

Improving Workplace Management and Performance – A Lost Art? - 16004

Peter Booth

Hylton Environmental, UK

ABSTRACT

Undertaking projects on nuclear licensed sites or on sites with a radiological connotation will undoubtedly lead to a variety of challenges. In many instances these challenges will be slightly different to those affiliated with projects on sites which do not have a radiological concern. However, common approaches can still often be found and transferable learning from other industries can also be applied.

The majority of these challenges relate to worker safety (both occupationally and radiologically), protection of the public and the environment, public communication, and the choice of technical and logistical approaches taken (e.g. for areas like decommissioning, waste management, environmental remediation). Notwithstanding these challenges the success of site-related projects also depends heavily on the functionality of the project team. The aim here is to highlight a number of logical approaches that are too often overlooked and which might often lead to improvements in workplace management and performance.

A successful project team is rarely built overnight, as it relies on the establishment of a harmonious working atmosphere, and continuous communication as well as demonstrable recognition of the relevance of the role of the different team members.

Improving workplace management and performance can be approached through a number of ways. First, there are clear benefits in developing an industry-specific culture, but of equal importance is the application of learning from other industries.

Second, improving workplace performance often comes down to treating people in the right manner and showing them respect. A culture of competition and blame in the workplace often results in individuals being too defensive or withholding useful information. Creating a harmonious atmosphere can help to overcome some of these barriers.

The third area of improving workplace management and performance is through developing and empowering personnel on a more formal basis. This can be achieved through initiatives like the Investors In People (IiP) National Standard, which many countries now support. Achieving this National Standard provides an opportunity to demonstrate to both your personnel and your clients that you are committed to this initiative and that you want to improve workplace performance. The IiP National Standard can lead to a range of benefits.

A combination of formal initiatives, developing sector-specific approaches and applying learning from other industries can lead to noticeable improvements in workplace management and performance.

INTRODUCTION

The nuclear industry, like most industries, has its own unique set of challenges. These challenges may revolve more around the materials that we are required to handle and the timescales that certain radionuclides will remain fixed to surfaces or in the environment as compared with other industries. Our work therefore requires us to apply high levels of safety and security as well as the continued application of research and innovation.

The majority of these challenges relate to worker safety (both occupationally and radiologically), protection of the public and the environment, public communication, and the choice of technical and logistical approaches taken (e.g. for areas like decommissioning, waste management, environmental remediation). Notwithstanding these challenges the success of site-related projects also depends heavily on the functionality of the project team.

The adoption of formalised project management tools and approaches will clearly benefit our projects and mitigate or eliminate risks. However, we often focus primarily on technical and financial risks and fail to highlight and mitigate against many of the risks related to workplace management and performance. A successful project team relies not only on sound management but also through the establishment of a harmonious working atmosphere, continuous communication and a demonstrable recognition of the role that the different team members can play.

The aim of this paper is to highlight a number of logical approaches that are too often overlooked which might lead to improvements in workplace management and performance. This includes learning from previous successes and failures, adopting ideas from other industries and most importantly focussing on how to get the best from our dedicated workforces.

CREATING THE RIGHT CULTURE

Experience shows that developing an industry specific “culture” can be beneficial on nuclear related projects. We clearly need to train our staff, mentor our younger personnel and undertake team building in order to ensure we have the right skills and attributes within the team. In the nuclear arena there is clearly a heavy emphasis on safety and demonstrating this to our various stakeholders. Projects are set up and managed with safety in mind and we often reward our personnel for adopting a good safety culture, as well as applying behavioural and observational safety in the workplace. This is paramount and all these approaches not only increase the standards of safety but they can also improve project team harmony and increase the potential for project success.

But creating an ideal project team culture within the nuclear industry should not purely be limited to a focus on safety. Adopting an industry specific culture does have its benefits but it is equally important to review working practices from other industries too. From my project management experience, providing a combination of both nuclear industry and non-nuclear industry traits often produces a more rounded and balanced project team.

Any given project team will be made up of individuals with different skills sets and experience levels. We want some people to lead and others to show initiative and be able to work alone and without constant supervision. But most of all we want all these individuals to function together as a team so that everyone is moving the project forward in the same direction. Buying into a team ethic is not always as straight-forward as it sounds. This is because human nature naturally makes us prioritise our own concerns, aims and aspirations over those of a wider group. A number of examples of this relate to job protection.

The retention, rather than sharing, of knowledge and experience is one of the main causes of project stagnation or even failure. There is a natural instinct to withhold information because even when someone has a desire to be a team player they know that knowledge is power. Losing all your knowledge or transferring it to someone else potentially places you in a vulnerable position because it means that someone else might now be able to do your job or that your initial value to the project has been diminished.

A further example related to job protection relates to an individual's concern that once a project has been successfully completed they may cease to have a job or a role to play. In these instances people might try to draw a project out longer in order to protect their job thus leading to missed targets, deliverables and budget overspends. Projects revolving around decommissioning and waste management might suffer in such instances because of their relatively long timescales.

Any experienced project manager knows that we learn more from our mistakes rather than our successes. Documenting what might have previously gone wrong and how it can be improved in the future is an integral part of formalised project management. But here lies another problem because people do not like to share failure, especially when a formalised system might reward the very opposite. As mentioned previously, the nuclear industry quite rightly focusses heavily on demonstrating that it has a sound safety culture. It is important not to turn this positive aspect into something negative though whereby people don't report mistakes or failures. For example in relation to occupational safety; slips and trips, near misses, and lost time accidents might be covered up or not be documented as frequently as perhaps they should be, if people are afraid to miss safety targets and potentially lose safety driven bonus payments. Yet it is crucial that we learn from such incidents so that we can improve the way we work.

How do we reduce or eliminate these cultural issues? First, we need to ensure that the subject of knowledge management is encompassed within our management processes. Although there are many different aspects to knowledge management, focussing on how we can ensure that the transfer of personal knowledge and experience is undertaken efficiently and in a manner that

provides a positive outcome for everyone is crucial. Personnel should be encouraged to act as mentors for new or younger staff so that knowledge is transferred within the company. The mentoring program itself can be designed in a manner that the mentors receive similar benefits to those they may get for reaching safety targets.

Maintaining longevity of workforces is another area for consideration. A greater consideration of lifecycle management in relation to a licensed site or a specific project can act as an enabler for the transference of skills to new projects or to new facets of the same project as it evolves. Linking lifecycle management into personnel development can help with the retention of staff, their continued development and the transfer of skills between individuals. Personnel will then have greater confidence that once one project is complete they are likely to be utilised elsewhere as another one is initiated.

We also need to change our project culture so that people feel comfortable rather than defensive if they highlight things that have gone wrong or where safety might have been compromised. There is a need to reduce the fear of negative peer pressure, getting a poor performance assessment, or having contributed to a downgraded health and safety record. Somehow we have to look at ways of turning a negative into a positive rather than naming and shaming. Initiatives adopted within the nuclear industry such as behavioural safety [1] and observational safety can assist in this manner. There are examples from some organisations where observations (positive or negative) have been used to count towards vouchers with partnering organisations that can be used in stores or on the internet. An alternative option would be to reward personnel through conference attendance and training opportunities, which might otherwise not be available.

MANAGING CHANGE

Managing change is also a difficult subject. Many people are extremely resistant to change, irrespective of whether it is at the company, project or team level. It creates suspicion, tension, stress and people sometimes wish to move on. When organisations merge or are taken, there are likely to be significant cultural changes. A dominant partner may change the culture of a minor partner leading to people's positions being undermined, their roles changing and in some cases having to take salary cuts. There will also be examples of an organisation that has historically been the incumbent within the industry, and where market forces have created changes that requires them to now compete openly with others for their work. This can cause difficulties in the short and medium term especially if such organisations do not adapt to the change quickly and efficiently.

Organisations therefore need to react quickly to change before too much negativity sets in, or in the worst case, when work dries up or people start to look for alternative employment. Planning for such eventualities is not easy because there are so many different scenarios which may come to fruition. Notwithstanding this, it is still possible to get your workforce to realize that

change doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing. Quickly tease out the positive aspects of any particular change and utilise team building events if there is a requirement to bring new people together. Team building events can work well if they are designed in the right way, are seen to be fun and do not result in making some people feel inferior to others. "Away days" are also useful if planned in a manner that staff can understand the new direction a company is taking and have the ability to provide feedback and express opinion. Be sure to write up any notes or suggested actions that are a product of "away day" or team building events as this will reinforce the positive benefits the event was designed to produce.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST AND OTHER INDUSTRIES

Linked into the previous discussions revolving around knowledge management and working culture is the necessity of being able to learn from both the past and from other industries. A high percentage of people in an organisation will have many years of experience in the nuclear industry or elsewhere. The experience gained may have been at a time when best practice was different to that today. This is perhaps a polite way to suggest that not all past practices were always the safest or the most environmentally conscious or cost effective. We need to create an atmosphere whereby individuals will feel comfortable about sharing past experiences whether these were positive or negative in nature.

The nuclear industry is sometimes criticised for looking too much in an inwardly manner and not recognising that there is learning to be had from other industries, especially in how to gain the best from our available workforce. My own experience from previous work in the offshore oil industry and the IT industry prior to a nuclear career allowed an application of experience from those industries into managing projects and people in the nuclear industry. Many aspects are directly transferable while others need to be carefully tried and tested when the right opportunity arises.

Past mistakes also teach a lot about how not to run a project or manage a team. This negative learning has been invaluable and is now being applied to avoid making the same mistakes again. Many mistakes and examples of bad practice may be related to safety and how an individual views risk to both themselves and those they work with. An individual's familiarity with their work and the workplace environment may lead to a lack of concentration, corner-cutting or an unwillingness to enhance the level of safety required. Conducting safety talks and having a safety "thought of the day" prior to the commencement of work has proved to be a successful mechanism in changing culture and ensuring workers consider those around them.

The United States Department of Energy (USDOE) has a "lessons learned" database which provides a platform for recording and accessing both positive and negative learning from the department and its many supporting agencies and laboratories. The United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission also has a lessons learned database which focusses on decommissioning [2]. The capture

of such information can be a valuable training and discussion tool for all employees.

Gaining briefings from personnel who have worked in completely different industries is another useful way to transfer learning. These personnel with valuable experience and lessons learned may already work for your organisation or you may bring them in specifically to provide a focussed presentation.

Environments with a mixture of full time staff members and contractors who are put together to form a project team pose unique challenges to improving workplace management and performance. Contractors are not always treated in the same manner as the full time staff but treating them as though they are less important doesn't work. By definition, if there is a need for contractors it means that either the desired skill-sets are not available in-house or there is too much work for the existing full time staff. For a project team to work in unity the contracting staff should not be excluded from meetings, team building initiatives or social events. Including them as equal partners can improve harmony within the team and ultimately improve project performance. There is a slight caveat to developing an all-inclusive atmosphere however, in that any legal obligations surrounding contractors having the same sickness, insurance, pension, bonus, redundancy benefits and rights as staff members need to be considered, and in many instances contractors need to cover these aspects separately themselves.

DEVELOPING AND EMPOWERING PEOPLE

A further area of improving workplace management and performance is through developing and empowering personnel on a more formal basis. This can be achieved through initiatives like the Investors In People (IiP) National Standard, [3] which many countries now support.

This internationally recognized accreditation is held by almost 15,000 organizations across the world. The IiP National Standard defines what it takes to lead, support and manage people and is underpinned by a rigorous assessment methodology and a framework which reflects the very latest workplace trends, essential skills and effective structures required to outperform in any industry.

The IiP National Standard explores practices and outcomes within an organization under three performance headings: leading, supporting and improving. Under each heading, three key indicators have been identified [3].

- Leading;
 - Leading and inspiring people
 - Leaders make the organization's objectives clear. They inspire and motivate people to deliver against these objectives and are trusted by people in the organization.
 - Living the organizations values
 - People and leaders act in line with the organization's values at all times. They have the courage and support to challenge inconsistent behaviours.
 - Empowering and involving people

- There is a culture of trust and ownership in the organization where people feel empowered to make decisions and act on them.
- Supporting;
 - Managing performance
 - Objectives within the organization are fully aligned, performance is measured and feedback is used.
 - Recognising and rewarding high performance
 - Recognition and reward is clear and appropriate, creating a culture of appreciation where people are motivated to perform at their best.
 - Structuring work
 - The organization is structured to deliver the organization's ambition. Roles are designed to deliver organizational objectives and create interesting work for people, whilst encouraging collaborative ways of working.
- Improving;
 - Building capability
 - People's capabilities are actively managed and developed. This allows people to realize their full potential and ensures that the organization has the right people at the right time for the right roles.
 - Delivering continuous improvement
 - There is a focus on continuous improvement. People use internal and external sources to come up with new ideas and approaches, supported by a culture that encourages innovation.
 - Creating sustainable success
 - The organization has a focus on the future and is responsive to change. Leaders have a clear understanding of the external environment and the impact this has on the organization.

The assessment process takes you through a journey of Discovery, Online Assessment, Employee Interviews and Observation and finally an Accreditation Report and Feedback.

Achieving this IiP National Standard provides an opportunity to demonstrate to both your personnel and your clients that you are committed to this formal personnel development process and that you want to improve workplace performance. The IiP National Standard can lead to a range of benefits including;

- The use of a widely recognised personnel development standard.
- A method for improving staff management and employee satisfaction.
- Access to training and development.
- An increase in internal communication.
- Help in the identification of strengths and weaknesses
- The generation of greater motivation amongst staff.
- Improved and greater prioritisation of in-house training requirements.
- Increased competitiveness.

- Including all personnel irrespective of their role and status (full-time staff, part-time staff, consultants and volunteers).

Initiatives like the IiP National Standard can make a significant contribution to workplace management and performance and should be considered as a valuable resource for personnel development on a more formalised basis.

CONCLUSIONS

A project can fail for many different reasons, but invariably it will be the project team itself that will prove to be the delineator between a successful and an ineffective project. It is important to create a harmonious atmosphere through recognising talent, rewarding success yet learning from experience without fear of feedback being viewed in a negative light.

Recognising how to meld the different skills within our workforce, and learning how to better manage change and uncertainty will undoubtedly lead to more effective projects. Applying experiences and approaches from other industries related to workplace and project management and can be beneficial.

Utilising a combination of formal initiatives, developing sector-specific approaches and applying learning from other industries can lead to noticeable improvements in workplace management and performance.

REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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