

## Lion Kings or Paper Tigers?

***All theory and science show that leaders' behavior cascades all the way down the organization. Investing in leadership will release energy to focus on the main task and will have significant impact on safety and efficiency going forward. It may all be about money, but what you invest on the top will show directly on the bottom line.***

In their harsh and isolated offshore environment, offshore leaders have to make decisions, crucial to safety and efficiency on a daily basis. It is huge responsibility and their ability to make the right choices may be a matter of life or death. It's a different world out there and it requires a different approach. Offshore leadership contrasts significantly from onshore and it seems there is a lack of understanding and recognition of the people skills needed for those in charge offshore so that they are able to act decisively.

What most offshore leaders have in common is that they appear to have had little or no leadership training. Off-shore leaders are very good navigators or engineers, but most of them have to rely on only their intuition and personal experience when it comes to leadership and people skills.

### **Efficiency versus Safety**

The offshore industry has rules, guidelines, manuals and checklists so that every single task is done as safety as possible. On one hand, 'going by the book' provides a high level of safety and helps the offshore leader to act in the leadership role. On the other hand, such regimented actions can

Sometimes undermine the leader's ability to think for themselves and make independent decisions.



From my experience, it seems sometimes too convenient for offshore leaders 'to hide' behind procedures and rules. Too many offshore leaders appear more as administrators. Paper mountains and office routines become an excuse not to deal with conflicts, unhealthy group dynamics, damaging relationships or aggressiveness. The consequence of not dealing with these situations affects the well-being and takes focus away from the operation, as well as safety and performance.

The same safety messages are repeated over and over again during toolbox talks, pre-tour meetings, drills and safety meetings. It seems like these talks have very little impact on improving the safety culture. The monotonous repetitions are in danger of creating safety fatigue among the crews and people becoming immune.

### **Isolated environment and the 'bubble' effect**

The offshore context differs significantly from the onshore organization largely due to operating in isolation. The fact that offshore employees and leaders cannot get away, is very different from an onshore organization.

Requirements on conformity and socialization by the individual are crucial. Offshore people live in a 'bubble' and leaders have to deal with challenges 24/7. There is no escape from the decision-making and no privacy except when in their cabin . . . and even there they can't put their role aside. To

be able to stay on top of the job for up to five weeks in a row, isolated from family and friends, requires a lot of inner authority, self-esteem, role identification and self-control.

What does help offshore leaders is that the main task is very clear, and the culture is task and result oriented. It's clear to all what to do operationally. The challenges of the isolated system are helped by a well-defined role culture which is characterized by clarity - a clear hierarchy, a clear line of command as well as clearly defined rules and regulations.



### **Isolation with dynamic team**

The closed offshore system is very different compared to the stable offices in onshore organizations. The rig system is regularly disrupted. Rotations and crew changes have the effect that the crew is constantly changed, and leaders have to deal and cope with new people and teams on a daily basis. It is for most exhausting.

Furthermore, it is not unusual that new crew members lack the experience, skills or the behaviour needed for the job even though they have the right certification. It follows that lot of effort is consumed getting new people up to speed and performance.

My claim is that requirements for social intelligence, intrapersonal as well as interpersonal skills and competences are profound for offshore leaders. The ability to on-board and welcome new people on a daily basis requires a lot of energy.

Off-shore leaders lacking these skills often 'hide in the office' because it is too overwhelming to engage and connect to new

people all the time. The ones feeling more comfortable with people management are very conscious about the value of healthy relationships and put a lot of effort and energy into leadership and people management.

### **Ability to cope and contain**

The offshore industry is a very task and result oriented environment. Depending on the leader ability to focus and manage also the wellbeing of the crew it may have considerable human costs. I have seen examples of crew members getting isolated and rejected by the group. This may be merciless as the rejected person is not able to leave the system and subsequently emotional breakdown is not unusual. Because of the very limited space on a rig, it may have a huge impact on the entire rig, when someone breaks down. The crew very often feel guilty that nobody stepped in and supported the individual. Such situations take energy and focus away from safety and performance.

Some leaders cope and contain with the emotional impact and thereby help the crew dealing with the guilt. Others lacking people and leadership skills are not able to cope with the situation and the message they communicate is '*he was not strong enough for this environment*'. The challenge is that the crews get emotional trapped and lose focus on the task, the operation as well as the safety behavior.

Offshore leaders with people skills and leadership training are much more capable of acting and handling these situations and thereby get focus back on performance and operation.

As a defence, I have experienced, that offshore leaders and crews typically use idealization of the rig and its performance, as a way of dealing with mixed feelings. A common statement on most rigs I have been on is: '*This rig has the best teamwork of all*

*the rigs!* or *'This particular rig is the best in the company.'* These statements can be seen as a feeling of proudness. But sometimes it is also the common belief on rigs with not so good performance. In these situations, it is more likely a defence to avoid guilt and maybe low self-confidence.

We know that group identity and sense of belonging is crucial for the human being. Therefore, the confirmation of *'here we are all good and we do the right things.'* May have an important function.

Another common defence mechanism is splitting. The statement that, *'The on-shore organisation doesn't understand us. They know nothing about how it is out here,'* is very common. My experience is, that the tension between the onshore and offshore organisation is often perceived and expressed as, *'It's like a war.'*

The challenge is that it creates a them/us effect and too much energy from both sides is caught up in this dynamic of pointing fingers. A hypothesis is that it causes some relief for the system/group to blame the onshore organisation and create a common enemy or a scapegoat. This mirror image of this mechanism is also seen onshore. However, it is not constructive and prevents communication and finding common ground on achieving the goals.

Sometimes the lack of communication between sea and shore may also result in complacency and decrease the performance. It may be worth a consideration to trust, authorize and empower offshore leaders more.

Taken into consideration that they all are part of the same organisation and ought to have a common interest in achieving the strategic goals, one may think there is room for improvement on the ability to relate, communicate, cooperate and trust one and other. This process takes strong leaders and leadership skills.

## **Why Off-shore Leadership Training**

Off-shore leaders are very often promoted to supervisors or head of department because they were good technicians, drillers or navigators. They've all attended a lot of technical and operational training, which have been prioritized over leadership training and people skills.

If the industry wants to improve the safety culture without jeopardizing performance maybe it is time to consider investment in ensuring that the most volatile, most variable, most vital part of the operation, the crew, always functions at its best.

All theory and science show that leaders' behavior cascades all the way down through the organization. Good leadership will release energy to focus on the main task and will have significant impact on safety and efficiency going forward. It may all be about money, but what you invest on the top will show directly on the bottom line.

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### **About SLOTSAGER**

As a business psychology and leadership consultant, I have conducted leadership training for more than 200 offshore leaders.

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