

Leadership Challenges of Managing H, S & E

The Health, Safe and Environment (H, S & E) aspects of hydrographic surveys in the energy sector are a significant part of the planning and project management of any survey, which does not end with the paperwork (vital as it is) but entails visible safety leadership and, in this context, we need to realise we are all leaders.<P>

Twenty years ago, I witnessed first-hand the worst disaster in the history of the oil and gas industry, when Piper A blew up and 167 men lost their lives, including one of my colleagues. At the time of the incident, I was on shift on a vessel 30m from the platform. As you can imagine, this has left a lasting impression and made me realise how much we rely on each other to do the right thing, how anyone can intervene and stop the job if it feels unsafe, and how everyone should be prepared to be a leader to prevent incidents occurring.

Most hydrographic surveys carried out in the energy business are undertaken using vessels that move from client to client for durations varying from a few days to several months. Vessels can range from small inshore craft to large construction support vessels.

Whilst I know safety management systems (to a high enough standard to cater for all clients) are important, as are job-specific procedures, work instructions, vessel audits, emergency response documents, interface documents, etc., I strongly believe the balance between safety management and safety leadership is often biased too much towards safety management. Paperwork that, sadly, the majority of people injured on the job will never read. With volumes of H, S & E documentation, personnel may see this as “talking the talk”, but do they see their management and clients “walking the walk”?

I acknowledge that a well-rounded safety management system should encompass aspects of leadership – and I feel this is often lacking. For me, one of the key aspects of winning the hearts and minds of people, and striving for a culture where safety is a natural part of the way we do our work, is about leadership: the ability to demonstrate genuine concern and enthusiasm for people’s safety and well-being, setting clear expectations, keeping the messages simple, and highlighting each individual’s value and role in the H, S & E system. Using real-life stories to appeal to people’s emotions and attract their attention, being an effective communicator seeking and giving feedback, making individuals feel valued, allowing them a high degree of pride in their work, and conducting safety observations at work sites and using the power of open-ended questions.

One of the key times to demonstrate safety leadership and influence is during vessel mobilisation visits before any work starts. Some of the key issues to address are checking that the vessel is fit for purpose (marine and suitability audit, safety observations tour). Meet the people and get a gut feeling of the culture and the leadership on board, provide a rigorous briefing, which involves the entire crew, to help them understand the technical and H, S & E expectations of the work. Conduct a walk-through and discussions of the project-specific hazards and controls to ensure project-specific risk assessment is valid and understood.

From working offshore for 6 years and visiting many vessels, what sets the culture on board is the competence and abilities of leaders such as the vessel Captain, Chief Engineer, Party Chief, Senior Surveyors/Geophysicists and Company Representative. The type of characteristics proactive safety leaders possess are good communication and diplomacy skills, active participation in risk assessments, willingness to stop work/intervene if necessary, they monitor change control and management of change, and analyse and make recommendations for continuous improvement. Almost above all, they need to be able to trust their management and their clients, or cynicism can all too easily flourish.

As many know, to prevent incidents everyone needs to understand the task they are about to start and, if they have any doubts, ask questions, as well as identify all the possible hazards, assess the risk and then control them. Consider whether the procedure for the task is correct and the best practice. Intervene and stop the job if it feels unsafe, taking into account this is alien in some cultures and is only possible if there is a culture of trust and support from colleagues and management.

In summary, we have to get the balance between H, S & E management and H, S & E leadership correct, relentlessly pursue no harm to people and keep refreshing the message to avoid complacency and cynicism creeping in.