

Interview

Women Making a Difference in Safety

Leaders In. 2022 Edition

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With a background in process engineering and operations, combined with almost 20 years' experience of managing health and safety for Cepsa, Ana Berrocal highlights why a safety culture needs to recognise people as human beings and not machines.



Q.

How did your journey from operations to safety evolve, and how has this shaped your understanding of the role?

There's no doubt that my background as an engineer and experience as an operations manager has been fundamental to shaping my current role. As a front-line worker in a chemical plant, you are exposed to risks 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's a fact. I have worked in this sector my entire career and feel privileged to have worked in several roles to learn about the processes and organisation. I then spent two years in Canada, studying for my Master's in Manufacturing Management and upon completion I accepted the position of Health and Safety Manager based at Cepsa's headquarters in Spain. The current health and safety manager was retiring and so I fortunate to be able to shadow him for a year before embarking on the role myself. In operations you can do many things to be safer, but there's a limit to what you can do in terms of safety. Being based at the headquarters of a global energy and chemical company that operates at every stage of the oil and gas value chain has enabled me to have a greater impact and contribute to the development of safety processes across all the plants across five continents.

Q.

What are your views on how company culture and good leadership can make a difference to excellence in safety?

Good leadership is central to a strong safety culture, just as it is central to the whole business. A company can have good systems or good practices, but good leadership makes the organisation actually 'feel' their good practices. The word feel is really important because a good leader is able to feel what people are thinking. They recognise that as a human being people are social and emotional and that this connection is vital to embed a safety mindset. If a leader is aligned to these feelings, it's easier for teams to feel their individual ownership in safety results. Good leaders will make time to listen and will try to learn every day from what they see and hear. Ultimately, this empathetic approach makes the organisation more efficient in safety, as well as business. It has to be in our mindset to learn every day. Another important aspect is for leaders to reward work that is well done. From a safety perspective this may be as simple as seeing someone following safety practices, the best thing is to tell them right there in the moment. It's very easy to always be identifying what is not working, or highlighting mistakes, but actually we need to reinforce and commend people for what they do well. This is even more important since we have lost some contact during Covid.

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Q.

You mention the impact of Covid-19 on direct communication. Have you also seen a need to focus on psychosocial risks such as mental health issues? Do you see any other emerging operational risks?

It has certainly had a big impact. I think what was most challenging was that we had to manage the situation with very little knowledge of what we were dealing with. It was a new risk that we had to approach, whilst finding solutions very quickly. Although mental health was present before, it has now firmly been introduced into our world of safety. What I see in some cases is that people are afraid, not so much of the virus now, but about any changes that may come in the future. Our organisations responded very well. People were patient and tolerant, especially as some of the measures were against the social aspects of life that we took for granted, and we can't underestimate the long-term impact of this. For example, we still have some centres where workers have to eat alone. I would say that we saw the biggest impact on our office workers. Reaching the homeworkers was difficult and many struggled being away from colleagues for so long. Unfortunately, I think in the future we will recognise more risks and consequences of Covid than the ones we see now.



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Q.

What would you consider to be the benefits of innovation and technology on safety programmes? Are there any disadvantages to consider?

Safety performance has improved dramatically over the last 20 years, and I think that's because of technology. From the design of plants to the tools that operators use, or devices that alert them when they are in atmospheres that are not safe, we try to implement technology wherever we can, and everybody is eager to use it too. Whilst technology creates a solution, you do need to be careful that it doesn't replace the dialogue and distance people from their managers. This can easily happen with something like control systems that provide managers with vital information that can be accessed at home, via their mobile or computer. Essentially, they don't have the need to see people in the field to get this information. It's another risk you have to control. There's no doubt that technology and innovation save lives every day, but it has to be a combination of virtual contact and face-to-face contact to maintain the safety culture.



What would you say are the core areas to focus on when building a safety programme?

It goes without saying that a strong safety culture is fundamental. This is reliant on leaders showing that they care and also promoting a culture that is always open to learn. A powerful and important tool is regular job safety observations. This provides an opportunity for managers to observe their team, have conversations sharing the risks they see, gain an insight into how much they understand the safety and how they'd control it. It's also important to show the progress to all the people involved and adapt the KPI's all different groups of stakeholders. These simple, yet effective processes enable the managers to visibly show their commitment to safety, as well as opening opportunities for dialogue and sharing of knowledge.

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What would you say to other women considering a career in a health and safety?

Well, I'd say if you're looking for a role where you want to learn every day, utilise science and tech and save lives, well this is the field. Other than being a doctor, I don't think there are other positions that can tick all those boxes. It really is a journey whereby you will never stop learning and this because you are pushed by the front-line risks and the changing environment. It's a truly rewarding area of work and it's also nice that this is recognised within the organisation. It's a role that touches the whole company and an opportunity to make a positive impact, so go for it.

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