Keys for Executives to Successfully Conduct Major Incident Reviews

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Recently I had the opportunity to join an executive team meeting as they reviewed a serious incident. The team saw the meeting as a crucial way for them to both show support to operations and to demonstrate their commitment to safety. However, the COO, who I have known for years, wasn't sure that the reviews were moving the organization toward becoming a learning organization or improving safety. So I was invited to listen to the review and to provide observations.

It became clear that the feedback based on this one observation wasn't going to be what the executive team expected. We agreed, therefore, that I should interview the last five managers who presented at these reviews.

It turns out these managers were consistent in their feedback. It turns out that the reviews were perceived as:

- An opportunity for executives to demonstrate how smart they were.
- A time to be told about your incompetence.
- A time for executives to reinforce their message about using discipline for learning.
- A check-the-box exercise primarily because there was never follow-up from these reviews.

All the managers agreed that these types of reviews can be helpful to demonstrate the executive leader's commitment to safety. While the current approach wasn't seen as helpful, the fact that leaders wanted to learn and understand was viewed as a positive.

However, when asked whether the reviews contributed to the organization becoming a learning organization, the answer was a resounding no. Being second-guessed, lectured to, and knowing a follow-up would never materialize were collectively seen as reducing the credibility of the leaders and the review. One of the managers shared with me that the site managers all agreed they had two objectives: say as little as possible and get out of the review as fast as possible.

Once I had the feedback pulled together I sat down with the senior executive and presented my observations. Having known this leader for quite a few years, I could tell he was swallowing hard and fighting back the urge to rebut. There were some appropriate and tough questions about my observations.

We agreed to use the feedback as a test for the executive team regarding whether they are creating a setting conducive to learning. It was agreed I would present my observations and the COO would observe the interaction. The leader agreed to not intervene for at least 15 minutes. To prep, we discussed attributes of a learning organization and developed a scorecard for the COO to use.

As expected, it turned out that the feedback was not well-received by the executive team. For example:

- The discussion turned from a focus on the observations to questioning the validity of the data. (Not a high score for the team on "reacts openly to unwelcome data.")
- Next, they began to justify their intense questioning of the managers in the review meeting. One leader asked: "How else is the manager going to learn if we don't ask pointed questions or point out where they could have done better?"
- When we discussed the percentage of time the executive team members spoke in the review session versus the percentage of time the manager spoke, they were stunned. I shared with them that the executives were speaking more than 70 percent of the time. Upon reflection they did agree that the session I attended was typical.

The senior executive shared with the team the checklist they were using to "score" the interaction and what they observed. This led to a 30-minute discussion about how the executive team was setting the organizational climate around learning. Ultimately, the team decided to form a small committee to refine the attributes of a learning organization. They also committed to start work on modeling these attributes.

What was great about this outcome is they wanted this to apply to all their meetings, not just the incident reviews. The COO's final request was to have a list of Do's regarding major incident reviews. We spent time talking about how creating a learning environment is much bigger than just how people act in a meeting. How people act in the review session is important, but the team needed to think broader about the before, during and after phases. Below is what DEKRA provided.

Before an Incident

Do: Have a communication system that addresses catastrophic incidents. Executive engagement typically starts shortly after a major incident is reported. While local management is dealing with the aftermath of the incident, they start getting "the calls." The calls come from their boss, their boss's boss, safety, and human resources to mention a few. The calls are typically uncoordinated. They distract local management from focusing on what should be most important, the welfare of the affected employees.

When there is no organized system of communication, facts can get distorted and people can compete to show they are up on the latest.

To prevent that from happening, establish a plan where communication is provided to all parties by a specific person, at specific time periods, post-incident. Adhere to the other do's listed below in these update briefings.

Do: Agree on the attributes of the "room climate" required for learning. Through the years I have found that checklists are critically important for two reasons. First, the checklist outlines the expectations and can be used to drive alignment. Second, they are a powerful reminder of the expectations and are valuable for conducting self-reflection or group debrief sessions. If a team wants to change the meeting climate, they need to agree on what that meeting climate needs to be. Then they need to evaluate their performance against these standards.

Do: Set expectations that incident investigations must focus on system causes and long-term exposure control actions.

The time to "train" a manager on the expectations of incident investigations isn't in the executive review session. There needs to be an organizational expectation that getting to system causation is an expectation of investigations and that action items must address how leadership will be assured that the exposure is controlled long-term. One challenge to incident investigations and action items is that they can be biased toward a short-time horizon and/or "fixing" the employee. Of note: If it is obvious in an executive review session that the investigation did not get to system causation or was overly focused on fixing the employee, this should be addressed outside the review, not during.

During the Incident Review Session

Do: Ask about the welfare of the injured employee, their loved ones, their co-workers, and others affected. This Do should be obvious, but often people jump into the details of the incident and never ask about those impacted. Every incident update should start with an update about those impacted. Specific medical information should not be provided. However, updates on the status of the injured and what steps were taken to support those impacted emotionally by the incident should be discussed.

Do: Trust that the on-site management team did a thorough incident investigation and thought deeply about how to prevent recurrence. This Do is one of the most critical. Too often this is where incident reviews go off the rails. Leaders mean well when they ask whether a specific cause was explored during the investigation, or whether a specific action item was considered. But from my experience, it often creates an avalanche of these types of questions. More importantly for the person presenting these questions, they can be perceived differently. The questions most often come across as questioning the leader's thoroughness of investigation and their personal competence. I have seldom observed that the questions led to profound new insights or action items

Do: Ask what barriers exist to completing the action items and how you can help.

One of the roles of an executive is to remove barriers. When incidents happen, investigations can often uncover decisions that allowed a hazard or exposure to remain. Any decision can be seconded guessed, but it must be assumed that at the time the decision was based on a risk assessment and it was sound. It is highly risky for a leader to bring up this decision. Executives have to make it safe for the leader to do so and demonstrate that they too can learn from this incident.

Do: Avoid asking about whether discipline was administered.

Sorry, but this just isn't an appropriate question for an executive to ask. It sends the message that discipline is expected if something goes wrong. Think about it: what is the "right" answer for the leader making the presentation? If an organization has suffered a major incident is administrating discipline important in the scheme of controlling the exposure?

Do: Provide positive reinforcement and ask for feedback on the review process.

It may seem obvious, but too many times I have seen review sessions simply just stop with a quick thank you. The team needs to spend an addition 2-3 minutes to reinforce for the presenting manager what they did that met the team's expectations, then ask what they can do to make the sessions more valuable to the manager.

After an Incident Review

Do: Reflect. Each leader should reflect on their actions in the review session and ask others for their observations.

Do: Have a mechanism to get an update on the impacted employee(s) and the status of action items.

When an executive inquires just once about the well-being of those impacted, it can come across as an insincere and a check-the-box activity. Learning organizations have an attribute

that leadership must have a passion for people. This means they have a genuine desire to know that those impacted are recovering and they also understand they have a responsibility to these individuals.

Another area where leadership need to be systematically updated is on action items that came from the investigation. At the time of the review, there may not be perceived barriers to completion. However, as the incident becomes more distant and as unforeseen challenges to completion become apparent, closure of crucial actions can become seriously delayed or seen to be less crucial.

Do: Have a plan to determine if the learnings and actions are more broadly applicable.

It is not realistic to think that the manager making the presentation has the capability or should be responsible to assure that the lessons learned, or actions taken from this one incident, are applied more broadly. The organization needs to have a mechanism where crucial lessons are shared and where crucial actions are implemented. A status report on the broader rollout should be part of the update mentioned just above.

Conclusion

Are executive reviews of major incidents the right thing to do? The answer is a resounding yes.

When done well, executive reviews create an environment where executives can learn about what is preventing significant exposures from being controlled. It gives them an opportunity to model what good looks like with regards to creating a learning moment. Additionally, it gives them an opportunity to use their position to remove barriers for operational leaders. Finally, they can demonstrate that they value fixing system issues that hinder safety excellence and long- versus short-term solutions.

Like any meeting or session that becomes routine, leadership will need to assure that it does not revert to a check-the-box exercise. Each review should start with stated objectives for the session. It should then meet expectations with each leader providing their full and undivided attention. The managers who participate in these meetings will share their experiences and therefore, executives should be very concerned whether the manager talks about the value of the session or the actions of the leader.