



Important factors in common among organizations making large improvement in OHS performance: Results of an exploratory multiple case study



Lynda S. Robson^{a,*}, Benjamin C. Amick III^{a,1}, Cindy Moser^a, Mark Pagell^{b,2}, Elizabeth Mansfield^a, Harry S. Shannon^c, Michael B. Swift^a, Sheilah Hogg-Johnson^a, Siobhan Cardoso^a, Harriet South^a

^a Institute for Work & Health, 481 University Ave., Suite 800, Toronto, Ontario M5G 2E9, Canada

^b Schulich School of Business, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada

^c Department of Clinical Epidemiology & Biostatistics, McMaster University, 1200 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8N 3Z5, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study sought to identify the factors important to *large* improvement in workplace occupational health and safety (OHS) performance. Mixed methods were used to systematically identify 12 organizations in a workers' compensation database that had made large and intentional improvement in workplace OHS performance in Ontario, Canada, during 1998–2008 (i.e., “breakthrough change” (BTC) cases). Four of these organizations were selected for in-depth case study (two manufacturers, a grocery and a social agency). Cross-case analysis and consideration of existing literature led to a 12-element conceptual model with organizational learning at its core. Four elements were involved in the initiation of BTC: external influence, organizational motivation to improve OHS, new OHS knowledge and a knowledge transformation leader. Five other elements were involved in the process of BTC: responsiveness to OHS concerns, positive social dynamics, continuous improvement pattern, simultaneous operational improvement, and supportive internal context. Finally, three elements are outcomes of BTC: integrated OHS knowledge, decreased OHS risk, and decreased injury and illness. These concepts can be used in future research regarding workplace improvement in OHS performance.

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1. Introduction

Although the rates of work-related injuries and physical illnesses have declined over the past two decades in developed countries, uncertainty remains about the mix of strategies regulatory authorities should use for further reduction. For decision-makers within workplaces, there is still a need to learn what specific steps should be undertaken to improve OHS outcomes. This exploratory multiple case study addresses gaps of knowledge in these areas by

contributing to new theoretical development regarding how and why organizations improve in OHS performance.

Research has provided much information about the determinants of organizational performance in OHS, most often from cross-sectional studies. Important determinants include OHS management (e.g., Cullen et al., 2005; Fernandez-Muniz et al., 2009; Gallagher and Underhill, 2012; Hale and Hovden, 1998; Robson et al., 2007; Shannon et al., 1997), leadership in OHS (e.g., Barling et al., 2002; Hofmann and Morgeson, 1999; Kelloway et al., 2006; Zacharatos et al., 2005; Zohar, 2002), employee participation in OHS (e.g., Aksorn and Hadikusumo, 2008; Christian et al., 2009; Shannon et al., 1997); safety culture (Guldenmund, 2000) and safety climate (e.g., Beus et al., 2010; Neal and Griffin, 2006; Zohar and Luria, 2005). Much less is known about determinants and mechanisms of OHS performance *improvement*. We would expect the two sets of determinants to overlap, but not necessarily be the same. Some determinants may be particularly important to improvement. Whereas the management and organizational literatures have many theories and models regarding organizational change to improve workplace performance (reviewed below), the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lrobson@iwh.on.ca (L.S. Robson), bamick@iwh.on.ca, bamickii@fiu.edu (B.C. Amick III), cmoser@iwh.on.ca (C. Moser), mark.pagell@ucd.ie (M. Pagell), elizabeth.mansfield@utoronto.ca (E. Mansfield), shannonh@mcmaster.ca (H.S. Shannon), mswift@iwh.on.ca (M.B. Swift), shoggjohnson@iwh.on.ca (S. Hogg-Johnson), scardoso@iwh.on.ca (S. Cardoso).

¹ Present address: Department of Health Policy and Management, Robert Stempel College of Public Health & Social Work, Florida International University, 11200 SW 8 St, AHC 5-453, Miami, FL 33199, United States.

² Present address: UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, University College Dublin, Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

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OHS literature has a sparse theoretical base regarding workplace improvement in OHS performance. This study aims to address that weakness.

OHS intervention studies certainly contribute to the knowledge base about factors important in workplace change, but they usually have a narrow focus on a particular type of intervention. In contrast, the starting point in the present research was the outcome of interest – *large* improvement – and we sought to understand what explains this improvement. Our primary research objective was to identify the factors important to *large* workplace improvement in OHS performance. The long term aim is to generate knowledge applicable to the design of OHS regulatory systems and to workplaces seeking improvement in OHS. This research studied a varied group of workplaces that underwent large improvement, and derived a common set of explanatory factors. Based on these, we propose a model of “breakthrough change” in workplace OHS performance that has organizational learning at its core.

2. Theory

Here we review organizational change theory, which informed our data collection and analysis. We then review concepts from the organizational learning and positive organizational scholarship field, which aided our interpretation of the research findings.

2.1. Organizational change theory

The OHS field has previously benefited from transferring or adapting concepts first described and studied in the organizational literature. For example, safety climate research was based on prior work on organizational climate (Zohar, 1980). The literature on (generic) organizational change, which is defined as “a difference in form, quality, or state over time in an organizational entity” (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995, p. 512), may therefore be relevant to organizational change specific to workplace OHS performance. The literature is vast, but reviews have been provided by Burke (2008), Martins (2011), Van de Ven and Poole (1995), and Weick and Quinn (1999). The review by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) organizes the literature into three conceptual streams and advocates that all three perspectives be included in subsequent research. One stream is concerned with how the external *context* (e.g. government regulations) or internal *context* (e.g. size) influences the nature or degree of organizational change (e.g., Damanpour, 1991). Another stream is concerned with the *content* of change; i.e., which organizational features (e.g. structure, leadership) should be targeted by change initiatives to achieve intended outcomes (e.g., Burke and Litwin, 1992). Finally, the *process*-oriented literature considers the sequence of actions an organization must take to make change (e.g., Lewin, 1947; Kotter, 1995).

2.2. Organizational learning theory

Organizational learning is sometimes seen as a sub-field of the organizational change field (e.g., Martins, 2011). It is concerned with an organization’s acquisition of new knowledge, its distribution, interpretation, and retention (Huber, 1991), as well as its impacts. Reviews are provided by Argote and Miron-Spektor (2011), Huber (1991), Schulz (2002), and van Wijk et al. (2008). Although organizational learning may involve changes in individual cognitions, the primary emphasis is on changes in *organizational routines*, which are “recurrent sequences of action that span multiple organizational actors and assets,” such as “organizational rules, roles, conventions, strategies, structures, technologies, cultural practices and capabilities” (Schulz, 2002, p. 415).

2.3. Application of organizational change and learning theories to OHS

The application of organizational learning concepts to OHS has been slow to develop. Gherardi and Nicolini (2000) and Broberg and Hermund (2004) drew from the field of sociology of science and technology, including actor-network theory, to consider how external actors (e.g. OHS consultants) transfer knowledge to organizations. Broberg and Hermund (2004) identified three roles for consultants: technical expert, process consultant who helps support internal development in OHS, and “political reflective navigator” who is “active in building and stabilizing networks [of actors and artefacts] to support the integration of work environment aspects into technological change.” Hasle and Jensen (2006) proposed a model of change management in OHS, drawing from theories of organizational learning, power, and change management. Drupsteen et al. (2013) introduced a model of learning from safety incidents by combining safety professional opinion and more general organizational learning concepts.

The application of other types of organizational change theories to OHS is limited. Carrillo (2011) discussed how complexity concepts could be applied to OHS, and Nielsen (2014) carried out a workplace intervention based on such concepts. Other OHS intervention literature is either atheoretical or uses theories with a focus on the individual, rather than on the organization (Goldenhar and Schulte, 1994; Kristensen, 2005; Wijk and Mathiassen, 2011).

2.4. Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)

Another body of literature found relevant to the interpretation of our research findings is known as Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). This emerged recently as a distinct field (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron and Spreitzer, 2012; Caza and Cameron, 2009; Center for Positive Organizations, 2014). It is “concerned primarily with the study of especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations” (Cameron, 2008, p. 1261). As such, the field encompasses and builds upon relevant existing theories and practices, such as the job characteristics model and appreciative inquiry, as well as newer developments. Associations between positive phenomena and positive outcomes are of particular interest. One notable focus in the field is organizational energy (Cole et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2012; Vogel and Bruch, 2012), which appears to be important for organizational coordination (Quinn and Dutton, 2005), organizational performance (Cole et al., 2012) and organizational change (Jansen, 2004). This energy is generated in part through positive interactions with others (Baker et al., 2003; Feldman and Khademian, 2003; Quinn and Dutton, 2005).

Another focus in the POS field of particular relevance to the present research is “positive deviance,” which is “intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a reference group in honorable ways” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004, p. 832). An intervention approach, known as “positive deviance strategy,” has been shown to be successful in various fields of health and in other types of workplace changes (Lavine, 2012; Marsh et al., 2004; Pascale and Sternin, 2005; Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2003). This strategy involves identifying positive deviance in a population of individuals or organizations, understanding the basis of the deviance, and then applying the gained knowledge to others in the population for their benefit. There has been little overlap of the POS and OHS literature to date.

3. Methods

Drawing upon the methods of Eisenhardt (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994), a multiple case study approach was used for

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