Beyond the Myth of Individual Responsibility

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo, MSOD.

Message from Dr. Andrew Sharman, Chief Executive Officer, IILSC

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As an author, consultant and keynote speaker, Rosa Carrillo inspires and re-energises both safety professionals and operational leaders to embrace the pursuit of full employee engagement through relationship building.

Her work is based on hands on experience. She has worked on many change management projects in oil and gas, pharmaceutical, nuclear, mining, manufacturing and power generation in multiple countries. She has inspired audiences to "never give up their vision" as keynote speaker in countries as diverse as Bahrain, Australia, Mexico and the United States.

Rosa graduated from UCLA with a bachelors and Pepperdine University with a Masters in Organisational Development. Subsequently she started her safety leadership consulting practice in Los Angeles, California, and became part of the adjunct faculty at the Presidential Key Executive MBA Program for Pepperdine.
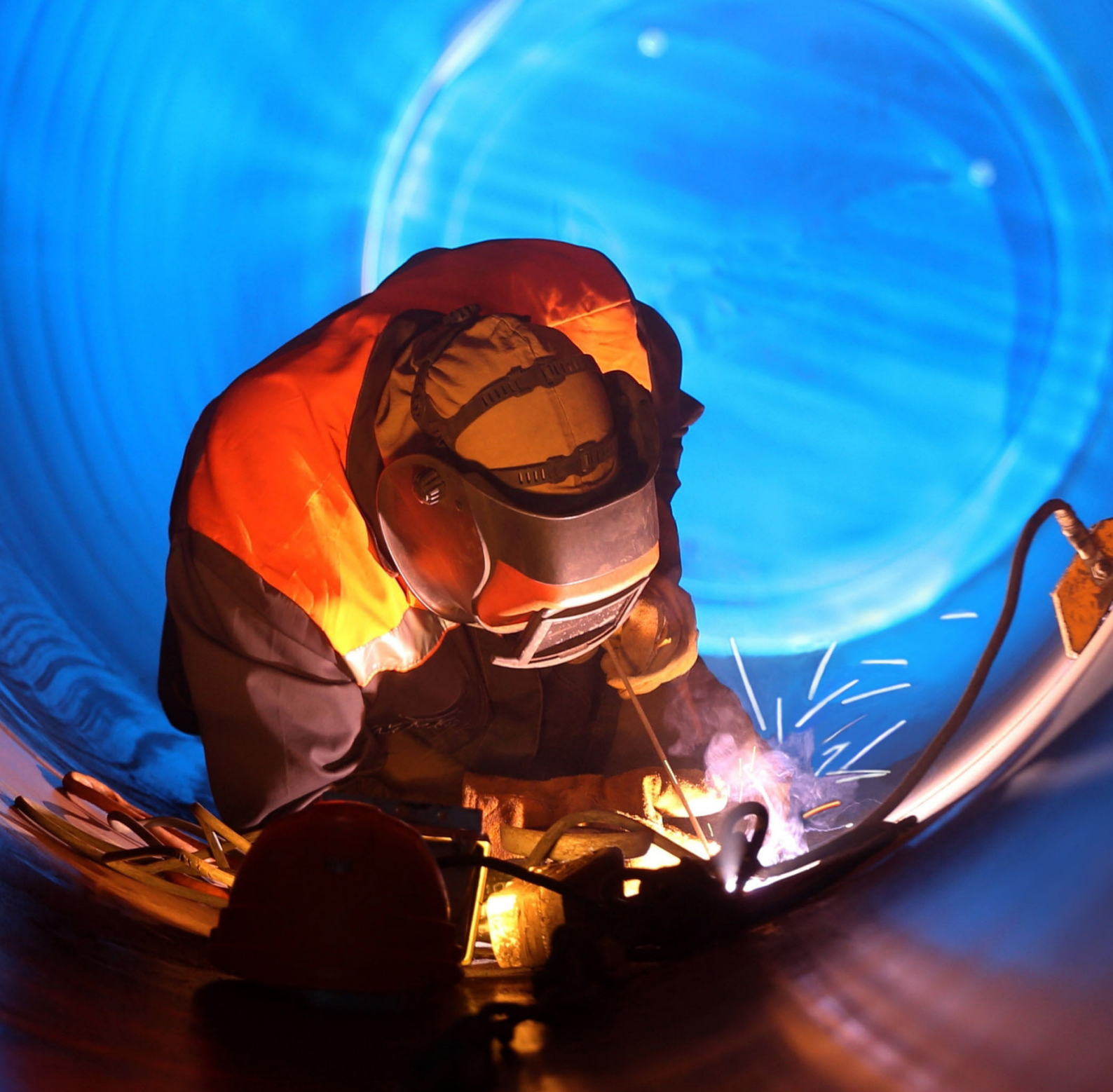
Executive summary

This paper by Rosa Carrillo challenges the prevailing belief that individual responsibility is the key to workplace safety. It argues that an overemphasis on individualism can erode empathy, hinder collaboration and ultimately create a less safe work environment.

The author argues for a relationship-centred approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and their environment. This approach emphasises the importance of social dynamics, collective responsibility, and the influence of broader social systems in shaping safety outcomes.

By shifting the focus from individual responsibility (accountability) to social and technical factors, leaderscan cultivate a culture of care, collaboration and open communication, leading to a safer, more inclusive and future-ready workplace.

Introduction

Why are people still dying or getting seriously injured in the workplace? Prepare not to see anything about resilience, engineering or emergent risk. Safety is a social science. It is relational. It is an outcome of human interactions with each other and the organisational and social systems. The time has come to acknowledge this reality.

At first, it may feel counterintuitive to say that individual responsibility for safety is a mistaken belief. Survey results from 3,000 employees at a power generation facility showed that 100 percent of employees felt they took personal responsibility for safety *(Carrillo, 2002)*. This was puzzling to the EHS department because the OSHA recordable rate was the highest in their industry.

The contradiction between the strong belief in personal responsibility and the high accident rate represents a paradox. This paradox demonstrates why it is a myth that people's individual beliefs about personal responsibility for safety drive outcomes.

Acknowledging this reality, the paper begins by challenging the prevailing belief that if individuals were to take responsibility for safety, workplace accidents and fatalities would be greatly reduced.

That is to say that the main reason accidents happen is because individuals are not speaking up to stop unsafe actions, not reporting hazards, and not following procedures. Instead, it advocates for a relationship-centered view of risk management where significant injuries and fatalities are rare.

The limitations of individualism often manifest in common safety phrases like **"accidents are the result of human error"** and **"safety is a personal responsibility"**.

This individualistic worldview prioritises visible evidence, such as individual behaviors and physical hazards, while devaluing the critical influence of intangible social systems and organisational dynamics in shaping safety outcomes. This focus on the tangible and measurable simplifies safety management decisions but deflects responsibility from deeper organisational issues, such as financial conflicts or power dynamics.

Consequently, the notion that individual responsibility is the key to preventing workplace accidents becomes a pervasive and potentially harmful myth in the safety industry. It places undue burden on individuals while obscuring the crucial role of power dynamics, organisational structures, culture, leadership, and even broader societal factors in defining and reinforcing what it means to work safely.

It is intended to be empowering, but without the accompanying power to control resources or others. It simply puts the weight of responsibility on the individual rather than where it should be on those in power. This dynamic is invisible to most, but dialogue can reveal and name it, thus compelling action—the aim of this paper.

This paper advocates for a relationship-centered approach, not to say that traditional safety systems are not important, but to give form to the intangible influences contributing to injuries and fatalities.

The goal of this approach is to both prevent incidents and create a supportive environment where people feel valued and empowered. This is important because many leaders aren't fully aware that neglecting those social and psychological needs of their employees results in high stress, burnout and persistent safety issues.

The next section examines the roots of individualism to more fully understand the urgency of moving from an individual to a social responsibility.

Roots of individualism

The dominance of individualism in Western thought, partly influenced by the scientific method's emphasis on individual observation and experimentation, can create challenges for leading safety, which as has been stated, is an outcome of people's interactions as much as it is managing physical risk.

This highlights how even our approach to knowledge acquisition and validation can reinforce an individualistic mindset. While individual responsibility is important, an overreliance on it can neglect the crucial role of social context and group dynamics in shaping behavior.

Becoming aware of this context helps to explain why the individualistic approach to safety has been so pervasive and difficult to challenge. In fact,

companies have experienced failure when trying to transplant safety programs that work in their own individualistic culture into another culture.

By understanding the origins of this mindset, safety executives can become more conscious of its potential biases and limitations.

In addition, recognising the deep-seated nature of individualism creates space for considering alternative approaches that prioritise social dynamics and collective responsibility.

Therefore, the discussion of the roots of individualism in this section provides valuable context and insights for understanding the challenges of shifting towards a more human-centered approach to safety.

Above Image Sourced: Two workers at docks_Shutterstock_2515745991

Consequences of unbrindled individualism

The consequences of unbridled individualism have been widely discussed by scholars from various fields, including philosophy, sociology and psychology.

These authors, despite their diverse backgrounds, share a common concern: the detrimental impact of excessive individualism on social relations, ethical values and human well-being. Their insights offer a valuable perspective on the challenges of fostering a strong safety culture, particularly in the context of leadership in safety.

Lasch's *(1979)* critique of the narcissistic culture in "The Culture of Narcissism" is particularly relevant to workplace safety because it highlights how an overly individualistic mindset can erode empathy, hinder genuine relationships, and ultimately create a less safe environment.

He argues that a narcissistic culture breeds a lack of empathy and concern for others. In a safety context, this can manifest in several ways:

01. Individuals may prioritise their own needs and ambitions over the safety and well-being of their colleagues. This can lead to cutting corners, ignoring safety protocols or failing to address potential hazards that could put others at risk.

02. A lack of empathy can also decrease helping behaviors and bystander intervention. Individuals may be less likely to assist coworkers in need, report unsafe conditions or speak up when they witness risky behaviors.

03. A narcissistic culture can foster an environment of competition and blame, where individuals are more concerned with protecting themselves than with working together to ensure safety. This can lead to increased conflict, decreased communication and a reluctance to take responsibility for safety issues.

04. A lack of trust can undermine collaboration and teamwork, which are essential for creating a safe work environment. Individuals may be less likely to cooperate with each other, share resources, or provide support, increasing the risk of accidents and injuries.

05. An over individualistic culture can create a climate of fear and insecurity, where individuals feel pressured to conform and avoid making mistakes. This can discourage them from speaking up about concerns, reporting near misses or challenging unsafe practices, ultimately hindering safety improvement efforts.

Lasch's analysis also suggests that individuals in such a culture may be more prone to risk-taking and self-preservation behaviors, which can have negative consequences for safety:

01.

Ignoring safety protocols: Individuals focused on their own success and image may be more likely to disregard safety protocols or take unnecessary risks to achieve their goals. This can lead to accidents and injuries, not only for themselves but also for others.

02.

Resisting feedback and learning: A narcissistic mindset can make individuals resistant to feedback and less willing to learn from mistakes. This can hinder their ability to improve their safety practices and contribute to a culture where safety is not prioritised.

Charles Taylor *(1992)*, a renowned philosopher, in "The Ethics of Authenticity", cautions against the dangers of excessive self-focus. He argues that an overemphasis on self-fulfillment can lead individuals to neglect their social obligations, potentially jeopardising the safety of others in pursuit of personal gain.

A similar erosion of collective responsibility can create a workplace where individuals are less likely to prioritise safety or look out for one another.

Finally, Alfie Kohn, a social psychologist, in "No Contest: The Case Against Competition,"*(1992)* challenges the notion that competition fuels creativity and innovation. He argues that a competitive environment can stifle these qualities, as individuals become more focused on outperforming others than on generating new ideas or collaborating effectively.

Competition often emphasises individual achievement and recognition, which can lead to a lack of collaboration and knowledge sharing. Individuals may be reluctant to share their ideas or expertise with others, fearing that it could give their competitors an advantage.

Excessive competition can create a toxic and fearful environment, where individuals feel pressured to constantly prove themselves and outperform others.

This can lead to stress, anxiety, and a lack of psychological safety, which can hinder creativity and innovation. Such a competitive environment can discourage individuals from speaking up about concerns, reporting hazards or challenging unsafe practices. They may feel that it could undermine their own performance or position within the organisation. This can create a culture of silence, where safety issues are hidden, and accidents are more likely to occur.

These authors collectively illustrate how an overemphasis on individualism can create a workplace culture where social obligations are neglected, empathy is diminished, collaboration is hindered, and creativity is stifled.

This ultimately leads to a less safe environment where individuals are more vulnerable to accidents and injuries.

By recognising these potential consequences of excessive individualism, organisations can prioritise fostering a more balanced and relationship-centered approach to safety, where collective well-being and shared responsibility are paramount.

This involves promoting a culture of care, collaboration and open communication, where individuals feel valued, heard and empowered to contribute to a safer workplace for all.

Frameworks for mutual accountability

Patrick Hudson's Ladder, a theoretical model describing the stages of an organisation's safety culture development, highlights the importance of collaboration and trust.

As organisations progress through the stages of this ladder, they need to foster collaboration between different levels and departments to share information and work together on safety issues.

A strong safety culture, as described by Safe Work Australia (2024), is built on trust and open communication, where employees feel comfortable reporting safety concerns without fear of retribution.

However, an individualistic culture can hinder the development of such trust and collaboration, as individuals may prioritise their own self-interest over collective safety goals.

Similarly, Steven Covey's concept of interdependence, where individuals rely on each other for mutual benefit, translates to a safety culture where everyone understands that their actions affect the safety of their colleagues.

While individual safety habits are important, an interdependent safety culture goes further by emphasising collective responsibility and recognising that everyone is part of a team working towards a common goal: a safe workplace.

Interdependent relationships in safety harness the strengths of all individuals and compensate for weaknesses, leading to a more robust and effective safety system. However, an overemphasis on individualism can undermine this sense of interdependence, leading to a fragmented safety culture.

These frameworks all underscore the importance of interdependence, collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility for creating a strong safety culture.

The constraints on agency: Understanding social influence in safety

These studies have profound implications for workplace safety, where conformity to unsafe practices and obedience to authority can lead to serious accidents and injuries.

The research on conformity and obedience (Asch, 1950; Zimbardo, 2007; Milgram, 1963) challenges assumptions about individual control and free will, further weakening the "it's all about personal responsibility" argument. Their research demonstrated the powerful influence of social pressure and authority on individual behavior.

These studies show that people often conform to group norms and obey authority figures, even when it goes against their personal values or leads to harmful outcomes. An example would be performing an unsafe job to avoid being accused of not being a team player.

Most people believe they have agency, making choices based on their inner voice. However, a minority of individuals defy group norms.

Asch's studies show that about two-thirds of participants agree with clearly wrong group decisions, even on simple tasks. When asked why they conformed despite disagreeing, roughly one-third stated it didn't matter enough to speak out, while the other third had convinced themselves the group was right. This occurred even when the questions were straightforward, such as "Which line is shorter?" (Asch, 1950).

Milgram's (1963) experiment showed that humans will most frequently obey those with authority, even if asked to go against their personal values. Participants were asked to administer electric shocks to an individual they could not see but could hear screaming. Unaware that the other person was faking their screams, they continued to obey the experimenter.

More recently, the Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 1970) was shut down due to ethical concerns. Researchers created conditions where one group was instructed to act as prison guards, the other as prisoners. Everyone initially found the situation amusing, but the "guards" quickly became tyrannical—even cruel. Though the social conditions were artificial, they evoked behaviors not previously exhibited by the participants.

Many struggle to accept the findings of these experiments. It's distressing to contemplate that one might go against personal values and succumb to authority. It's more comforting to believe oneself among the small minority who resist such pressure.

These types of experiments are no longer allowed due to the psychological trauma suffered by participants when they realized how far they were willing to go against their values.

These studies challenged the prevailing belief in absolute free will. It questioned the belief that individuals have complete control over their actions and can resist external pressure if they are 'strong' enough. They showed that social context heavily influences our actions and risk perception.

While individuals possess agency, it is easily suppressed by authority or social norms. In addition, they support the point that placing individual responsibility at the center of your safety program is unsustainable.

The paradox of individualism: How it erodes agency and human potential

Individualism, with its emphasis on self-reliance and independence, can paradoxically undermine the very agency and human potential it aims to promote. In the workplace, individualism can manifest as a focus on individual performance and control, leading to organisational structures and management practices that undermine social connections, stifle collaboration and ultimately hinder both individual and organisational growth.

Organisational improvement often focuses on optimising workforce potential. However, management approaches emphasising technical systems, individualism and control can hinder growth.

This was starkly illustrated in the research by Trist and Bamforth (1951) on the English coal mining industry. Prior to their study, the mining group had worked autonomously, sharing responsibility for various tasks. This fostered strong social bonds and mutual responsibility, leading to high productivity and morale. However, when an efficiency expert redesigned the work process, replacing self-

directed protocols with individual task assignments, the results were disastrous. Illness, absenteeism, accidents and low morale increased significantly.

This demonstrated how a lack of agency, coupled with the breakdown of social connections and mutual support, can have detrimental effects on individuals and the entire organisation.

The researchers concluded that the shift towards individualism had eroded the miners' sense of agency and human potential. When individuals were no longer interacting and collaborating, their relationships deteriorated, and the natural support system that had previously existed crumbled. Workers were left to fend for themselves, leading to feelings of helplessness, disengagement and decreased motivation.

Above Image Sourced: Female lab worker_Shutterstock_2538180443

The importance of social bonds and mutual responsibility

This study highlights how the breakdown of social connections, can negatively impact well-being and performance. When individuals are disconnected and unsupported, they feel helpless, disengaged and less motivated.

The natural 'taking care of each other' that emerges from collaborative work environments disappears, replaced by an individualistic 'every man for himself' mentality. Individual responsibility cannot replace the power of collective effort, collaboration and mutual support in fostering a sense of agency and unlocking human potential *(Kleiner, 2008)*. Neuroscience can now support Trist and Bramforth's findings. This understanding is reinforced by neuroscience, which demonstrates the profound influence of emotions and relationships on decision-making and behavior.

Since relationships influence emotions, our actions are inevitably shaped by our connections with others. Damasio *(1999)* and Siegel *(1999; 2010)* highlight the crucial role of emotions in conscious decision-making and social bonding.

Therefore, fostering a relationship-centered approach is crucial to accident prevention. When individuals feel valued and connected, they are more likely to prioritise safety, communicate concerns openly, and support each other.

Leaders who understand social dynamics and engage others in change efforts are essential for creating a workplace where that is actively building relationships, fostering trust and promoting open communication to raise everyone's ability to contribute to risk awareness and mitigation.

It is important to note that this relationship-centered approach does not negate the value of technical safety management systems.

Rather, it emphasises the importance of integrating these systems within a culture of care and collaboration, where individuals feel empowered to contribute to their own well-being and that of their colleagues, (Geller, 2010).

The way forward

When we examine the continued business focus on individualism and physical hazards from a sociological perspective, we are forced to question whether organisational systems are truly designed with employee well-being as a primary intention.

If the results we see — high stress levels, burnout and persistent safety issues — derive from the way the system is designed, then we must acknowledge that other agendas may be at play.

This is not to say that progress hasn't been made or that there aren't organisations genuinely committed to employee well-being. However, these organisations operate within a different set of values and norms that challenge the dominant forces in our current economic and social landscape.

The renowned psychologist William James proposed that our beliefs shape our thoughts, which in turn translate into actions. These actions ultimately determine the results we experience. When we consistently encounter undesirable outcomes, it becomes necessary to re-examine and adjust our beliefs about reality.

This paper proposes that to enhance safety systems and programs, leaders must first address their own beliefs. Might an overemphasis on individual agency and responsibility lead to overlooking the impact of relational hazards and the negative consequences individuals face when deviating from group norms or challenging authority?

Yet changing one's individual belief is not enough. Change of this nature requires social action. So, the challenge is to enlist other members of the organisation in a dialogue to critically examine the social norms and structures that impede mutual collaboration and support.

These questions are crucial because achieving further improvements in safety necessitates a cultural shift within our social systems, encompassing families, schools, corporations and even the intangible influence of the wealthy elite or prevailing social structures.

These systems collectively establish rules and

social norms that create what sociologist Allan G. Johnson termed the "path of least resistance".

This path, as Johnson emphasised, is not merely about individual choices but rather the inherent dynamics within a system that subtly guide individuals towards certain behaviors. It favors conformity and maintaining the status quo, even when it means overlooking potential hazards or engaging in unsafe practices.

Therefore, this paper aims to raise awareness about the trajectory organisations have taken to reach the current level of accident and fatality prevention. While existing safety management systems have undoubtedly contributed to substantial improvements in workplace safety, there is still much to learn.

Examining countries with strong collectivist cultures and low workplace fatality rates, such as Great Britain and Scandinavian countries, can offer valuable insights *(Hofstede, 2005)*.

However, the argument presented here extends beyond simply adopting practices from collectivist cultures, as some such countries experience even higher fatality rates than those with more individualistic cultures.

The issue, therefore, is multifaceted and requires a broader perspective.

A potentially game changing concept to explore is how our understanding of human interaction is evolving. Emerging research suggests that we are far more interconnected than previously thought, influencing each other's decisions and perceptions through emotions and feelings.

Gaining acceptance of the idea that people can sense each other's emotions and that leader's will have to take that into consideration when making decisions is a culture change.

There is no quick fix to changing an organisational culture. However, an individual leader can effect rapid change within their own team by treating them with respect and valuing their input.

These findings compel us to reconsider the role of individual responsibility as a central pillar of safety. We must shift our focus to the relationships between individuals to understand how ideas and actions emerge.

It is not solely about what transpires within individual minds but rather the dynamic interplay between people and their environment. In this regard, there is much to learn from the fields of organisational development and complexity management.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the limitations of excessive individualism and advocated for a more nuanced, relationship-centered approach to safety leadership. By challenging the dominant narrative of individual responsibility, it encourages leaders to question conventional safety practices and consider alternatives that prioritise social dynamics and collective responsibility. This includes recognising the influence of broader social systems, such as families, schools, and societal structures in shaping safety outcomes.

A relationship-centered approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of individuals and their environment, prompting a deeper understanding of the social, emotional and psychological factors influencing safety.

This holistic perspective guides leaders to create workplaces where individuals feel valued, supported and empowered to contribute to their own well-being and that of their colleagues.

However, the implications of this paper extend far beyond simply fostering a positive workplace culture. The grim reality of rising fatality rates, particularly among vulnerable populations, underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how we approach safety. This paper serves as a wake-up call, highlighting the inadequacy of solely focusing on individual responsibility while neglecting the profound impact of social dynamics and systemic factors. By embracing a relationship-centred approach, organisations can cultivate a culture that is not merely reactive, but proactive and preventative, ultimately saving lives and creating a more just and equitable workplace for all.

The value of this paper lies not only in its analysis but also in its potential to drive meaningful change and contribute to a future where workplace fatalities are drastically reduced.

Furthermore, this shift towards a relationship-centered approach is not merely a philosophical or ethical argument; it is supported by emerging scientific evidence.

Modern research in fields such as neuroscience and social psychology increasingly points to the profound impact of social connections and relationships on human behavior, motivation and well-being.

By aligning safety practices with these scientific insights, organisations can leverage the power of human connection to achieve lasting improvements in safety outcomes. Not to reconsider individualism would be following the paths of least resistance.

By doing so, individuals reinforce the very systems that create the problems they might otherwise be trying to address.

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