

Strategies for safety & health Collectivism (BBS, etc.) vs. individualism (personal values)

Individualism — an ideology that holds the individual personally responsible for his or her [safety and health] actions and concedes that each person is best suited to decide the [safety and health] interactions associated with their own life.¹

Collectivism — an ideology that holds the individual to be subjugated [by force, if necessary] to the group and forfeit all personal needs and rights for the sake of the common good.²

All of us are members of at least one *collective*, namely our families. Today, we are surrounded by a proliferation of new social networking tools that facilitate the establishment of numerous *collectives* to include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Ning, Plaxo, Twitter and, of course, that omnipotent tool known as email.³

At some point in our careers we look to *collectivist* approaches to address a safety or health matters using such techniques as “Brothers [Sisters] Keeper,” Behavior-Based Safety, “Actively Caring,” peer safety observations and feedback, etc. These approaches have proven effective as long as they do not fall prey to the “program-of-the-month” syndrome or, worse yet, become a *collectivist* approach to the extreme (more on this later).

Collectivists believe they know [safety and health] better than the individual and they are averse to allowing individuals to determine their own [safety and health] courses of action since they believe individuals may make the wrong choices [when it comes to the individual’s safety

and health].⁴

Personally, I tend to favor *individualistic* approaches to addressing safety and health matters because of the personal value attributed to an individual’s contribution to the business’ productivity, efficiency and effectiveness coupled with the importance of the individual to work in a manner that does not hurt anyone.

Out on oil platforms

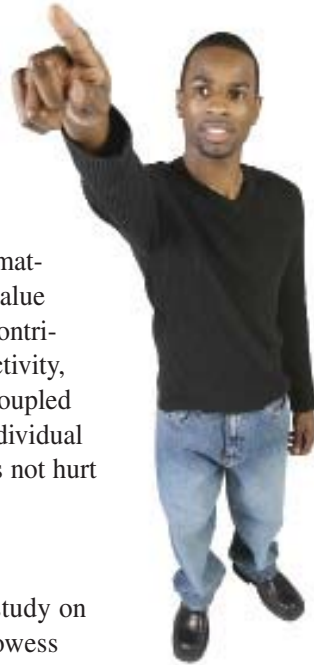
I recently read a research study on the undoing of masculine prowess and interactions in highly dangerous, male-dominated workplaces — two offshore oil platforms. Many circumstances described in this case reveal a strong push for goals that advance the *collective* good (i.e., focusing on contributing to the well-being of the whole, rather than garnering acceptance or admiration for self).

The study, by researchers Robin Ely and Debra Meyerson⁵, revealed three organizational conditions appear to prompt the “undoing” of masculinity: 1) a connective purpose; 2) the decoupling of masculinity and competence; and 3) psychological safety.

The oil platform workers’ connective purpose involved ensuring co-workers’ safety, building a sense of community, and contributing to the work as a valuable activity in its own right. One of the norms used to foster co-workers’ safety was the practice of co-workers conducting anonymous safety observations and providing feedback, which workers noted kept them attentive to safety. The sense of community was cultivated by the com-



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Safety programs should allow for individual contributions.

pany’s frequent recognition for jobs well done. The researchers discovered that the platform workers took pride in the intrinsic value of their work, namely producing oil and gas for consumers.

Decoupling of masculinity and competence was accomplished through a “mission-driven” standard of workers “caring for their fellow workers,” being “good listeners,” “thoughtful,” and “willing to learn.” These qualities were deemed necessary to perform work safely and effectively as opposed to being “the biggest, baddest roughneck” on deck.

Psychological safety referred to the workers’ shared belief that they could let go of self-image concerns when safety and effectiveness required it. Ely and Meyerson found workers flourished in their work environment by learning from mistakes and not having to fear repercussions. Everyone was given the chance to speak up, which allowed for expressions of vulnerability and communicated acceptance of fallibility.

By making safety top priority, this “manly men” environment took on the appearance of a *collectivistic* work environment. But specific actions by management permitted the platform workers to retain their *individualistic* characteristics. This allowed each worker to develop a

revised identity of their masculine self-image and make their contribution toward achieving the goals of the company in a safe manner. Interestingly, the company's safety initiative resulted in an overall 84-percent decline in accidents while achieving productivity (barrels of oil produced), efficiency (cost per barrel produced), and reliability (production "up" time) levels above industry benchmarks.

Extreme measures

Returning to the thought of collectivistic safety approaches taken to the extreme, research,^{6,7} on *collectivist* versus individualist cultures has shown that collectivists exhibit a lack of trust for *individuals* who are not members of their in-group. On the

other hand, *individualists* exhibit a propensity to trust *individuals* regardless of their in-group or out-group memberships.

Taken to the extreme, *collectivistic* safety approaches can lead to *in-group* members ostracizing *out-group* members, resulting in the potential for increased injury rates.

From a systems thinking perspective, our primary objective in dissolving complex, messy systemic safety problems should call upon methods that do not depend solely on *collectivistic* consensus, but draw upon the *individualistic* contributions and interactions of all members of the organization, whether they are members of the *in-groups* or the *out-groups*. Failing to integrate this

individualistic thinking into our safety messes causes us to lose the benefit of disagreement and serious debate, which may lead to constricting our options to dissolve safety messes.

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2 Rand, Ayn. The Only Path to Tomorrow. *Readers Digest*. January 1944: 88-90.

3 Andromeda-510639.

4 Wikipedia. List of social networking websites. July 18, 2009. July 19, 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites

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Reprinted from *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*

September 2009 ©2009 Industrial Safety & Hygiene News