

The silent massacre

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Thu, 2015-05-14 12:42



A bugbear of mine is the process safety engineer quipping “I’m not going to stop my plant blowing up by getting everyone to hold the handrail!” The riposte is “No, you’re going to stop people falling down the stairs,” which is vital because falls and other gravity related fatalities greatly outnumber deaths caused by fire, explosions and other lack of containment issues. But it’s not the most dangerous thing faced in work by any means — nor is road risk, which kills almost 600 people at work or commuting each year. It’s the urge to throw yourself from high places and other forms of suicide.

While we rightly increase our efforts to curb the 14,000 deaths reported by the **Rushton report** ^[1] as caused by occupational health issues per annum (and, because of silica and the like, not in any danger of falling for decades at least) we also need to address an issue of toxicity, pain and suffering **right now** that will cause around 6,600 deaths this year. That’s 50 for every accident fatality. Walk down through the triangle and that’s an awful lot of people clinically depressed and genuinely stressed.

Studies show that wellbeing has five main components. First, enough money; Second, family and friends. Third, physical health. Fourth, the chance to give back to the community and fifth, enjoyable work. Dividing that 6,600 by five is very rough and ready of course, but still suggests state of mind about work “kills” colleagues at a rate 10 times that of accidents.

Digging into that, other than career progression, the primary reason that employees leave a company is their relationship with their direct boss. (The other major factors include work interfering with other aspects of life, like being called at home a lot; being treated unfairly, a lack of training and chance to develop skills and lack of autonomy — or too much).

The Institute of Leadership and Management ^[2]’s research finds that large numbers of UK managers are promoted until they become incompetent: the **“Peter principle”** ^[3]. No wonder, when the vast majority receive no formal leadership training. This seems to correlate perfectly with the UK’s lack of productivity (20% below the G7 average) and a lack of engagement (only 24% say they are engaged at

work). The institute suggests this costs us £30 billion a year — that's George Osborne's planned welfare savings funded three times over. Surely no-one would argue these figures are unrelated.



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[4]Leaving aside the human cost for a second, there's a business case for widespread emotional intelligence training, because alongside a "just culture" approach it will deliver greater workforce engagement and meaningfully address all the issues above.

The recent election showed the devastation the sudden loss of employment can cause. My own (now ex) Lib Dem MP John Leech looked so utterly distraught when the results in his constituency were announced I was worried about him. How we feel about our jobs and the way we are treated while doing them is hugely important. So another riposte to the process safety engineer: "And in showing concern about their risk of falling you demonstrate you care about them ... which may be a well timed gesture".

Challenges:

- *You'd report an unguarded drop and challenge an unsafe act but would you feel comfortable asking a colleague if they felt OK because they look bothered and/or distracted? (The exchange "You OK?" "Yeah ... sure" doesn't count!)*
- *Does your organisation give leadership skills/emotional intelligence training to all leaders?*
- *Just how disengaged is your workforce? Roughly how much is it costing you?*

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