Making a Case for Informal Participation in Occupational Safety and Health Management

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***Abstract*-A myriad of research have listed organisational commitment, reduced employee turnover, increased productivity amongst others, as some of the benefits of employee participation in management. Some studies on employee participation, however,indicates that, employees are generally reluctant to use formal avenues created for them to contribute to management. This is especially so because management mostly uses such formal avenues for a top-down information transfer. Also, employees have the fear of being victimised if they raise issuesof concern thatboarders on the use of finance or on something they assume may be offending to management during such meetings.**

In Ghana, the high annual accident and injury claims made by employees from the manufacturing industry requires urgent action by manufacturing organisations. Legislature on occupational safety and health (OSH) is scattered, with different oversight agencies, inadequate enforcement,and the absence of laws that require the establishment of a health and safety committee which is standard practice in mostdeveloped jurisdictions.In the light of the weak OSH legal and regulatory framework, coupled with the fact that employees feel reluctant to report their safety predicaments during formal meetings, it is important that management and employees create the necessary environment for employees to participate in safety management. Indeed, studies suggest that the existence of such informal avenues in organisations for employee participation in management decision making will enable open discussions on employee safety issues and therefore lead to the prioritisation of OSH in those organisations.

Nevertheless, research indicates that informal participation has received little research attention especially with regards to Ghana. This study makes a case for the use of informal participation in ensuring safety in manufacturing companies in Ghana.

***Key words:* informal participation, occupational safety and health, manufacturing, Ghana**

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee participation in management and the decisions of an organisation has been argued to result in organisational outcomes such as organisational commitment, reduced turnover and turnover intentions, job satisfaction, increased productivity amongst others [1]–[5]. The concept of participation is much researched in the management literature but not much in the area of occupational safety and health. Ensuring the safety of employees is an important concern for the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which estimates that the costs to organisations all over the world totals about 1.2 trillion United States Dollars per annum [6] in the form of compensations for accidents and injury, loss of production time, litigations as well as the cost of employing and training new employees to replace injured persons on either a temporary or permanent basis.

Participation in occupational safety and health management is usually covered under legislation on OSH in a country. The requirement is for the establishment of a 'health and safety committee' made up of management and employees and or the representative of employees [7] - [10]. This committee is expected to address issues of the safety and health of employees in an organisation. Employees can thus have an input into the management of safety issues. The effective functioning of the health and safety committee in ensuring participation of employees have been questioned [6], [7]. Rees and Porter (1998) argue that where the requirement for the establishment of the committee is by law, some organisations put up cosmetic committees that are non-functional. Yassi et al. (2013) are of the opinion that such committees, whether voluntary or mandated by law are effective in reducing work-related accidents. The argument can thus be made that, involving employees in the management of OSH leads to reduced incidents and accidents in the workplace.

Whilst the requirement for the establishment of the health and safety committee is in most countries that have health and safety laws, the same cannot be said about Ghana. Ghana does not have a health and safety law but she does have several laws that relate to occupational safety and health [8]. A review of the existing laws in Ghana reveals that none of them has the requirement for the establishment of a health and safety committee. Statistics from the Tema Metropolitan Labour Office shows an average of 477 injury compensation claims

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made from the manufacturing sector for the period of 2010-2015.

Compensation claims are usually used as proxy for situations where accidents, injuries and deaths are underreported in OSH situations. This high statistics, in addition to no law requiring the establishment of a health and safety committee means that unless manufacturing companies makes a conscious effort to involve employees in the management of OSH, the safety concerns of employees would be left unattended to and the high accident rates would continue to the detriment of manufacturing companies and the nation at large. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on ensuring the safety of employees by suggesting the use of informal participation as an appropriate approach.

II. THE CONCEPT OF EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION

Employee participation in management takes two forms: representative and direct participation [9][10]. Representative participation is when employees have a representative addressing their issues with management. The dwindling activities of trade unions has reduced representative participation in recent times [11]–[13]. Direct participation on the other hand involves engaging employees directly in the management of an organisation. This form of participation is of two forms also: formal and informal [14]–[17]. Formal participation is the structured way in which employees are involved in management. This involves the use of quality circles, meetings and the use of staff durbars [11]. Informal participation on the other hand is when employees are involved in management through ad hoc meetings with managers or supervisors such as raising a management issue over coffee or on the work floor [2], [11] . Thus the issue discussed does not render participation formal or informal but rather the setting at which such discussions take place.

In the area of OSH, extant research exists on representative participation and how these have helped reduced accidents and injuries modestly in the workplace [13], [18]–[20]. Widerszal-Bazyl and Warszewska-Makuch (2008) are of the opinion that generally, employee participation has not been applied much in the area of OSH. Robinson and Small (2008) foundin a study that very few managers consulted employees on safety issues in their organisations in Britain. As alluded to earlier, the dwindling activities of trade unions implies that, there is the need to reconsider the role of worker representation in OSH management. It can be deduced that the health and safety committee is a formal way in which employees participate in occupational safety and health management. Not all countries with health and safety laws require the establishment of such committees. In Britain for instance, the requirement for its formation is as a result of the existence of a union in the workplace [20], and in the United States of America, incentives are given for the establishment of such a committee [21].

Informal participation has been defined in the literature as the ad hoc interactions occurring in the workplace that informs management decisions in an organisation [2], [11], [22]. Informal participation is said to be extemporaneous in nature, unregulated and self-motivated [23], [24]. Informal participation has been argued to have received very little research attention [11], [15], [16], [17] over the years.

III. FORMAL AND INFORMAL PARTICIPATION

Researchers on employee participation appear not to have consensus on which (formal or informal participation) should first be applied in an organisational setting or which actually leads to results for employees and management. Marchington and Sutter (2013) are of the opinion that in some situations, managers encourage informal participation after an issue has been discussed formally so more insight into the issue would be gained. The authors further argue that at other times, informal participation may precede formal ones[25]. This makes the use of informal participation in organisations conditional and does not clearly show the specific role of informal participation considering it has received little research attention.

There also exist the assumption by researchers on the subject that informal participation is only effective when it rides on the back of formal participation. Dundon et al. (2006) argues that informal participation is an important prelude to formal participation [26] and Marchington and Sutter (2013) adds that informal participation does not have an audit trail and whilst formal participation has and thus both formal and informal participation run parallel in organisations.

These lack of consensus on the exact role of informal participation, and considering the literature indicating that little research on the subject has been conducted requires an investigation of informal participation and a determination of the outcomes that occur as a result of informal participation.

IV. THE CASE FOR INFORMAL PARTICIPATION

Informal participation has been argued as being inexpensive to implement and is born out of the social exchange that exits between leaders and employees [27]. As manufacturing companies are concerned about meeting production deadlines and minimizing accidents as much as possible, requiring employees to take time off production to meet to discuss safety issues, may not be favourable. However, if employees can raise safety issues in the course of their work it would not influence production times and management may be more receptive of employee suggestions on safety issues.

Some authors [25], [28] have postulated that the characteristics of an industry may not permit formal participation in management. The use of the shift system and the peak periods of the hospitality industry are the examples cited. The manufacturing industry can be likened to the hospitality industry as some companies also practice the shift systems and have peak periods also. Thus, adopting an informal participatory approach to managing OSH could influence accident and injury rates in the organisation.

The free discussion of safety issues between employees and supervisors is said to reduce accident rates in organisations [29][30]. This is in spite of the existing of legislation and even organisational policies that require formal

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participation [31]. The free discussion of safety issues according to Mullen (2005) can be likened to 'issue selling' which is voluntary in nature and aimed at influencing organisational decisions. In a context where legislation does not require a formal form of participation and existing laws are not strictly enforced, encouraging voluntary discussions on safety issues would go a long way towards reducing workplace injuries.

Empirical studies [28], [31] conducted in the hospitality industry reveals that both leaders and employees prefer to use informal participation in solving work-related issues. Townsend et al (2012) also found out that, where formal avenues of participation existed, employees were reluctant to discuss issues and these avenues only served as information-giving ground for managers. There is a feeling of importance and being considered responsible that employees experience when they directly communicate their ideas and issues to management without the use of formal structures [33]. Jirjahn and Smith (2006) attribute this feeling to commitment and trust built through direct communication between management and employees of an organisation.

V. METHODOLOGY

Data for the review was from journal databases such as Proquest, Ebcohost, Science Direct, Elsevier, Emerald Insight, Sage Publications, Oxford Journals. The search words included, employee participation, direct participation, informal participation, formal participation, employee involvement, occupational safety and health. The focus was on selecting papers that discussed direct employee participation and specifically, employee informal participation. A synthesis of the papers followed in building up a case for the use of informal participation in OSH management in Ghana,

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The paper sought to make a case for the use of informal participation in ensuring occupational safety and health in the manufacturing industry in Ghana. The argument has been raised that informal participation is preferred by both management and employees in solving direct work-related issues and OSH issues are of such nature. The raising of safety issues may pose a problem to some employees because of previous experiences of being laughed at or not being taken serious and thus, ad hoc interactions may be preferred. In the peculiar case of Ghana, high injury claims, inability to adequately enforce existing legislation on safety and the non-existence of the requirement for the establishment of a formal system of employee participating in safety that the health and safety committees offer requires the need to make such a case.

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