

MINIREVIEW

PSYCHOLOGICAL PREVENTION OF OCCUPATIONAL INJURIES

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that psychological prevention measures against the consequences of workplace accidents are primarily based on pre-emptively addressing some social aspects within the organizational context. The “caregiver institution” should evoke and endorse the feeling of belonging to the group among its workers, in turn promoting a greater perception of safety in the individual workers, thus determining and promoting safe behaviours (prevention function). At the same time, the institution should be capable of absorbing the negative effects of an injury event, which are considered “paranormative” events (unpredictable and unexpected), through ‘recognition’ of the stress caused by the traumatic event.

From this perspective, the accidental event is perceived as an ‘attack’ to the group and not just to the directly affected individual.

Key words: caregiver institution, belonging, organization, work context

Introduction

The first attempts to identify and minimize the causes of workplace accidents date back to the second half of the nineteenth century, around the second industrial revolution which was marked by the introduction of electricity, chemicals and oil to the production process.

Some the first studies focused on individual predisposition to accidents, while others, adopting a psycho-technical approach, aimed at the personnel selection, and identified the attitudes and personality traits of future employees to place the “right man in the right place” [1].

A breakthrough was made in the field of psychological prevention of workplace accidents by successive studies on the ‘organizational climate’ and the perceived ‘safety climate’ inside the organization. The former can be defined as a set of perceptions on the organization as a whole, while the latter is a set of perceptions specifically related to safety aspects.

The term safety climate was used for the first time in 1980 in a study conducted on a group of Israeli workers in the manufacturing sector [2]. The author defined this concept as the sum of the perceptions of the employees regarding their work environment, that can be used to differentiate between organizations with high and low accident rates.

The safety climate is, in fact, a multidimensional factor that can influence the behaviour of workers, working groups and organizations [3]. In other words, it could be stated that the safety climate consists of a set of beliefs and attitudes shared by the members of an organization, within the context of safety.

The most interesting aspect of the results

published so far is that although most of the studies have focused on individual perceptions, their findings can be considered as valid indicators of the social representations and the 'mythical dimension' of professional safety among the working groups within organizations.

The indicators of safety climate: perception, attitudes and locus of control

A comprehensive and detailed review of the constitutional aspects of safety climate by Flin and colleagues from 2000 highlights the detail that perception is the most commonly assessed parameter in this research area [4]. Four distinct types of perception are commonly assessed: 1) the workers' perception of the safety management by the leadership; 2) the perception of employees in relation to the safety systems in place; 3) the perception of occupational risk; 4) the perception of organizational strain on the employees caused, for example, by short delivery times and overworking (increased workload, overlapping and/or change of objectives, etc.).

Some authors have highlighted the importance that the degree of participation in the corporate life of the worker can have in determining safe actions and, therefore, in significantly influencing the risk of accidents at work. In fact, Anderson and West identified five sections in their questionnaire designed to measure the teamwork climate (safety climate within a working group), including "shared objectives and visions of the group", "participative safety", and "support (as a contribution) for innovation" [5].

This research is of great interest to those wishing to study the concept of belonging among groups and organizations, as well as its importance not only in reducing accidents, but also in view of the recovery of workers affected by such accidents. In this context, the institutional "restorative" and "reparative" function are especially important for making injured workers feel like an integral part of the social network sharing a "group culture", constituted by a set of values, attitudes, customs, rules and regulations. It must be kept in mind that the feeling of belonging is at the base of personal identity, since from the early stages of psychological development, the question "who am I?" is closely related with "to whom do I belong?". Likewise, personal and professional identity are also strongly correlated [6].

The present paper aims to show that psychological prevention measures against the consequences of workplace accidents are largely based on the opportunity to pre-emptively (even before accidents happen) address these aspects of social life within the organizational context. The caregiver institution approach aims to evoke and endorse the feeling of belonging to a group in its workers, which in turn promotes a greater perception of safety in the individual workers, thus determining and promoting safe behaviour (prevention function). At the same time, it aims to absorb the negative effects of an injury event, considered a "paranormative event" (unpredictable and unexpected), through the recognition of the stress caused by such traumatic event. In cases of functional loss or permanent disability, the injury event becomes a "loss event", and the ability to process and overcome the grief passes through the awareness of not only being part of a group, but also of the 'sacrifice' made being 'recognized'. From this perspective, the accidental event is perceived as an 'attack' to the group and not just to the directly affected individual. Loss, sorrow and pain are perceived and experienced by the group as a whole; in this way, the individual is supported and comforted by the 'emotional sharing' with the group that does not isolate, but embraces him ('restorative and reparative function', sometimes also called the 'transformative function').

Alongside the workers' perceptions, an important role is played by their attitudes towards safety; they may affect not just the individual worker, but also the 'mythical dimension' of the organization, or the system of beliefs, opinions and attitudes within the organization, enterprise or institution. A certain degree of "distancing" from safety matters can be observed in organizations or working groups where this aspect is overlooked, and its importance is diminished, or where the organization believes it should not be held responsible for safety issues because they are dependent on the experience of the worker in charge of the specific task. On the other hand, some believe that workplace safety is directly affected by how much enterprises invest on safety, how much attention it is afforded, and the importance attached to it by the organization. Several studies confirm a positive correlation between positive attitudes towards safety and safe behaviours in the workplace.

Perceptions and attitudes are key aspects of the “work safety” system. Some researchers, such as Clarke, who analysed 51 studies on the safety climate, have identified four different approaches applied to encourage workplace safety: 1) the attitudinal approach, centred on the attitudes of workers towards safety; 2) the perceptual approach, focused on their perceptions; 3) the mixed model, which combines these two perspectives; 4) the dispositional approach, that highlights the dispositional traits of workers [7]. The current paper proposes the ‘locus of control’ as a third element in addition to workers’ perceptions and attitudes, since it is derived from these two parameters, and yet differs from them. Attributing an ‘internal locus of control’ to the safety climate implies that the risk of danger and injury while carrying out general work activities or a specific task depends on factors related to the individual worker (attention to safety, knowledge of the rules and their enforcement, experience-related strategies etc.). This concept is very similar to the attitude of responsibility and the perception of the degree of importance attributed to safety, but differs due to the prospect of causality. The ‘external locus of control’, however, implies a fatalistic vision of the safety climate, because the factors involved are connected and associated with destiny, fate and chance.

Group culture and cultural identity. The importance of the symbolic dimension

As stated by Feather: at a very abstract level of analysis, a culture can be represented as a social system which possesses identifiable and interdependent structures and institutions, and is associated with a common set of beliefs, attitudes and values shared by its members [8]. If culture, thus defined, represents the group identity, the equivalent concept at the individual level would correspond to ‘cultural identity’, that, as highlighted by a previous paper published in 2007, is constantly re-invented in response to changes within the group itself. It constitutes a cultural construction that is created in the course of time, thus implying that the symbols that represent it are repeatedly re-interpreted, and new symbols are created [9].

Among the pillars that support the relationship between group culture and cultural identity, there is the concept of “implicit pact” that was

described as an invisible bond by Boszormenyi and Spark, like an invisible thread, it supports the relationship and contributes to its maintenance [10].

In an organizational context, where the perceived level of belonging is high, the implicit pact, which, like in all types of relationships (couple, family, social and working group) is shared but not explained, could be expressed in these terms: “if you make your skills and time available to the company, we consider and recognize the value and the importance you have for the organization”, or alternatively: “if you sacrifice yourself for the company, we believe in and depend on your investment.” In both cases, the properties of reciprocity and gratification maintain the balance in the relationship.

A workplace accident causes a breach in this implicit pact if the organization does not implement the following actions and behaviour: a) recognition of the event in order to avoid its negation; b) formalizing the event; c) simultaneous request for psychological intervention which, when involving not only the affected individual, but also the working group and hierarchically higher organizational framework, can turn into organizational counselling; d) emergence of the implicit pact and its confirmation or re-definition through relocating the worker to tasks that transform his/her disability (temporary or permanent) into “diverse ability”.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the symbolic level of an organization could constitute, as suggested by Caillé, the dimension that best determines the attitudes and behaviours that develop within it [11].

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