

Taking a lesson from the military

Written by Brian Darlington

Wednesday, 07 March 2018 21:15



In many instances safety articles are aimed at the safety professionals. However, it is important for leaders to take responsibility for the safety of their teams when driving for desired safety cultures and maturity levels

As part of the military conscription, which was instituted in South Africa on August 4, 1967, like most young white South African males, I was called up to join the South African Defence Force (SADF) in July 1980, as I had finished college at the end of 1979.

I was subsequently sent to an infantry battalion located in a town on the banks of the Orange River called Upington, in the Northern Cape region of South Africa.

During our 12-week basic training, I became familiar with the mindset of continuous and repeated training and instruction in understanding rules and procedures and getting things right, as well as the importance of the “buddy” system.

At the time, most of the riflemen in my platoon thought all the retraining was a waste of time. The corporals would repeat everything and drill us until we understood what was required, and punish us when we did not meet the requirements. Most of us believed that the corporals and our staff sergeant (Palmer) just wanted to mess us around.

How wrong we were, and we would realise the importance of doing things right as time moved on during our two-year stint in the military, as well as during subsequent annual military camps.

As my grandfather fought and was captured in France during the First World War, I developed an interest in reading books based on the Great War. My interest later extended to the Second World War as well as the South African Border War that took place on the border of the former South West Africa and Angola from August 1966 to early 1990.

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Through all this reading I came to realise that there are many lessons that leaders in industry can take from the military.

Hopefully, this article – and the follow up in the next issue of SHEQ MANAGEMENT – will provide some of the reasons why we can compare the two.

Leadership is the key aspect of success

Similar to the military, industry leaders have an important role to play in ensuring the safe operation of all the equipment, as well as safe behaviours of the employees and contractors in ensuring everybody returns home safely at the end of the day.

In the military, the corporal taking his team out on patrol is responsible for ensuring good planning and execution of the task. He ensures each member of the team has an understanding of the objectives, as well as making sure all procedures and requirements are clearly understood and followed.

Should things go wrong during the patrol, it is his or her responsibility to assess the situation and take action to ensure the safety of the team is not compromised. The corporal's prime responsibility is to ensure the team returns to base safely at the end of each patrol.

The same applies to industry leaders (managers, supervisors and foreman): they have the responsibility to ensure good planning of a task, clear understanding of the hazards and the risks, as well as mitigating procedures and controls to ensure the safety of the team who will conduct the work.

To do this successfully, comprehensive risk assessments and safe working procedures must be available and all those involved must be well trained in the details thereof.

Should conditions change, or new risks be identified, the leader has the responsibility to stop

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the activities and to develop and agree on suitable control measures. The prime objective of the leaders must be to send everybody home safely every day.



If the leaders responsible for the line do not take full responsibility for their teams, then all the aspects listed in this article will not be implemented successfully and undesired incidents, injuries, occupational health illnesses and diseases, as well as fatal injuries, will continue to occur.

It might at times mean that jobs are delayed to ensure the conditions are suitable and the safety of the team is considered. This is exactly what Commander General Dwight D Eisenhower did on June 4, 1944, when he learnt that the weather could be detrimental to the safety of the Allied troops during the D-Day landings. As a result, he suspended the landings by 24 hours and eventually they only commenced on June 6, 1944.

Selection of suitable candidates

In the military, soldiers are put through a series of tests and medical examinations to ensure that they are suitable for the military core that they wish, or are required, to join. If they do not pass the physical and health assessments, they are not permitted to join, as their relevant issue could place their own life, or that of fellow soldiers, at risk in a combat situation.

In some countries, it is a legislative requirement for companies to conduct pre-medical examinations as a baseline in understanding the limitations of the person.

Now, I am not suggesting that people with certain health conditions or disabilities should not be employed. Instead, I am suggesting that pre-medical screening can ensure an understanding of the person's condition and whether they would be suitable for the specific type of work.

Leaders should have an understanding of whether people in their employ have any health

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issues that would exclude them when allocating the work. They should also identify suitable control measures to ensure health and medical conditions are not aggravated or compromised.

For example, a person suffering from occupational asthma can still be employed. They would, however, not be permitted to work in a chemical plant, and a person showing signs of noise-induced hearing loss should be placed on a continuous monitoring programme to identify if the condition worsens or remains stable.

A “Buddy” system

In the military it is common to have a “buddy” system in which soldiers are trained and coached to take care of themselves as well as others during training sessions and in combat.

This approach is crucial to ensure the safety of each soldier in the team. Having a buddy system is a caring approach as soldiers can openly talk to each other about all aspects including their mental state.

There are many initiatives that can be considered to promote the buddy approach in industry. These include behaviour-based safety campaigns where staff observe peers conducting activities to identify issues of concern and to provide guidance and support. Using different colour t-shirts also enables employees look out for those who are still in training.

It is, however, crucial that leaders promote and support these types of initiatives to ensure that they are successful.

Issuing of PPE

The issuing of personal protective equipment (PPE) is the last resort when considering mitigation of risks and when considering the hierarchy of risk controls, however in many circumstances the issuing of PPE is necessary.

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It is, once again, the responsibility of the leaders to identify the most suitable PPE to provide the desired protection.

Selection of PPE should be undertaken by the leader in consultation with the employees to find the best solution (both practical and comfortable) and should not be left to the sole discretion of the purchasing department. Cost should not be the only consideration when selecting PPE.

In most instances, soldiers going into combat are issued with equipment to provide maximum ballistic protection, which is as comfortable as possible while providing sufficient manoeuvrability for the soldiers.

I end off part one of this article with the following quote from Eisenhower: "Farming looks mighty easy when your plough is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the corn field".

Brian Darlington is the group head of safety and health for the Mondi Group, based in Vienna, Austria. He has filled the role since 2012 and is responsible for safety and health in more than 30 countries. Brian started working at Iscor before joining Mondi in 1987, working in Gauteng. In 2000 he transferred to the Kraft Division in Richards Bay. During 2005, Brian transferred to Europe, taking up the position of business unit SHE manager, responsible for SHE in paper mills in Austria, Hungary, Israel, Slovakia, Poland, South Africa and Russia, as well as forests operations in South Africa and Russia.