

Clear expectations?

It has been reported in the past fortnight, 10 nurses in the U.S. healthcare system were suspended for refusal to treat patients as Personal Protective Equipment [PPE] was not available. This was at a time when the advice from the UK healthcare system, to its staff, was to refuse to treat patients when no PPE was available. Yet in the last few days, a news story is highlighting that a medical student in the UK was restricted from working for refusing to enter a COVID-19 ward without the appropriate PPE. A confused state of affairs, so when vital resources are lacking what are the expectations and who gets to determine what they are? I guess it depends on who you ask but should it?

Without commenting on these specific headlines any further, they do raise some key points. Whichever way you look at it, being able to say “no” is often as difficult as it is to *hear*, particularly when it comes at a time when there are pressing needs. Is it an expectation of your personnel to raise their concerns when faced with a situation they feel or know is not right as part of exercising their responsibilities? Furthermore, does your organisation welcome opportunity for scrutiny when personnel seek clarification or does it respond inconsistently?

An expectation can be defined as a strong belief. From the frontline staff believing that they will be supported in making the right decisions in line with clear safety objectives, the managers believing that decisions will be consistent OR staff will raise their hands when the system lets them down, to leaders believing that protection objectives are as important as financial objectives. Any disconnect in the collective expectation likely results in an increase in safety risk!

I recall a conclusion made in a report¹ that stated “In health care, trade-offs about risk reductions and cost are often not managed consistently or transparently. Local teams might be enthusiastic about improving patient safety, but the lack of a shared framework might lead to varied practice and some frustration”. The very same report questioned the application of ALARP² [As Low as Reasonably Practicable]: a trade-off test used widely in safety critical systems to facilitate the determination of *acceptable* safety risk.

The principle does suffer from much misunderstanding, often cited as subjective. It certainly takes judgement, there is much guidance available yet through reference to good practice that makes it much more objective than perceived. Once you get past the acronym, and once understood correctly, it focuses on the measures required to provide positive protection rather than focusing on the safety risk itself; bear in mind it obligates an organisation to adopt the control measures unless the safety risk reduction value is minimal compared to the effort. This obligation should create a shared mind-set across the whole organisation including suppliers.

Reasonably Practicable, however, is no different to any rule, standard, guiding principle or expectation in that it is unable to deal with the *desire* to implement such measures. Commonly, ‘*acceptable*’ is often shaped by the status quo in the business as opposed to it driving appropriate resources to ensure safety risk measures are effective.

Too often acceptability is used to determine what is Reasonably Practicable as opposed to Reasonably Practicable being used to determine acceptability.

Griffith University

In dynamic systems that are prone to resource constraints and lack of clarity, the result will often involve various and inconsistent decision making. When examined further, such can often reveal sanctioned non-compliances and risk taking behaviour on the frontline and throughout the entire organisation thereby casting doubt on the organisations

ALARP position. In an era whereby 'risk' is popular, and in danger of becoming a distraction, it is very easy to confuse those decisions made on the frontline as effective risk management.

Scrutiny of decision making at all levels is a key element of any management system but it must be done so against clear expectations. A common and robust understanding of what we are trying to achieve will assist in aligning the expectations of leaders, organisational personnel and authorities and adopting a Reasonably Practicable mind-set should facilitate the true ownership of safety performance in any organisation.

There is no learning without having to pose a question. And a question requires doubt.

Richard Feynman

With the leadership to create the right drive and attitude, a Reasonably Practicable mind-set should enable consistency and objectivity of decision making, allow for equivalence due to organisational context and accommodate change. It should be a leveller based on the risk faced, not the ability to resource the measures, and moves us away from the no harm, no problem mentality that often constrains many safety systems.

One such behaviour that must be sacred is that personnel can 'raise their hands' and seek support irrespective of the pressing need. This 'free' but vital component offers any organisation with a rich source of learning. Failure to embed this expectation starts the slide into practical drift and condemns the organisation to a reactive stance.

"In matters of safety, there can be no compromise on openness and honesty."

Sir Charles Haddon Cave QC

In a positive environment where safety management can flourish, it will be clear to all involved as to what the expectations are with regards to the objectives and required standards yet arguably the overarching expectation should be one of how *we* behave; something that should be clear throughout the *entire* organisation.

References

1. "How can health care organisations make and justify decisions about risk reduction?" Reliability Engineering and System Safety.
2. www.HSE.gov.uk. ALARP