

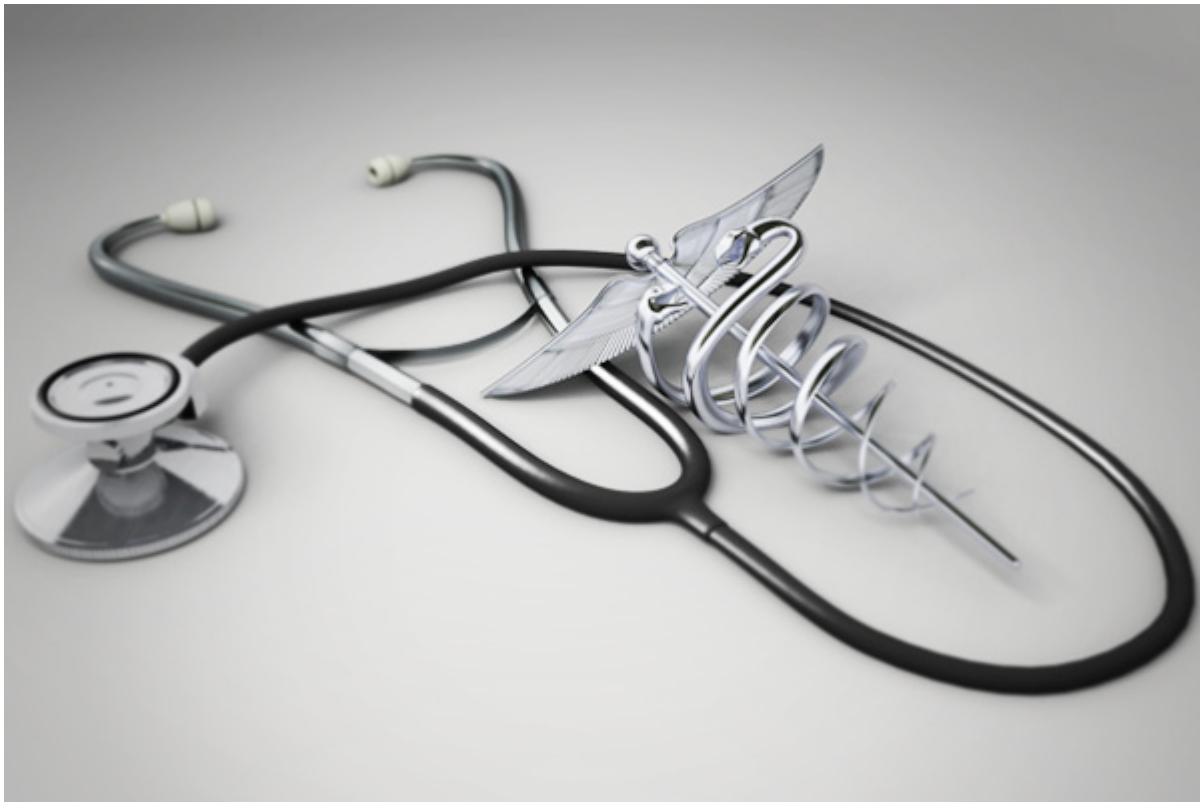


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ANALYSIS

# Leadership by health, safety and environmental ownership

by Ogechi Obiorah    On Oct 6, 2017



Every workplace is fraught with some kind of risks. A typical incident will result into different outcomes in different workspaces. An incident may be minor like a fall caused by a wet floor or more serious incidents like a fall from a building under construction, or injuries or even death by machinery. This was the focus of the discourse at the recent knowledge café of the Humanistic Management Network (HMN), Nigerian Chapter, titled “Safety, health and environmental management in the workplace.

Most workers spend averagely 9 hours daily at work. For those hours spent in the workplace, to what extent is one personally responsible for the health, safety and environmental (HSE) management at the workplace? It is easy to think that HSE falls within the jurisdiction of the employer, but the reality is that HSE responsibility lies with everyone in the organizational value chain (employer, employee,

and stakeholders) It has been recognised that the main sources of accident in the workplace are the people, the procedure, the equipment and the work environment. More importantly, it is the people who will use the equipment, and follow the procedure in the work environment. Where the people use the equipment inefficiently or do not follow the procedure, this could result in an accident for them, their fellow workers and the environment. This emphasises the onerous role of every individual in HSE management in the workplace.

But before the individual can be entrusted with this responsibility, there has to be a HSE plan in place in the first place. It is a fundamental need for every organization to have a documented HSE policy endorsed by the management. The business leaders of every organisation; small, medium and big are expected to champion HSE and engender efficiency in promoting health and safety within the workplace. They must assume ownership of the health and safety of their employees, the workplace, and the environment. Safety ownership means that if a task or duty is not safe or has unknown consequence, then don't do it; if it is not safe for others, don't let them do it.

One of the main rationales for HSE is the legal implications. As a business leader or the board of an organisation, protecting the health and safety of the employees, the environment and the members of the public who may be affected by the activities of your organisation is a crucial part of risk management. The health and safety laws imposes a duty on organisations and employers for the health and safety of employees, the environment and the general public who may be affected by their work. Failure to provide adequate health and safety policies and procedures is a key business risk and can have catastrophic effects including civil suits and even personal liability for the director or business leader. Many high-profile safety cases over the years have been as a result of leadership failures. Effective health and safety culture come from the top, therefore, it is imperative for business leaders to demonstrate both individual and collective responsibility for HSE. Other rationales for HSE management include; good corporate image and responsibility, social obligation, economic benefit, increased productivity and reduced costs, risks and accidents.

Business leaders should therefore ensure that their organisations: make their HSE policy visible to staff (Put your policy up on the wall); identify all the possible risks and have health and safety policies in place to prevent identified risks; have designated first aiders, minimum of two people per shift and a certified HSE personnel; be proactive in improving knowledge of HSE management; train staff routinely on health and safety in order to empower them; constantly monitor and review the health and safety measures of the organization; have a policy to address the mental wellbeing of individuals at the workplace; have in place a plan for each and every level of emergency response; efficient housekeeping ("space for everything and everything in its place"); adopt health and safety compliance as part of performance management (introduced in the induction process and included in new employee handbooks); have a strong audit system for constant audits and reviews, at the least, amongst others. Organisations should adopt a preventive approach to promoting health and safety,

by incorporating an organisational discipline which should translate into self-discipline by the employees. Celebrating positive achievements and milestones in relation to health and safety, for instance, a targeted number of accident-free hours or days will help to foster organisational consciousness of the importance of health and safety in the workplace. Provision of ergonomic chairs and other suitable equipment to aid the physical health of employees may seem quite expensive, but they promote better health, last longer and are cost effective. So also is the Environmental Impact Assessment which is essential for every business and even though it can be expensive, it is worthwhile.

The main challenges, when establishing health and safety systems, especially for newly established organisations have been identified as cost, time restrictions, the absence of knowledge/skill and the absence of guidance and information. In 1999, Better Regulation Task Force (BRTF) in an initiative, considered the regulatory barriers to start-up, success, and growth of small businesses, and found that smaller firms are often at a competitive disadvantage compared with larger firms because of the cost and time involved in regulatory compliance. Many SMEs have pointed at cost, lack of knowledge, the small number of employees, low priority, and time restrictions as reasons for not having HSE systems and policies in place. So how do we address the issue of cost especially for small business owners in relation to safety, health and environmental management? Especially as the BRTF Initiative reported more accidents in small organisations than medium and large organisations? Proper guidance and advice are required, for all organisations but especially SMEs, on HSE regulations that are relevant to them, identifying the risks and taking proactive and preventive measures, setting performance targets for health and safety, and evaluating the effectiveness of specific activities and their impact. It will be cost effective and wise for the SME to get these guidance and advice from qualified HSE professionals at the start-up when there are fewer people and fewer risks and then scale up as the need arises.

It is crucial for every individual across the organisational value chain to accept ownership and responsibility, and companies must be more proactive and reactive to issues of HSE.

## **Ogechi Obiorah**

*This article is an outcome of the Knowledge Café of the Humanistic Management Network (HMN) Nigerian Chapter titled "Safety, Health & Environment Management", anchored by the Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics (CRLE) at Lagos Business School (CRLE). The Humanistic Management Network (HMN) Nigeria is part of an international, interdisciplinary, and independent network that promotes the development of an economic system with respect for human dignity and well-being. It defends human dignity in face of its vulnerability. CRLE's vision is creating and sharing knowledge that improves the way managers lead and live in Africa and the World. You can contact CRLE at [atcrle@lbs.edu.ng](mailto:atcrle@lbs.edu.ng).*

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