Keys for Executives to successfully Conduct Major Incident Reviews

White Paper

Recently DEKRA Executive Consultant had the opportunity to join an executive team meeting to review a serious incident. The team saw these meetings as a crucial way to both show support to operations and demonstrate their commitment to safety. However, the COO, who had worked with DEKRA for years, wasn't sure the reviews were supporting the organization in becoming a learning organization or improving safety. So, DEKRA was invited to listen in and provide observations.

To supplement what we heard in that review, the COO agreed that DEKRA Consultant should interview the last five managers who presented at these reviews. These managers were consistent in their feedback, perceiving the reviews as:

- An opportunity for executives to demonstrate how smart they were.
- A time to be told about their 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 executive leaders' 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 managers answered with a resounding no. Being second-guessed and 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 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.

When we presented this feedback to the COO, it was clear he was fighting the urge to rebut. He asked some appropriate and tough questions about our observations.

We agreed to use the feedback to test whether the executive team was creating a setting conducive to learning. DEKRA would present our observations and the COO would observe the interaction, agreeing not to 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, 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, the team 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 spoke versus the time the manager spoke, they were stunned. The executives were speaking more than 70 percent of the time. Upon reflection, they did agree the session DEKRA attended was typical.

The COO shared with the team the checklist used to "score" the interaction and what was observed. This led to a 30-minute discussion about how the executive team was driving 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. Even better, they wanted this to apply to all their meetings, not just the incident reviews.

We discussed how creating a learning environment is much bigger than just how people act in a meeting. The team needed to think more broadly about the before, during, and after phases.

The COO's final request was for a list of "Do's" for major incident reviews. DEKRA provided the following.

Before an Incident

Do: Have a communication system that addresses catastrophic incidents.

Executives typically become engaged 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 to date on the latest news.

To prevent this 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. 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. Checklists are critically important here and elsewhere 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.

Do: Set expectations that incident investigations must focus on system causes and long-term exposure control actions. Executive review sessions aren't the time to "train" a manager on the expectations of incident investigations. Everyone involved needs to understand beforehand that investigations are expected to uncover system causation 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-term horizon and/or "fixing" the employee. Note: If it becomes obvious that an executive review session 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 the steps 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 our experience, this often creates an avalanche of these types of questions, which most often come across as questioning the leader's investigation thoroughness and their personal competence. These questions seldom lead 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 second-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 manager to bring up this decision. Executives must make it safe for the manager to do so and demonstrate that they too can learn from this incident.

Do: Avoid asking whether discipline was administered. This 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 manager making the presentation? If an organization has suffered a major incident, is administering discipline important in the scheme of controlling the exposure?

Do: Provide positive reinforcement and ask for feedback on the review process. Too many times review sessions simply end with a quick thank-you. The team needs to spend an additional 2-3 minutes to reinforce what the presenting manager 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, check-the-box activity. One attribute of learning organizations is 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.

Leadership also needs to be systematically updated on action items that come 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 be seen as less crucial. Leaders need to be kept in the loop.

Do: Have a plan to determine if the learnings and actions are more broadly applicable. It is not realistic to think the presenting manager has the capability or responsibility to assure that the lessons learned, or actions taken from this one incident are applied more broadly. The organization needs to have a mechanism for sharing crucial lessons and implementing crucial actions. A status report on the broader rollout should be part of the leadership update mentioned 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 what is preventing significant exposures from being controlled. It gives them an opportunity to model what good looks like when creating a learning moment. Additionally, it gives them an opportunity to use their position to remove barriers for operational leaders. Finally, they can demonstrate they value (1) fixing system issues that hinder safety excellence and (2) long-term versus short-term solutions.

Like any meeting or session that becomes routine, leadership will need to assure that reviews do not revert to a check-the-box exercise. Each review should start with stated objectives for the session, and then meet those objectives, with each leader providing their full attention. Knowing that the managers who participate in these meetings will share their experiences with others, executives should be committed to optimizing the managers' perception of the value of the session and the actions of the leaders.

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