Going beyond compliance: Safety leadership in the boardroom

Dr Kirstin Ferguson
Safety leadership

While there are many models of safety leadership available for organisations to understand how to improve safety cultures and safety outcomes, most personal safety leadership behaviours are designed for supervisors and managers working in the field.

Yet board members, by the very nature of their duties and responsibilities, do not have a direct leadership role in an organisation. And many senior executives, particularly of large organisation, are located remotely and well away from day-to-day operations.

While often not involved in day-to-day operations on site, board members and senior executives have a strong influence on the tone and safety culture of an organisation through the questions they ask, the focus they place on key organisational issues and the messages they give during interactions with employees. Regrettably, the important safety leadership role of this group of senior leaders has been highlighted after recent high profile disasters such as the Pike River mine explosion and the BP Texas City oil refinery fire.

Recent research\(^1\) has investigated the intersection of corporate governance, leadership and workplace safety to consider safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives. This research has identified four criteria of safety leadership relevant for board members and senior executives:

- **Vision**

- **Personal commitment**

- **Decision-making**

- **Transparency**

“The board did not provide effective health and safety leadership and protect the workforce from harm. It was distracted by the financial and production pressures that confronted the company.”

Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy, 2012; p. 18

Vision

When considering a senior leader having vision regarding workplace safety, this criterion refers to their ability to publicly articulate shared safety goals that resonate across all levels of an organisation. Senior leaders demonstrating vision will inspire others, set high standards for safety behaviours, establish safety expectations and solicit commitments to safety from others.

Practical examples:
- CEO and Chair regularly reinforce the existing company safety vision;
- the board authentically engages with employees in safety issues while on site visits; and
- the board understands the importance of, and actively supports, the CEO and senior executive team in their day-to-day safety leadership activities.

Personal commitment

Senior leaders exhibiting a personal commitment to workplace safety have a sincere, visible and genuine dedication to safety that demonstrates care for the welfare of others. Senior leaders with a personal commitment to safety exemplify a positive attitude to safety in the workplace, role model safe behaviours and help solve safety issues on behalf of employees.

Practical examples:
- commitment to safety included in board charter;
- company safety vision is communicated regularly and widely; and
- the concept of ‘safe production’ is confirmed by the board and communicated widely with board decisions made which are consistent with that message.

Decision making

With respect to board, safety decision-making involves promoting sound assessment of safety issues while also providing an opportunity for open communication between all levels of an organisation. Senior leaders promoting decision-making ensure safety concerns are heard and employees are included in the safety planning process.

Practical examples:
- a board committee is established focused on safety;
- there is regular, robust and meaningful safety reporting to the board; and
- senior executives are encouraged by the board to think strategically about safety and not just as a source of statistical analysis.

Transparency

In the context of the board, transparency involves being open to scrutiny of safety performance through monitoring and communicating the effectiveness of safety initiatives. Senior leaders demonstrate transparency through formal and informal communications which celebrate safety successes, as well as openly communicate safety challenges as they emerge.

Practical examples:
- ensure consistent and comparable range of lead and lag indicators are reported and disclosed to stakeholders;
- develop open communications with other companies to develop best practices in safety; and
- include team safety performance with an executive remuneration system.
Further reading


Additional Orbitas Group white papers can be downloaded from www.orbitasgroup.com:

- Safety governance and safety leadership for board members and senior executives
- Practical actions for safety leadership : Safety governance frameworks for boards
- Going public on safety leadership : Best practice safety disclosures for annual reports & CSR reports

About the author - Dr Kirstin Ferguson

Dr Kirstin Ferguson is a professional company director sitting on ASX publicly listed, private company and government boards. Kirstin was previously the global CEO of a safety consulting organisation operating in the mining and resources industry. In 2014, the Australian Financial Review named Kirstin as one of Australia’s 100 Women of Influence.

Kirstin has a PhD in Business focused on safety leadership and safety governance for board members and senior executives, and was awarded the QUT Colin Brain Corporate Governance Fellowship for her research contributions. Kirstin sits on the Editorial Board of OHS Professional, the journal of the Safety Institute of Australia, and was previously an independent expert member of the Queensland Workplace Health and Safety Board. Kirstin is an Adjunct Professor at the QUT Business School.

Contact Details

E: info@orbitasgroup.com
W: www.orbitasgroup.com