Middle managers' role in safeguarding OHS: The case of the shipping industry

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ABSTRACT

Employee participation and commitment from top management are important factors in effective occupational health and safety (OHS) management. However, between top management and employees there are middle managers, who are given little room in the top management/employee dichotomy. In this context, using the shipping industry as a case study, this paper investigates the impact of senior officer leadership on ratings' participation in OHS management. Results suggest that while ratings' precarious employment coupled with a steep hierarchy of command on board ships make upward communication in formal environments practically impossible, it is possible for senior officers to elicit effective participation from ratings by making good use of informal settings, working alongside ratings and engaging with them in social activities. Such leadership efforts bring in temporary relief to the constraints of participation and create spaces for them to contribute in the management of shipboard OHS.

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1. Introduction

Over the last four decades the self-regulation approach, which requires employers to systematically assess and mitigate workplace hazards, has become prevalent in the management of occupational health and safety (OHS). Research suggests that effective OHS is heavily reliant on the resources employers put in place (see Nytro et al., 1998; LaMontagne et al., 2004).

Equally important to the effectiveness of OHS management is employee participation (Dawson et al., 1988). Safety experts have developed effective scientific models using techniques such as fuzzy logic and the analytical hierarchy process (AHP) to evaluate and mitigate workplace risks (Dagdeviren et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2012; Ouedraogo et al., 2011). Applications of these models, however, require a good knowledge of workplace hazard, such as the probability of occurrence of accident and the severity of the consequences. One group that should have such an intimate knowledge of workplace and its potential hazards are those who work there, i.e. the employees. Furthermore, they have the most direct interest in safeguarding workplace health and safety. As such, their participation in identifying, assessing, and mitigating workplace hazard is crucial (Gunningham, 2008). In fact one of the key indicators of genuine employer commitment is in their ability to elicit effective participation from the employees in the management of workplace health and safety. Empirical research in various workplace settings has repeatedly confirmed that effective employee participation helps to significantly reduce injury rates (Nichols et al., 1995; Reilly et al., 1995; Shannon, 1998; Shannon et al., 1996, 1997; Walters and Nichols, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that the need for effective employee participation is explicitly mentioned in several guidelines and statutes. The EU Framework Directive 89/391 (article: 11), for example, states that 'employers shall consult with workers and/or their representatives and allow them to take part in discussions on all questions relating to safety and health at work' (EEC, 1989).

In practice, however, unfavourable social and economic preconditions for employment inhibit employees from participating in OHS management. Short-term employment and a lack of organised labour, which commonly requires trade union support, are two prominent concerns identified in a number of studies (Aronsson, 1999; Quinlan and Mayhew, 2000; Naswall and De Witte, 2003; Lloyds and James, 2008).

Between the top levels of management and employees, however, there are frequently middle managers, who have been given relatively less prominence in this debate. This paper focuses on them, examining their supervisory strategies in eliciting employee participation in the management of OHS under the constraint of unfavourable employment relations in the shipping industry.

2. Literature review

The stark employer/employee dichotomy may not be strictly applicable in many of the current business settings. By developing a model of class structure Wright (2000) showed that each employee may be slotted into a particular class as per his/her organisational decision making power, possession of work skills and in the number of workers employed by him or her in the orga-

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nisation. Managers who possess high authority, are highly skilled in their field and employ relatively large number of employees are seen as 'employers'. They are typically Chief Executive Officers, directors and senior managers, and their authorities include OHS policymaking. By contrast those who have a low level of authority in their jobs, do not employ others or do not possess expert skills are termed as 'employees'. In between these two extremes lies the middle class – such as the first-line supervisors – which is the centre of investigation in this study.

As the first-line supervisors interact with employees directly, their supervisory practices are easily observable and reveal to employees the relative priorities of management and behaviours supported in the organisation (Zohar, 2010). This enables them to have a direct impact on employees' safety perceptions and performances. Research suggests that if employees find supervisors approachable they are more likely to perceive their work environment as safe (Watson et al., 2005). Employee safety performance consists of two types of safety behaviours: safety compliance, that is, 'adhering to safety procedures and carrying out work in a safe manner', and safety participation, that is 'helping co-workers, promoting the safety program within the workplace, demonstrating initiative, and putting effort into improving safety in the workplace' (Neal et al., 2000, p. 101; Inness et al., 2010). In terms of safety compliance, research often finds that if supervisors set up good examples by following safety rules and taking safe working initiatives, then these tendencies are likely to be emulated by the workers (Bandura, 1977; Inness et al., 2010). Clarke and Ward's (2006) research suggested that employee safety participation is influenced by supervisors' leadership strategies. They found that 'soft' and 'rational' strategies (including consultation, inspirational appeal, and rational persuasion) improved the workplace safety climate which encouraged safety participation. Lauver et al. (2009) too found that when employees believed that their supervisors cared about safety, they were more likely to report incidents and near misses. Furthermore, research by Simard and Marchand (1997) suggests that safety participation and safety compliance are interrelated, as it revealed that when supervisors encouraged employee safety participation, the latter were more likely to comply with safety rules.

Unsurprisingly then previous research also suggests that different supervisory practices can produce different safety outcomes. Mattila et al. (1994) found that when supervisors paid more attention to monitoring worker performance, gave workers feedback about the consequences more often, and spent more time communicating with workers about non-work related topics, the workplaces suffered from fewer accidents. Likewise, Zohar (2002) observed that increased safety related interaction between supervisors and workers resulted in reduction of minor-injury rate. This is because such interaction served to modify workers' behaviours and improve safety compliance (Zohar and Luria, 2003). Similarly the research of Simard and Marchand (1994) showed that injury rates were lower in workplaces where supervisors were able to encourage employees' participatory involvement in accident prevention.

Another key aspect of effective OHS implementation, as discussed previously, is that employment relations affect employee participation, and thus they may also constrain supervisors' role in promoting safety participation (Simard and Marchand, 1995). The influence of employment relations on safety related supervisory practices, however, has attracted relatively little research, and thus the impact of employment relations on supervisory strategies in motivating workforce remains relatively unexplored. This paper aims to addresses this gap, using the shipping industry as a case study. An overview of the relevant features of the shipping industry where this study is based is presented next.

3. Shipping industry

3.1. Seafarers' employment condition

Safety in the shipping industry is a major concern. One study on fatality on British registered ships, for instance, shows that between 1976 and 2002 the rate of fatalities was between 13 and 28 times higher than the general British workforce (Roberts and Marlow, 2005). Such figures are consistent with those form of studies conducted in different parts of the world and over different time periods. One main causal factor for such dismal safety records is located in the industry's poor regulatory standard. In part this is due to the nature of the business in which the workplace is physically separated from the managers and regulators. While this remains a characteristic feature of the industry, in the last 40 years the concern is much exacerbated due to the growing fragmentation of the industry. In this period the ship-owners – who predominantly came from the traditional maritime countries, such as UK and Norway – moved away from national regulatory control. They chose to regulate their ships by new and more lenient regulatory countries, known as the Open Registries which include nations such as Panama and Honduras. By imposing no restrictions on employees' nationalities, Open Registries enable ship operators to employ cheaper seafarers from new labour supply nations, such as countries in the East Europe and the Far East. By the beginning of the current century nearly half of the global shipping tonnage was registered with the Open Registry countries (Alderton and Winchester, 2002; Alderton et al., 2004; ISL, 2009).

As a result of restructuring there is now little overlap between the jurisdiction of a ship, location of its management office, its trade route and the nationalities of its owner and those of the seafarers sailing on it. A consequence of this is that it weakens the influence of the trade unions. The local trade unions, which in theory could support the 'local' seafarers through collective bargaining with the ship-owners within the national jurisdiction, find it difficult to have a similar level of influence in an international setting (Lillie, 2006). All these developments pose new threats to what was already a challenging task to regulate the industry.

Arguably the worst sufferers as a consequence of this development are the seafarers. By taking advantage of regulatory leniency towards seafarers' employment standard and the lack of effective trade union influence the employers engage seafarers on weaker employment conditions. It enables ship-owners, for instance, to operate their ships with fewer crews on relatively lower wages. Moreover they employ seafarers on short-term contracts thereby not committing to their income security (Beth et al., 1984; Bloor et al., 2000; Alderton et al., 2004).

The responsibility of managing OHS is thus largely left to the ship-owners or to their technical managing team working on their behalf. The increasing importance of the ship-managers in the management of seafarers' OHS is also reflected in the adoption of the International Safety Management (ISM) Code in 1998. This formal piece of regulation was introduced to the global shipping industry to make ship managers assume greater responsibility for managing OHS in their own organisations.

3.2. Shipping organisational structure

In the shipping industry the onshore managers possess varying degrees of authority, skills and employing power. In a rough layout of a shipping organisation, the CEO and the board of directors control organisational budget allocation and policy making (see Fig. 1). They are supported by senior managers who have some input in the above functions but are more involved with the external liaison in the company business. The lowermost layer of onshore managers is