

Narrative as a prerequisite for sustainable development of safety culture

A stranger came across three stone masons and asked them what they were doing. The first one answered, "Isn't it obvious? I'm hewing stone." The second one replied, "I'm working on this stone window so that I can feed my family." And the third one said, with shining eyes, "I'm helping to build Cologne Cathedral!" (traditional).

1 Introduction

Although "what is reality?" appears to be a philosophical question, it is actually a very practical one. We search for real causes of incidents, for example, or endeavor to adopt an objective approach in determining risk potential.

But what if objective reality doesn't exist? If what we experience as real, as objective, is actually nothing more than an expression of certain perspectives that we exchange in the course of conversation.

Welcome to the world of safety culture, part of a reality that takes place in language and in anecdotes; a world that is not objective per se, but is "communicated within working relationships". Welcome to the idea that the reality of safety culture is reflected in stories told, so-called narratives.

2 The meaning of narratives for safety culture

Occupational health & safety offers an easily comprehensible strategy for ensuring that people stay healthy at work, do not sustain any injuries and do not fall ill. The strategy calls for an assessment of potential risks with subsequent implementation of technical, organizational and personnel measures. This is the order in which things must be done; this is the way the legislative authority wants things done. And this is where technical and organizational measures alone come up against their limits, as practical experience has shown that human behavior is frequently the predominant factor. If a fork lift truck has not been parked and switched off properly, the management decides not to make a necessary investment, a supervisor tolerates critical behavior or an employee fails to address colleagues' potentially hazardous working practices, we are not talking about technical or organizational discrepancies, but conscious or unconscious human behavior.

To put it in more drastic terms: however necessary they may be and regardless of how clever or sophisticated they are, technical and organizational measures alone will not be able to guarantee that you will arrive home from work safe and sound. That is why we industrial psychologists concern ourselves with the subject of safety culture, but without underestimating the technical or organizational causes. This is because culture provides a framework in which behavior takes place. We are fully aware of the fact that, when it comes to human behavior, we cannot re-educate people, exert any influence on their personality or change their mentality (and wouldn't wish to, of course). To the

same extent, we can steer the course of discussions with the people we work with in the direction of a health and safety-promoting company culture that gives safe behavior patterns in management, executives and employees more of a chance than unsafe ones. Nevertheless, the problems really begin when we try to describe what safety culture actually is; when we try to "make" culture understandable and tangible. Because safety culture is apparently something that has no objective presence, like a building or a machine.

3 The narrative approach

A communicative, "narrative" approach is therefore pivotal to our counseling. In an attempt to make culture tangible and modulatable, we suggest that attention should be given to the way in which anecdotes, stories and narratives are told and, in this way, find possible ways of intervening.

Why? We are firmly convinced that culture can only be accessed through language, in the form of stories or narratives. Culture takes place in a world full of mutually shared and communicated meanings, in perpetual discourse and in the relating of stories.

Everything that we think (and do) has been developed from the narratives that we avail ourselves of. These stories and the ways in which they are told generate incredible power with respect to the way in which we structure the reality of our actions. Language not only describes reality, but shapes reality as well.

Reality can be described in a number of different ways, but many narrative perspectives are required in order to tell a story. There is neither a right one nor a wrong one; it is rather the diversity of points of view, which enables us to perceive complex events in an appropriate manner and not reduce them down to an individual structure or an individual theory. It is the very diversity of the stories that we invent, and the diversity of the behavior patterns that emerge as a result, that constitute what we call "culture". Narratives act as doorways, which offer a means of accessing the world of safety culture. By thematizing the narratives, we also have an opportunity to exert a sustainable influence on the development of the culture. A fascinating insight into the world of narratives - rational and irrational, fatalistic and constructive, provident and magical - then unfurls.

Let's consider just a few of these: paternalistic, charitable, fatalistic and naive narratives, for example: "I'm doing this because the company wants me to", "I'd like you to come home safe and sound", "accidents can't always be avoided", "tripping accidents are the only ones that occur here now", "we mustn't take any risks", "if only the contractor's employee had been more careful". Heroic narratives are also popular: "when all's said and done, production must go on" or "we must get the problem under control". And hopeful narratives: "every accident can be avoided". What about a professional narrative: "dealing with risks is part of our professional mandate".

You are probably asking yourself, what exactly is the problem? Consider, if you will, the ways in which these narratives determine what we do and how they lead to errors of judgement that cause us harm. The diversity of the narratives circulating throughout a company also shows that there is no mutually agreed, common narrative and this leads to a "problem of identity". Different groups within a company relate different stories that represent different understandings of safety culture. As a result,

the people concerned feel as though they are working in different companies or at least towards different ends. Furthermore, the narratives also represent an understanding that essentially reflects an extrinsic motivation ("I am working safely because that 's what the company wants; not because of my own conviction!"). This can be dangerous when we consider that the same employees are entrusted with the operation of a chemical plant, for example, with extremely high risk potential.

4 Narrative intervention

One of our main aims in the work that we do is to help people discover constructive narratives on safety culture as alternatives to the stories that they tell themselves. We adopt a communicative, discursive (always appreciative!) attitude by attempting to establish transitions that offer a means of departing from a chosen narrative in order to find or create a new one. This means that we are guided by such questions as "How do we describe the culture in which we want to live safety?" "How do we want to behave towards one another in the event of a mistake causing an incident?" "How do we want to address one another when one of us is behaving in an unsafe manner?".

This is easier said than done. Why? As narratives are meaningful, they provoke anxiety when called into question. They are defended if challenged. A narrative acts as a "schema" or "philosophy" that offers a means of understanding ourselves, our lives and what we do in a meaningful manner. Every new experience is also interpreted against a background of narratives. And they give us a sense of belonging to a group. We therefore hold on to them, even if they are associated with pain or injury.

I would like to introduce you to just a few of the many methods that we use in our profession. The *"Reflecting Team"* method suggests that more attention should be given to the nature of the anecdotes, stories and narratives used to constitute meaning. In this respect it can be helpful to simply be aware of the narratives that form the basis of our own actions. We can use the *"Inner Team"* method to become aware of the stories that we communicate. Conflicting thoughts are not only lived on the inside, but are expressed in voices that communicate messages to the outside world, which may be heard and interpreted by others. *"Peer-to-Peer Counseling"* works in a similar manner, where colleagues discuss cases from their practical experience on an equal footing. Hypotheses are formulated on the causes, which offer a means of relating the solution again in the form of an alternative narrative. *"Reframing"*, another tool, contributes towards ensuring that the meaning of one and the same story can change if told in a different light. The *"Narrative interpreting Interview"* provides a vehicle for interpretation of narratives against the background of different constructs and patterns. Which quality of the "culture" is revealed by the narrative? How do we advance from a reactive culture to a proactive culture? The technique of *"Visual Communication"* helps teams to visualize aspects of their own safety culture. The resulting images disclose unconscious narratives and reflect behavior.

Now what did the third mason say? ... "I'm helping to build Cologne Cathedral!"

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