



Review

Safety leadership practices for organizational safety compliance: Developing a research agenda from a review of the literature



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ABSTRACT

Safety leadership is asserted to positively influence safety compliance amongst employees. We examine this assertion by conducting a systematic literature review of the available academic literature on safety leadership practices and observed safety outcomes. We identified 25 empirical studies, the majority of which measured leadership through generic scales (MLQ and LMX). Closer scrutiny of the outcome measures suggested that these were mainly aligned to the implementation and operations phases of the OHSAS 18001 safety management systems framework. We conclude that safety compliance has been narrowly defined in academic study, but in practice embraces a much wider range of activities. While safety leadership may contribute to successfully achieving these other actions, there is no empirical evidence for this. Moreover, there is considerable critique of transformational and transactional leadership, so that the specification of desired leadership practices is problematic. We propose that a broader conceptualization of safety compliance requires safety leadership to embrace 'plural' forms of leadership. We draw attention to the narrow range of contexts in which safety leadership has been empirically studied and suggest other settings for investigation. Alternative methods for investigating safety leadership other than scales of leadership behaviour are suggested to enrich our understanding of safety leadership and so improve safety compliance.

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1. Introduction

Leadership is an activity (Raelin, 2011) that varies depending upon the context (Denis et al., 2010), although this is frequently ignored despite calls for greater attention to be given to the context within which leadership is enacted (Osborn et al., 2002; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006). Studies of safety leadership however have focused on the style or behaviour (often transactional or transformational) of the leader rather than on the activities and practices that constitute leadership. Moreover, they fail also to account for the influence of context on these practices, following the pattern of the wider leadership literature. For example a recent meta-analysis of safety leadership styles as antecedents of safety behaviours (Clarke, 2013) took no account of context and how this might influence choice of styles or required behaviours. Conchie et al. (2013) noted this lack of research on the impact of context on leadership, using it to justify their study of supervisors' engagement with safety leadership.

In the UK an organization's safety environment is replete with legal requirements, stemming from the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (1974), safety standards (e.g. BSI, 2004), guidance on safety practices from the Health and Safety Executive (e.g. HSE, 2013) and specific approved codes of practice (ACOPs). In addition to these nationally mandated frameworks are voluntary codes which can be equally compelling (Rocha, 2010). One of these – OHSAS 18001 (BSI, 2007) “has gained de facto international standard status, p. 232” (Gallagher and Underhill, 2012) following widespread adoption in more than 50k companies in 100 countries (Hasle and Zwetsloot, 2011). This provides a global benchmark for safety practices in organizations and we use it here to permit comparison of studies from different regulatory contexts. Safety “regulations” such as these are an integral component of the external environment and a key aspect of the safety leader's role is to ensure their organization is compliant with them. Members of the top management team have a legal responsibility to ensure their organization's safety management systems (broadly defined) are compliant with these regulations. However, the content of these systems is extensive ranging from risk assessment and hazard identification to evaluating compliance against organizational policies and practices, and also including training, operational control and emergency preparedness (e.g. HSE, 1997). Achieving compliance with all of these different requirements is a challenging task for the safety leader(s) demanding the adoption of a range of different practices. Practices to ensure organizational safety compliance therefore appear to encompass much more than those specified in the narrow definition of safety compliance provided by Neal et al. (2000, p. 101), namely “adhering to safety procedures and carrying out work in a safe manner”, and regularly rehearsed in subsequent studies of safety leadership. Achieving organizational safety compliance, broadly understood, would require differential leadership responses depending on a combination of the nature and object of the regulation; the role or position of the leader; and the role and position of the employees required to comply; as well as their perceptions of risk; and the wider organizational context.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine empirical studies published in academic journals to discover the extent to which the reported practices of individuals ascribed as safety leaders ensure organizational compliance with this wider range of safety requirements voluntarily demanded of organizations through adherence to OHSAS 18001 and to develop a research agenda to investigate the opportunities revealed by this wider view. Specifically, this paper has three objectives. First, it will identify practices aimed at ensuring organizational safety compliance enacted by those deemed to be safety leaders in organizations. This will be achieved

by revealing the implicit practices of safety leaders inherent in existing individual behavioural measures used in current studies and aligning them to the appropriate elements of the OHSAS 18001 framework. Second, drawing on selected reviews of the wider leadership literature we will suggest how a newer conceptualization of leadership, namely distributed leadership, may engender a different form of compliance by employees that may support organizational safety compliance. Rather than relying on the traditional psychological approaches to understanding individual behaviours and motivations and personal characteristics of individual leaders in relation to safety, we draw on more relational and practice-based perspectives from sociology (Emirbayer, 1997; Nicolini, 2013) to present an alternative approach to safety leadership to support organizational safety compliance. Third, we will develop an agenda for safety leadership research, by identifying opportunities that arise from deficiencies in current research.

The paper is structured as follows. Following the systematic literature review methodology outlined for management and business studies by Tranfield et al. (2003) we first conduct a scoping study that provides an overview of current perspectives on safety leadership, the subjective nature of risk and motivations for compliance. The method deployed to conduct a more focused systematic literature review to elicit studies of safety leadership roles and practices is then described. The descriptive analysis (or findings) of the review reports the practices enacted by safety leaders to achieve organizational compliance. It also provides an analysis of the different empirical contexts in which safety leadership has been investigated. This is followed by a discussion of the thematic findings arising from the review. These report the current state of knowledge in the field and also what is not known by identifying limitations of existing work and opportunities for further research.

2. Scoping study overview

2.1. Safety leadership

According to the HSE sponsored literature review of effective leadership behaviours for safety (Lekka and Healey, 2012) existing safety leadership research published in a variety of academic journals, books and policy documents has focused on either transformational–transactional leadership or leader–member exchange (LMX).

Transformational leadership may be defined as “leader behaviours that transform and inspire followers to perform beyond expectations while transcending self-interest for the good of the organization” (Avolio et al., 2009, p. 423). Transformational leadership comprises four leader behaviours (Bass, 1985) namely; idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration and is characterized by value-based and individualized interaction, which results in better exchange quality and greater concern for welfare (Clarke, 2013). *Idealized influence* is based on trust and occurs when leaders demonstrate high standards of moral conduct in their own behaviour, becoming role models for their subordinates. *Inspirational motivation* occurs when leaders provide clarity, communicate a positive value-based vision for the future state of the organization and its employees and challenge employees to go beyond their personal interests and focus their attention on the goals of the collective. Leaders exhibit *intellectual stimulation* when they encourage employees to share their perspectives on issues, to challenge organizational norms, question assumptions and to think creatively. Leaders draw on a variety of opinions in order to make decisions. Leaders displaying *individual consideration* recognize the unique needs and abilities of the followers and by adapting their approach seek to coach or mentor them in order that they might reach their full

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