Decluttering, distractions, and dashboards – are we trapping safety into rules?

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I was with Joe when he recorded that testimony and visited the memorial with him. But I'm not going to add to anything to what he said. He was there. He knows what it was like. And I think that video helps capture some of what he and the other 225 people onboard experienced that day.

It lives on in our memory.

We owe it to everyone on Piper Alpha – and the families they left behind – to remember. And to learn – and to keep improving to help get people home safe at the end of the day.

Since Piper Alpha – fortunately – the industry has come a long way.

We've worked hard at safe design, management systems, operating discipline.

But – and it's an important but...

I would argue safety improvement across our industry has – broadly speaking – plateaued in recent years.

And there is a risk that if we are not careful, further efforts to improve safety could have the opposite effect.

So, on the 35th anniversary of one of the worst process safety incidents our industry has experienced – we should pause.

And ask ourselves if we are really focusing on the right things.

Today is about us having a conversation.

Hearing from each other… sharing perspectives.

So, to get us going, I'd like to make three points on where I think our industry – as a whole – could do more.

Reducing clutter

Point one – reduce **safety clutte**r. What do I mean by that?

In a bid to improve safety over the years – in the wake of incidents like Piper Alpha, we've developed multiple safety practices.

There is no doubt that processes and procedures have brought progress, avoided recurrent mistakes, and allowed for best practices to be adopted.

However, it seems that the exclusive and intensive use of procedures today is in fact a potential threat to new progress in safety.

So, let's ask whether these safety practices are actually having the right effect. Here it's important to distinguish between 'safety work'. And the 'safety **of** work'.

Safety work is activity to manage safety – think risk assessments, permit to work, audits, and the like.

But 'safety **of** work' is different – it's the actual physical risk our people are exposed to when they are performing work.

Ideally the former contributes to the latter.

But does it?

How do you know?

And is there increasingly a risk that too many processes and procedures actually make work less safe?

As an example, a recent survey of oil and gas organisations asked safety professionals to review 20 safety practices.

They were asked whether they believed they contributed to the safe execution of work.

The survey showed that they believed two-thirds of those practices did not actually make a difference.

OK, it's one study – with all the caveats that go with it.

But two-thirds.

I found that extraordinary.

A further survey showed four out of five safety professionals would not want to remove a process because they worry about not complying with regulations.

That kind of decision might come from a good place – but it may also come at the expense of prioritising safety and avoiding injuries.

This can have real-world consequences.

Are we trapping safety into rules?

At an onshore oil and gas construction site – there were 800 pages of safety documentation. 800 pages – that's like a Dickens novel. It covered every operating procedure from the four companies involved, all the work permits, the risk assessments and so on.

But there was a pretty fundamental oversight: no-one physically looked for hazards.

So, when an excavator was unloaded from a truck, it immediately raised the bucket into a live 11kV overhead line.

A stark example of how safety work doesn't necessarily lead to the safety **of** work.

So, let's think how to remove some of that clutter.

This is not a plea against process or procedures.

We need them.

The question is: do we need to reassess how far they can still go?

And to what benefit?

Cut peripheral work

Let me move to my second point – reducing the ever-increasing **peripheral work**.

It is worryingly easy for organizations to lose focus on safety. With time, other priorities can start to draw focus – commercial considerations, the energy transition, organizational change, and the like.

This is particularly the case after a period when the stats suggest safety is trending in the right way.

You don't need me to tell you that the rise of this peripheral work – all the macro stuff that isn't safety-focused – can be distracting. Particularly on the frontline.

Administration, people-management, procurement – all this often now lands on the supervisor. Meaning less time to focus on safety.

Just think about the time spent in meetings, auditing, form-filling, multiple risk assessments and signoffs for the same tasks.

Not to mention the constant bombardment of messages on a broad range of non-core subjects – it could be very easy to lose track of what's important.

I think this can distract from the most important job of all – keeping our teams safe.

So, my push would be to reflect.

And ask how much of this peripheral work is really necessary and stop whatever isn't.

Can we also be more focussed with our messaging? Does everybody need to know everything?

Connect the dots

I'll move onto my third and final point. Connecting the dots better.

What do I mean by that?

The energy world is complicated. It requires keeping tabs on a lot of moving parts. And frankly, that can be challenging.

More than challenging – it creates real risk. Because the way safety is monitored can, if not done thoughtfully, lead to a false sense of confidence.

As you know, many organizations track data on incident rates, number of actions open, number of leadership visits, audit non-conformances.

But.

These dashboards and the metrics used... ask yourself: do they tell you what you need to know? Are you seeing what you need to see? Perhaps more fundamentally – are you asking the right questions?

Let me point to an example from an adjacent sector. A recent review of a critical risk management program among international mining organizations, showed 99.7% operator control verifications were in place and effective.

99.7.

The target was more than 99.

So, from a Board perspective, those controls are doing their job. It's a good number.

But let's think about that.

The remaining 0.3%. A tiny number. But in the real world – away from the dashboard with percentages – they were still having greater than 200 possible fatalities in their operations each year.

200 lives potentially lost. 200 families potentially devastated.

So, are you managing a number or are you managing the risk?

Seeing the bigger picture

The problem is looking at safety data in isolation.

If you take a step back, see it in context – and ask more questions.

What's the bigger picture?

Look at operational and business data – find conflicts between the many goals organizations are aiming for.

What are the resourcing challenges?

And – and – look at strong, real-time information flowing from the frontline.

What can HR add about leaders who are new in post or teams with high turnover rates?

What can procurement say about contractors brought in to perform higher-risk work – what if they are contractors you haven't worked with before who may be trained, but inexperienced?

What can we learn from finance about who's behind on their budgets and might be focusing their energy on commercial challenges– or who's behind on maintenance spend to focus on production?

If we don't have these conversations and get these wider perspectives, we're not doing the best job we can on safety.

Conclusion

I began with that video of Joe from Piper Alpha.

I said how in the 35 years since, we have worked hard to make our industry safer.

The irony is in recent years the harder we have tried to improve safety; the greater the potential risks we've created.

At its heart – I strongly believe safety is a simple concept.

We have to make it simple to execute.

So rather than adding procedures and process. And then adding even more every time there's an incident.

Look for ways to reduce.

Make things easier.

Make things simpler.

I know this is easy to say – and much harder to do.

It might require unwinding mindsets and approaches built up over decades.

But ultimately – that's what's required. And it's our job – all of us – to try and make that happen.

After all, I think it was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a World War II pilot, who said: "Perfection is achieved when there is nothing left to take away".

I'm no author, and definitely no pilot. But I can totally see how this concept applies to our sector.

Now after I step down from the stage, we're going to have some conversations about how we can improve safety.

So, to get us all thinking, I'm going to ask you 3 questions.

As safety professionals – how well do you actually know your practices and processes are making your people safer?

As a safety organization, you may have limitless data, but are you measuring the right things and getting the insights you need?

And finally – as safety leaders – are you focusing on what really matters and is it time to be bold and strip things back to what is really needed?

Thank you.