggle to set the agenda..."
- "Actors' access to and control of agendas"
- Preferential treatment to those who have a seat at the table
  - Often ignoring the concerns of those absent

Lukes' 3rd

- "...not all exercises of power can be traced back to individually chosen acts."

- "...social systems tend to be biased in reflecting the values of a few groups at the expense of other groups."

- "...enables the dominant to influence the dominated to adopt the goals, values and attitudes of the dominant."

- Antonsen points out that this "...introduces a notion of culture into the study of power."

The Challenger Launch – January 1986

- [Space Shuttle Challenger Explosion](#)
- Rubber O-rings failed to seal the joints of the solid rocket booster.
  - The O-rings lost their elasticity in the unusually cold weather that day.
- The O-ring problem was the discussed in a teleconference the night before the launch
  - between NASA and Morton Thiokol -contractor responsible for the solid rocket booster
- Combination of rubber O-rings and cold weather could severely threaten the safety of the mission
- Morton Thiokol engineers recommended delaying the launch

As presented by Antonsen, except for the YouTube link

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But...

- NASA officials at the Marshall Space Flight Center, under pressure to justify the huge costs involved with the space missions, responded quite harshly to this recommendation.

- Facing this reaction, senior managers at Morton Thiokol changed their minds and recommended the launch, against the advice of the engineers.

- The fact that the engineers had voiced concerns about the launch was never communicated from the Marshall Center to higher levels of the NASA organization.

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Teleconference Decision Followed Other Decisions

- A history of deviations from rocket motor safety concerns – over several shuttle missions

- Diane Vaughan wrote of 'normalization of deviance' due to cost effectiveness pressures

- Snook later labeled this "practical drift"

Power in Organizations

- "Normalization of deviance does not come about in a power-free context." (Antonsen)

- Top level NASA managers had to sell the shuttle program to Congress as
  - " a project that would, to a great extent, pay its own way."

- Committed NASA to goals more like those of a commercial organization

- Quotes from Antonsen

Culture / Power

- The normalization of deviance not just from daily practice, but also
  - "...the result of a system bias in NASA...introduced by powerful forces."
- Bob Scholte (anthropologist)
  - Culture consists of webs of significance that actors spin themselves – but
  - '...very few do the actual spinning, while the majority is simply caught."

- Quotes from Antonsen

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Lessons Regarding Safety Culture?

- "There is often disagreement about what is dangerous and what is safe"

- There are shared concepts in organizations

- But also concepts that are not shared

- "Building consensus can easily turn into manipulation"

  – "A culture which influences safety positively is not necessarily ... homogenous and free from conflict, but one in which there is enough headroom to deal with conflicting views in a constructive manner.

- Quotes from Antonsen

Questions for Discussion

- What are the conflicting views of safety – and what groups of actors present these views?

- What attitudes, values or assumptions about safety and health in the work environment tend to not be shared when talking about safety culture?
  - How might this be related to the balance of power in a workplace?

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