The Role of Leadership in Disaster Management

Aaron Smith M.Ed.

University of Phoenix

ABSTRACT: This paper analyzed leadership practices before and after a mining explosion resulted in twenty nine deaths in Chile. When the first reports came upon the explosion, it appeared that there was a lack of appropriate safety precautions. However, further investigation revealed that the organizational culture created by the leadership was considered as the root cause which could have been prevented if the leadership had established an employee-centric culture. It is possible to see the repercussions of the leadership practices to a great extent. Showing workers that the organization will always do the right thing to assure their safety is an important step toward establishing trust. The despotic leadership, that constantly imposed fear on its employees to discourage them from voicing their opinions and questioning the existing conditions, eventually brought organizational deviance. Members of the organization neither had any meaningful communication nor appropriate information exchange. The absence of mutual trust and respect in the work environment was apparent. This paper sheds further light on the impact of leadership in the prevention of future catastrophic events while ensuring safety and enhanced performance.

KEYWORDS: inclusive, leadership, organization, production, safety

INTRODUCTION

In order to better analyze the factors that led to this tragic accident, it will be useful to analyze the incident from an organizational theory perspective. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) suggested that the concept of modernism emphasizes maximum performance. Since the goal is to improve organization's efficiency and effectiveness, the right to control production work and workers belongs to leadership. The belief behind this notion is that when effectively managed, organizations can turn into effective systems of decision and action based on norms of rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness. Cooper and Burrell (1988) also argued that functional rationality is the essence of modernist concept and high performance is the key ingredient of that.

On the other hand, post-modernist perspective argues that there is no objectively definable reality. Instead, humans should continuously question what's known as reality (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Organizations are socially constructed realities and due to their vibrant and dynamic nature, they are subject to change (Morgan, 2006). Since organizations reflect human values and choices, cooperation and adaptation are considered as the reason for their existence (Egitim, 2021b; Egitim, 2021c; Egitim, 2021d).

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE ORGANIZATION

The leadership demonstrated by the Massey Energy's management took a rationalist approach holding high performance and production above employee safety. The post-accident investigation reports indicated that leadership placed an emphasis on productivity and efficiency and thus, human life was not prioritized. This aspect is in contrast with post-modernist view which perceives the concept of progress as a myth and believes that progress justifies power abuses (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Thus, the case is a demonstration of a systematic modernist perspective involving a great deal of ambition and greed.

As the company's sole aim was to maximize its production of coal, the leadership disregarded all the other factors to accomplish its objective. This type of leadership practice is associated with objective ontology which places the reality outside human influence (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). In this regard, the focus is on maximizing technical efficiency by rationalizing the social order. Thus, unobservable elements such as emotions, thoughts and beliefs are perceived as an obstacle ahead of their perceived unshakable reality.

However, organizations' survival depends upon human interactions, it is important to emphasize the role of emotions. This perspective is in line with Weber's substantive rationality theory which emphasizes human values (Egitim, 2020). If organizations disregard the existence of substantive rationality and only focus on formal rationality, which Weber associated with technical skills and efficiency, humans would be perceived no different than machines, the consequences would be grave as in the case of Massey Energy.

Marx argues that that there may be a power struggle when the interests of capital and those of labor conflict with one another. The conflict of interest stems from the dispute of division of profit surpluses. Furthermore, competition from other firms

puts further pressure on organizations forcing employees into more production (as cited in Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). This capitalist notion aligns with mechanistic leadership approaches which overlook motivation and engagement (Egitim, 2021c).

Massey Energy's leadership practices were based on a strict mechanistic approach with a focus on efficiency and production. The leadership perceived workers no different than machines. Their safety was not considered as a high priority. Due to the negative organizational culture created by the leadership, employee trust and commitment were at the bottom level. Thus, communicative interactions between the staff and management were close to none. As a result, the catastrophic incident was unavoidable. Having said that, if the leadership had focused on genuine, and collaborative interactions with the aim of achieving a mutual objective, it would have been possible to make everyone feel important for the organization, trust and commitment would have peaked, and productivity would have been accomplished more naturally (Egitim, 2021b; Egitim, 2022a).

Needless to say, those in the management roles face a daunting task of meeting all the listed requirements (Youngs, 2017). Thus, it may be necessary to reevaluate our understanding of leadership in academic institutions. There may be a need to develop a new leadership approach that could potentially ease tenured personnel's burden while embracing employees and encouraging them to participate and partner with each other to achieve collaboration (Youngs, 2017). Bryman (2009) emphasizes a need to "create an environment or context for academics to fulfill their potential and interest in their work" (p. 66). This can be achieved with a new leadership model based on respect for existing values, supporting one another and promoting the interests of subordinates while encouraging autonomy within the organization (cited in Jones & Harvey, 2017).

However, adopting a process approach as such requires a significant paradigm change that acknowledges shared responsibilities in leadership work. Randall (2012, p. 4) claims such paradigm change can only take place if all faculty is committed to participate and in some cases, actually lead the change initiative. Burke (2018) also noted, the change process would involve revisiting cultural beliefs, values and basic underlying assumptions that are not visible from outside. In other words, the leaders of the organization are required to reflect upon their own actions and behaviors influenced by deep-rooted beliefs and values (Egitim, 2022b). Such deep reflection could help them develop a genuine understanding of the issues facing the department. **Conclusion**

This accident teaches us a number of important lessons. Firstly, the role of leadership is essential to create an organizational culture that embraces a collective mindset. Leadership should be participative, democratic, and employee centric (Egitim, 2021c; Egitim, 2022b). Since organizations are systems run by humans, they are vibrant and dynamic. Their source of energy is fostered through human interactions which reflects the interdependent and interrelated nature of the subsystems. Through everyday interactions, organizations can evolve into adaptive systems which can help them better prepare and deal with the complexity of the ever-changing external environment. Therefore, leadership that can genuinely make their employees feel that they are the true owners of their organizations and hence, their thoughts, feelings and concerns are held above everything else, can give their organizations the edge over others.

Leaders frequently make decisions with far-reaching affects on everyone across the board. Thus, their ability to anticipate problems and take effective measures is essential (Gronn, 2002). For this purpose, leaders need to interact with their subordinates and be open to learn from them. Establishing a learning organization where everyone can feel comfortable learning from one another can eventually reach success (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). Trust and respect are two key components of organizational success. They are strong human values that can only be earned upon genuine interactions between members. From a leadership perspective, showing employees that their safety is prioritized over production would be a firm step toward establishing trust and respect with employees. Improved organizational performance and productivity are the likely outcomes of an organizational environment where everyone trusts and respects one another.

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