Managers' viewpoint on factors influencing their commitment to safety: An empirical investigation in five Finnish industrial organisations

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A B S T R A C T

Managers' strong commitment to safety is a key element of a successful safety management, culture and climate. Several studies have approached managers' commitment from the employees' point of view, but research approaching commitment from the managers' viewpoint is scarce. This qualitative study aims to identify the organisational factors that hinder or promote managers' commitment to safety and to suggest organisational measures that can be applied to support managers' commitment to safety. A total of 49 managers in five industrial organisations were interviewed. In addition, a workshop for the safety professionals of the participating companies was organised to review the interview results and to suggest organisational measures to support managers' commitment to safety.

The managers identified role overload, production demands, overly formal safety procedures, external safety goals, workforce attitudes and managers' attitudes as the most common factors hindering their commitment to safety. On the other hand, the factors that promote managers' commitment to safety are increasing managers' safety awareness, influencing managers' safety attitudes, recognising managers' safety commitment, emphasising managers' safety responsibilities, developing adequate organisational safety procedures, superiors' encouragement and support, benchmarking others' safety activities, understanding the economic effects of safety, and safety improvement. The suggested organisational measures to support managers' commitment to safety include inspirational and participative management training; appropriate safety objectives; peer, superior and top management support; campaigns and competitions; employee safety training; and simplified safety procedures and reporting. The study expands on previous studies on supervisors' safety engagement and suggests practical organisational measures to promote managers' commitment to safety.

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1. Introduction

In many industrial organisations, safety is a value and strategic objective (Nenonen et al., 2015). The valuation and prioritisation of safety are increasingly being evaluated by customers, employees and collaborators (Biggs and Biggs, 2013; Montero et al., 2009). Moreover, many industrial organisations nowadays procure services from external service providers and operate at multi-employer worksites where safety is of common interest (Nenonen, 2012).

Despite changes in society and various technological innovations, the number of occupational injuries has not decreased as expected during the last decades, as it did from the beginning of the 1900s until 1961 (Petersen, 2000). More recently, significant declines in rates of reported work-related injuries and illnesses have been observed among U.S. union carpenters (e.g. Lipscomb et al., 2014; McCoy et al., 2013) and in the construction industry as a whole (Welch et al., 2007). A general downward trend has also been seen in work injuries in Denmark across all sectors, but the number of injuries in the construction sector has not changed significantly in the past three decades (Lander et al., 2016; Nielsen et al., 2015). The rate of workplace injury is often seen as associated with the business cycle; a declining number of reported work injuries is observed during recessions (Asfaw et al., 2011; Boone et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2009; Nielsen et al., 2015). In Finland, the number of occupational injuries has slightly decreased in recent years, mainly due to regulatory changes, development activities and reduced working hours (FAII, 2014). Although safety records have shown some improvement, more safety development measures are needed to meet the demand for safety development. Supporting managers' role in and commitment to safety could help organisations in this endeavor (Simola, 2005; Takala et al., 2014).

Managers have both the power and the obligation to take the necessary actions in relation to safety issues (Frick, 2013). The managerial role presumes knowledge and understanding of safety issues and procedures (Simola, 2005) as well as an understanding of the business effects of safety (Veltri et al., 2013). Managers' resources and commitment, along with organisational support, are essential to the success of safety improvements (Conchie et al., 2013; Frick, 2013; Fruhen et al., 2014; Hale et al., 2010; Hardison et al., 2014; Tappura et al., 2014). Several studies have shown that the continuous support of top management is critical to success in occupational safety interventions (Hale et al., 2010; Hasle et al., 2008; Saksvik et al., 2002). Effective organisational interventions are required to support managers and to develop procedures to help managers protect the employees' health and safety (Hale and Hovden, 1998; Hale et al., 2010; Law et al., 2011). Nevertheless, many managers lack power to take action because upper management often ignores its duty to manage safety and delegates issues to first-line supervisors without providing adequate resources, support, guidance or monitoring of the results (Frick, 2013).

Organisational structures and safety procedures should enhance managers' ability to focus on safety in their workplace, since the origins of safety problems are often at the organisational level (Cox and Griffiths, 2005; Idris et al., 2012; Skagert, 2010; Tappura et al., 2014). Many safety issues are high-level issues, and frontline managers cannot resolve them without support from upper management (Frick, 2013). To support managers in their safety role, it is important to understand their perceptions. Hence, information is needed about the organisational factors that promote and hinder managers' commitment to safety. Moreover, information and examples are needed about the implementation of organisational measures that increase managers' awareness of safety issues and their commitment to safety-related activities.

This study discusses the organisational factors that influence managers' commitment to safety, e.g. safety policies and procedures, as well as suggests organisational measures that could support their commitment. The objective of this study is to chart the factors that hinder or promote managers' commitment to safety from the managerial perspective and to complement the previous literature with empirical findings from five Finnish industrial organisations. The study expands on previous study about supervisors' engagement in safety leadership within the construction industry (Conchie et al., 2013) by providing more detailed information on the hindering and promoting factors of managers' commitment to safety in other industries. In addition, this study provides new information about organisational measures to promote managers' commitment to safety. Moreover, it examines managers' commitment to safety from their perspective, something that has not yet been extensively studied.

1.1. Managers' commitment to safety

Managers' commitment to safety can be defined as the extent to which they place a high priority on safety and how effectively they communicate and act regarding safety issues (Neal and Griffin, 2004, as cited in Fruhen et al., 2014). Engagement is often synonymous with commitment (Conchie et al., 2013) and is defined as the extent to which a person shows energy, enthusiasm, a sense of inspiration and full concentration (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, as cited in Conchie et al., 2013). In this study, commitment refers to managers' commitment to safety management and leadership. Several studies have suggested that an organisation's industry or operating environment are not predictive of safety performance but that commitment to safety is important (Hale et al., 2010; Killimett, 2006; Veltri et al., 2013; Yorio and Wachter, 2013). These findings highlight the value of managers exhibiting a strong commitment to safety.

Achieving sustainable safety performance requires paying attention to both safety management systems and cultural change in organisations (Fitzgerald, 2006; Killimett, 2006). Through their actions and examples, managers can positively affect the safety culture and climate to encourage safe behaviours and activities for employees (Biggs et al., 2013; Fernández-Muñiz et al., 2007; Flin, 2003; Fruhen et al., 2014; Guldenmund, 2000, 2007; McDonald et al., 2000; Reason, 1997). In particular, leadership behaviour is important with regard to safety performance (Clarke, 2013; Griffin and Neal, 2000; Jitwasinkul et al., 2016; Kapp, 2012; Tappura and Nenonen, 2016). Both the transactional and transformational leadership styles (Bass, 1985) are related to effective leadership, with the best managers demonstrating both styles when motivating employee safety participation and safety compliance (Clarke, 2013; Hoffmeister et al., 2014; Kapp, 2012; Tappura and Nenonen, 2016). According to previous studies (Clarke, 2013; Hoffmeister et al., 2014; Tappura and Nenonen, 2016), specific leadership facets (Bass, 1985) are emphasised with regard to safety performance. They include: idealised influence (such as being a role model for safety and creating trusting relationships), inspirational motivation (such as fostering safety goals and using inspirational appeals), intellectual stimulation (such as empowering and consulting with employees) and active management by exception (such as monitoring employees' safety behaviour, encouraging safety related learning and sanctioning rule violations). Managers who successfully demonstrate honest and consistent prioritisation of worker safety can promote the development of workers' trust in the importance of safety; this may motivate workers to behave safely (Jitwasinkul et al., 2016; Törner, 2011).

Employees' perceptions of managers' commitment to safety is one of the most significant predictors of accidents and near accidents (Cohen, 1975; Hale et al., 1997; Rundmo, 1992; Smith et al., 1978) and predicts their reporting (Clarke, 1996). Moreover, managers' visible commitment is essential for employees to accept changes to the working routines (Clarke, 1996; Huse and Cummings, 1985). Management's commitment to and active participation in safety is also one major aspect of occupational health and safety systems and safety management systems (e.g. Carder and Ragan, 2003; Fernández-Muñiz et al., 2009; OHSAS 18001:2007; Redinger and Levine, 1998; Robson et al., 2007), as well as effective safety interventions (Chen et al., 2009; Hale et al., 2010; Mearns et al., 2003; O'Toole, 2002; Vinodkumar and Bhasi, 2011; Vredenburgh, 2002).

Top management's commitment, active role and support are often emphasised in relation to successful safety interventions (Fernández-Muñiz et al., 2007; Hale et al., 2010; Hale and Hovden, 1998; Michael et al., 2005; OHSAS 18001:2007; Shannon et al., 1997). Employees' perceptions of senior managers' safety attitudes and behaviours form the basis of their safety behaviour and, in turn, their safety performance (Clarke, 1999; Cooper and Phillips, 1994; Cox et al., 1998; Zohar, 1980). Thus, top management should visibly demonstrate their commitment to the continual improvement of safety performance (Geldart et al., 2010; OHSAS 18002:2008). They should also ensure organisational measures and support for managers at different levels of the organisation (Frick, 2013; OHSAS 18001:2007).

Petersen (2000) suggested the following criteria for safety excellence, reflecting management's commitment to safety at different organisational levels:

- Safety system enforcing supervisory performance
- Middle managers' involvement in the threefold role of
  - Ensuring supervisory performance.