

Narratives and what they mean to health & safety consciousness

1 Introduction

We advise managers, executives and employees throughout the chemical industry. Motivation is one of the most popular issues discussed during counseling interviews: "How much importance do you and your staff attach to occupational health & safety?" "In your capacity as a supervisor, why should you and your staff behave safely?" We often receive such answers as "Occupational health & safety is important within my company, so I behave accordingly." "My supervisor would get into trouble if accidents were to occur and I don't want that to happen."

Such answers are an expression of extrinsic motivation. They reflect a safety consciousness that corresponds to a reactive culture rather than a proactive or generative safety culture (desired by many people) (Hudson). Consciousness is part of a paternalistic narrative: "We do something because our company, the management, the supervisors and the regulations tell us to." What they do not say is: "We're not really convinced." This narrative reveals an aspect of a company's safety culture. People are essentially storytellers. So we tell one another stories or relate narratives about safety culture.

My lecture is therefore concerned with the following questions: Can we re-write "stories" on the subject of a culture that promotes safety? How are the established stories told? How can we contribute towards telling new stories in our capacity as consultants?

2 Narratives and how they affect reality

Unlike our customers, we consultants do not assume that an objective safety culture exists. Safety culture is something "that is communicated in working relationships" (cf. Büttner, Fahlbruch, Wilpert; 1999). It is not an attribute that is attached to an organization, but emerges as part of a communicative evolution process involving many different individuals, who interact with one another.

Safety culture is part of a reality that takes place in language, in discussion and in storytelling. In exaggerated terms, one could say that safety culture only exists in the stories that people invent and communicate to one another. The diversity of the stories that we invent and the diversity of behavioral patterns that emerge as a result are what make up the concept that we call "culture" (cf. Harari 2015, p. 53).

Communication and the stories told by the most diverse people therefore play a very special role in our practical work. The "reality" of safety culture is regarded as being the result of social construction (cf. Luhmann 1984, Watzlawick 1978) rather than an objective concept that continues to be valid once and for all. Our stories therefore play an important role when it comes to what we regard as being real and for the reality that we consider to be "our" safety culture.

The term "story" used in everyday language corresponds to the scientific term "narrative". The systems theory uses the narrative construct in the sense of a "schema" or "world-view" that a person or a group of people has developed relative to himself/itself in the course of discussion. It embraces everything that makes the world and the reality perceived within it what they are, including the people around them and the prevailing environment. It is a particular way of looking at things, making sense of the world and giving it a meaning (cf. Schlippe / Schweitzer 2010, p. 8 ff.).

The impressions that we perceive are "drawn into" narrative schemata in the same way as air is drawn into a vacuum. The term "sense attractors" is also used in this context. Isolated, individual aspects of perception are brought together with other isolated impressions to produce meaningful stories, i.e. "narrated".

Narratives help us to understand the world in an expedient manner. This corresponds to the tendency of human cognition to order, define categories and, in doing so, reduce complexity and enable cognizance. In its capacity as a "fundamental mental operation", the creation of order appears to be an important motif for human beings.

This usually takes place in social contexts within the framework of communicative interaction rather than in isolation, whereby people unconsciously use themselves as interaction partners to generate narrative world-views and mutually corroborate them. People no longer respond impartially to reality but to the anticipated outcome of an existing story. This means that, once established, narratives continuously substantiate themselves because they uphold order.

Human behavior is not abstract; it takes place in a world of mutually shared meanings, i.e. within the framework of continuous conversation and storytelling. Every event that fits into the respective narrative is regarded as being "typical" and those that do not conform are either ignored or disqualified as being "exceptions". Family therapists, who have concerned themselves with the meaning of narratives in the context of psychic disorders in the family environment, therefore refer to the "logic of substantiating the nothing-new-syndrome". Whatever a member of the family does, the intent is always evident in advance (cf. Schlippe / Schweitzer 2010, p. 8 ff.).

3 Narratives in safety culture

We are assuming that narratives exert a strong influence on our consciousness and therefore affect our behavior. The way in which we talk about things, make sense of the world and our shared convictions affect our awareness, our attitudes and our (safe or unsafe) behavior. I would like to illustrate this concept by means of various narratives that we have encountered in practice.

These are "powerful" narratives, which as latent causal patterns, can lead to critical modes of behavior and critical situations in the same way as self-fulfilling-prophecies: "not all accidents can be prevented" and "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs" are just two relatively harmless variants that control our consciousness and with it our behavior. The story about the importance of occupational health & safety in enabling the company to save on the premiums paid into accident insurance policies every year adopts a more subtle approach. A colleague of mine heard one interesting argument during one of her seminars, when one of the participants declared, with utter conviction, "that's how the people at London headquarters want it!" Another interesting variant: "with all of these safety measures, we haven't got time to work!" Stories are also told within the framework of accident analyses. When talking to safety officers, including officers with a great deal of experience, the narrative saying that "the accident actually happened because the employee wasn't paying attention" has proven to be the underlying story again and again. After an accident, employees have frequently been heard to say that they had assumed that the work they were doing was not dangerous. After all, their workplaces are guarded in such a way as to eliminate any potential risks.

The following narrative is not heard so often: "Dealing with risks is one aspect of entrepreneurial behavior. Companies have to run the risk of safety hazards in order to be able to manufacture their products. Coping with these risks in a reliable manner is therefore crucial to the company's success. In our capacity as executives, safety officers and employees, we support our company in handling these risks responsibly and safely by helping to safeguard ourselves, our colleagues and our plant ..."

This is not how the story is told, however, which means that we are constantly confronted by a motivation problem. Interventive techniques are not applied or implemented, not even basic safety measures, as they are regarded as being something extra rather than belonging to the work performed. This gives rise to the following questions: How can we intervene in dialogs that lead to narratives? How can we change things?

4 Conclusions

Our counseling process draws inspiration from this knowledge of the narratives in terms of further developing a corporate culture that promotes safety. This is why we always aim to join forces with our participants to find out how the stories are told within a group of people. We firmly believe that counseling from the perspective of an outside observer is doomed to failure. In this respect, narratives provide a common communicative approach to understanding safety culture. Rather than analyzing from the outside, we offer participants a means of discovering their own culture, which reflects the real situation in their company, in the course of a dialog.

The purpose of this is to weave a way into the "web of mutually stabilizing stories" (cf. Schlippe, Schweitzer 2010) from different perspectives in order to describe transition points that can be used to depart from the adopted narratives and discover new stories. We use various methods for this, which enable a re-interpretation of existing patterns of meaning and explanation, such as circular questioning, reframing or forming hypotheses within the framework of "peer group supervision". Tools that help employees to adopt positions relative to themselves in the stories that they tell.

The advantages of this approach are obvious. Prudent use of narratives not only helps to shape the safety-promoting safety culture development process, but can also help to understand causal relationships. It also opens up new possibilities. Knowledge of the "stories" told within the teams helps executives to understand the behavioral patterns of their employees. Accident analyses reveal patterns that lead to recurring critical situations. When developing risk assessments, narratives can be used to support the synchronization of a common understanding of risk potential within the teams.

A plethora of applications is evidently conceivable and called for!

Bibliography

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