

Health & Safety – Essential corporate identity or additional burden?

Corporate health & safety is visible in many ways. Many of us are all well familiar with common denominations, such as HSE, HSEC, HSEQ, SHEQ, etc. All describe in one way or the other regulations and guidelines in the areas of health, safety, environment, quality and communities.

I have a mining industry background and I am happy to have experienced HSE with a major mining company. I usually hear discussions centred around the usefulness and applicability of HSE. Some colleagues argue that HSE is more of an additional, paper-heavy burden, that prevents us from getting on with our jobs, than representing anything useful. I argue that HSE should be an essential part of corporate identity, and that direction and leadership from management will result in a sustainable company culture.

Why is HSE important?

HSE is not just there to keep shareholders happy or to prevent people getting injured and environments being polluted. HSE is more of a philosophy that, if correctly applied and communicated, allows us to run operations in a sustainable manner – and this should be everyone’s goal. We would like to achieve a positive and lasting impact on our surroundings whether it is constructing a new office complex in downtown Paris, operating an oil rig in the Caspian Sea or extracting minerals from an African desert.

Development of corporate HSE schemes

Historically, many companies have started corporate HSE schemes because a.) they have experienced a tragic event with fatalities or other impacts on the company’s reputation or b.) they had to adopt a scheme as part of required governmental policies. When looking into how HSE schemes develop, it becomes evident that to start with HSE plays more of a *reactive* role. This means that incidents happen and a company tries to respond to particular drivers, risks and hazards that led to the incident in the first place. When HSE schemes have run for a number of years and employees are aware of major risks and hazards, HSE undergoes a transition into a *preventative* function. In an ideal case (“Zero Harm”), all employees are fully aware of and communicate risks before an incident might happen, thus preventing the incident. Whether “Zero Harm” can be realistically achieved outside planning offices though, is another question.

The role of company leadership

A particular role of introducing and communicating HSE-related matters falls to company leadership. Management, in particular, should lead by example and communicate key messages to each and every employee in the organisational structure. This means that, not only managers are promoting HSE discussions, but also workers at the lower end of the organisation, who will carry out the work that is actually dangerous and potentially harmful. It is also important that management promotes a *sensible* and *practical* approach to HSE, and help to maintain productivity at a high level, whilst still ensuring that operations are

performing in a safe and sustainable manner.

Where does it start? – It's not just paperwork.

HSE starts with company management agreeing on an HSE policy, which outlines key messages and targets that the company wants to achieve in a given timeframe. The policy will act as an umbrella for all other HSE initiatives in the organisation. Risk assessments, active discussion of HSE matters through communication forums (meetings, Take 5s, interactions), drawing up of work procedures and other documentation follows next and requires positive interaction between company leadership, HSE advisors and staff. The key point to note is that HSE is not just paperwork – it is a philosophy that should accompany each employee at work and (ideally) beyond.

As always, I am keen to hear your experiences and opinions about this topic.

Best regards,
Benedikt