



THE CASE ANALYSIS OF UPPER BIG BRANCH MINE

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze a catastrophic mining explosion which resulted in 29 deaths in West Virginia, U.S. The first reports upon the explosion suggested that the explosion happened due to lack of appropriate safety measures. However, further investigation revealed that the issue was deeper than merely the absence of appropriate safety measures. The negative organizational culture created by the leadership was considered as the root cause of this catastrophic incident. According to a case study published by The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission in 2012, it appeared that the organization made systematic and aggressive efforts to prioritize production over the safety of its employees. The disaster could have been prevented if the leadership had taken appropriate safety measures. Leadership, who can see the big picture, understands that prioritizing safety results in overall performance improvement in the long term (Krause, 2005). It is possible to see the implications of such leadership mindset in the organization's culture. Showing workers that the organization will always do the right thing to assure their safety is an important step toward building trust across the board. Otherwise, lack of trust and communication may eventually lead to tragic incidents as in the case of the Massey Energy. The despotic leadership, that constantly imposed fear on its employees to discourage them from voicing their opinions and questioning the existing conditions, eventually brought organizational deviance. Members of the organization neither had any meaningful communication nor appropriate information exchange. The absence of mutual trust and respect in the work environment was apparent. This paper offers further insights into the role of leadership in the prevention of future catastrophic incidence while promoting both safety and enhanced performance.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive, leadership, organization, production, safety

In order to better analyze the factors that led to this tragic accident, it will be useful to analyze the incident from an organizational theory perspective. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) suggested that the concept of modernism emphasizes maximum performance. Since the goal is to improve organization's efficiency and effectiveness, the right to control production work and workers belongs to leadership. The belief behind this notion is that when effectively managed, organizations can turn into effective systems of decision and action based on norms of rationality, efficiency, and effectiveness. Cooper and Burrell (1988) also argued that functional rationality is the essence of modernist concept and high performance is the key ingredient of that.

On the other hand, post-modernist perspective argues that there is no objectively definable reality.

Instead, humans should continuously question what's known as reality (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Organizations are socially constructed realities and due to their vibrant and dynamic nature, they are subject to change (Morgan, 2006). Since organizations reflect human values and choices, cooperation and adaptation are considered as the reason for their existence (Egitim, 2021b).

The leadership demonstrated by the Massey Energy's management adopted a rationalist approach holding high performance and production above their workers' safety. The extreme negligence revealed in the post accident investigation reports suggests that leadership placed a strong emphasis on progress and thus, human life was not considered essential. This perspective is in contrast with post-modernist perspective which perceives the concept of progress as



a myth and believes that progress justifies power abuses (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). Thus, the case is a demonstration of a systematic modernist perspective involving a great deal of ambition and greed.

As the company's sole aim was to maximize its production of coal, the leadership disregarded all the other factors to accomplish its objective. This type of leadership practice is associated with objective ontology which places the reality outside human influence (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). In this regard, the focus is on maximizing technical efficiency by rationalizing the social order. Thus, unobservable elements such as emotions, thoughts and beliefs are perceived as an obstacle ahead of their perceived unshakable reality.

However, since organizations exist due to human interactions, it is impossible to disregard the role of emotions. This perspective is in line with Weber's substantive rationality theory which emphasizes human values (as cited in Egitim, 2020). If organizations disregard the existence of substantive rationality and only focus on formal rationality, which Weber associated with technical skills and efficiency, humans would be perceived no different than machines, they may face grave consequences as Massey Energy experienced.

On the other hand, Marx's theory of capital and labor emphasizes the survival needs of workers. However, Marx suggests that there may be a power struggle when the interests of capital and those of labor are in conflict. The conflict arises from how to divide surpluses of profits. Moreover, competition from other firms puts further pressure on the organization. As a result, laborers are forced to work more efficiently to produce more (as cited in Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). This capitalist notion is also observed in the leadership practices employed by Massey Energy.

Massey Energy's leadership treated the organization based on a strict modernist approach with a focus on production and profits. The leadership perceived workers no different than machines. Their safety was not considered as a high priority. Employees' emotions, thoughts, beliefs were disregarded. Due to the negative organizational culture created by the leadership, employees gradually lost respect and trust for the management. Since the staff realized that they were not considered as a meaningful part of the organization, there were no longer any communicative exchanges or interactions between the staff and management. As a result, the catastrophic incident was inevitable. However, If the leadership can achieve deep, genuine, and collective interactions based on a mutual objective, it is possible to make everyone feel valuable for the organization. taking gradual steps under the guidance of the leadership is essential for smoother

adaptation to the newly nurtured organizational culture (Egitim, 2021b).

CONCLUSION

This accident teaches us a number of important lessons. Firstly, the role of leadership is essential to create an organizational culture that embraces a collective mindset. As Egitim (2021a) suggested, leadership should be participative, democratic and employee-centered. Since organizations are human systems, they are vibrant and dynamic in nature. Their source of energy is derived from human interactions. Burke (2017) suggested that organizational structure that reflects the interrelated nature of its subsystems holds greater potential for participation. Through everyday interactions, organizations can evolve into more adaptive and flexible systems which can help them better prepare and deal with the complexity of the ever-changing external environment. Therefore, leadership that can genuinely make their employees feel that they are the true owners of their organizations and hence, their thoughts, feelings and concerns are held above everything else, can give their organizations the edge over others.

Leaders frequently make decisions with far-reaching affects on everyone across the board. Thus, their ability to anticipate problems and take effective measures is essential (Gronn, 2002). For this purpose, leaders need to interact with their subordinates and be open to learn from them. Establishing a learning organization where everyone can feel comfortable learning from one another can eventually reach success (Caligiuri and Tarique, 2012). Trust and respect are two key components of organizational success. They are strong human values that can only be earned upon genuine interactions between members. From a leadership perspective, showing employees that their safety is prioritized over production would be a firm step toward establishing trust and respect with employees. Improved organizational performance and productivity are the likely outcomes of an organizational environment where everyone trusts and respects one another.

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