People's actions, reactions and resistance are consistent with their perceptions

Humans have a very partial access to reality. We are limited by what our senses, our knowledge and experience allow us to grasp. A useful analogy for understanding the concept is the perception of the temperature of a room. If you ask the occupants to decide on the temperature, the answers will be different to the temperature indicated by a thermometer. Transposed to the field of risk, the concept of perception reflects the fact that the level of perceived risk varies from one person to another. Perceptions vary according to whether he or she has already experienced a similar event or not, the extent of their knowledge of risk factors, etc. Thus, risk taking has little to do with logical analysis but rather what individuals or groups perceive as the risks they face.

Perceptions are intrinsically valid: they express a form of reality that people hold to be true. However, a fundamental question is that of the homogeneity of perceptions within a group of people. For example, a typical question in the field of safety is the following: "On our site, do operators have the same ideas about following rules as managers?" Surveys of perceptions therefore make sense, particularly before a company-wide programme is launched. They measure the convergence or divergence in the views of group members. The more divergent the views, the more work is needed to explain the differences and how to reduce them before commiting to the programme.

According to the principle of consistency, individuals spontaneously act in accordance with their perceptions. Therefore asking individuals about behaviours that are consistent with these perceptions is a route to success. Conversely, asking individuals to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their perceptions creates resistance. From this point of view, every programme that a company attempts to put in place and, in particular, any programme aimed at the development of a safety culture is a change that will engender both support and resistance to varying degrees. We can imagine a program that aims to eradicate the macho culture found on building sites. Such a programme may run into opposition from teams on the ground that have established initiation rites for young recruits. Conversely, the same program would meet less resistance from operators who are unfamiliar with the practice, or do not understand its social usefulness.

A programme to develop safety culture that begins without this knowledge of perceptions is exposed to unknown difficulties. It could be compared to a hiker who sets out blindly for a long walk, without knowing the summits they may need to climb in the following days.

In management terms, taking account of perceptions when providing support for a programme that aims to develop safety culture implies:

- recognising the weight of perceptions in the decisions of individuals and groups;
- assessing the degree of convergence and divergence of individual and group perceptions of actors who influence safety culture;
- anticipating the effect of group perceptions on support from, or resistance to, a programme that aims to change safety culture.

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