

## **Top-down Capacity for Competence**

Wayne Vernon, General Manager High Hazards Unit and Energy Safety, WorkSafe New Zealand

Ensuring the competence of everyone involved in work activities is an essential step in preventing harm from both process safety and personal safety hazards. Managing competence is, therefore, a critical safety control measure for any organisation, and is a legal obligation in most regulatory jurisdictions.

The vast majority of companies operating in offshore oil and gas have some sort of competence management system, often in the form of a matrix that identifies what skills are required on a particular facility, and who among the workforce possesses a particular skill or has received appropriate training. The best even have an awareness of the competence required by teams of workers, and seamlessly blend employee and contractor labour to deliver teams that know what they are doing.

In my experience, it is less often the case that this detailed analysis of the skills and knowledge is implemented at higher levels of an organisation, including the board of governors. Thus, when the price of oil plunges, it is not unusual to find from time to time that the most carefully crafted competence management system is swept away by a corporate restructure designed with cost efficiency as the only constraint. In these circumstances, it is not uncommon for companies to lose not only the people who possess plant-level safety critical skills and knowledge, but also the corporate knowledge of the competence management system itself.

Economic pressures are not the only cause of corporate amnesia and skill loss. Many installations are now well along the bathtub curve having long since outlived their original design life. The demographics of the industry are such that many of those still living who have been involved in the lifecycle of an installation are contemplating retirement, just at the time when their knowledge and competence is most required. Operators of installations will, therefore, have to capture as much relevant safety critical knowledge as possible, while it's possible.

Competence management is potentially a big challenge, so where to begin?

When she was in the role of Chair of the UK's Health and Safety Executive, Judith Hackett said that, "the leader who understands what the process's greatest vulnerabilities are and how they need to be addressed will create a very different climate in their organisation." I agree with this, and think such leadership understanding is the key for creating a built-in culture of competence management, and the retention of corporate memory that supports this.

If those at the very top of an organisation understand the nature of the hazards they are responsible for, and the role that control measures such as competence management play in preventing harm, then it would seem more likely that they will understand the potential long-term consequences of their decisions, and that safety critical competence will be preserved. Once that high level culture of awareness exists, the detail should be easier to maintain through turbulent economic times, and through demographic transitions.

For any organisation looking to develop its capacity for competence management, therefore, it appears that the foundations need to be built at the very top.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of any other IRF member.