



By Goran Prvulovic,
MOccHlth&Saf

Situational Awareness at Organisational Level

The concept of situational awareness (SA) is not a new one. It is often talked about in management circles and is extensively covered in OHS literature, especially in relation to an individual's ability to understand the work environment elements in a particular time frame, evaluate a range of factors and use the acquired knowledge to predict their status in the future. It is a deep, conscious awareness in 'now', the present moment.

Situational awareness can simply be seen as a past, present and future state with associated internal questions such as:

- Where was I and what happened before?
- Where am I and what is happening around me, and
- Where am I going and what can credibly happen?

There are a range of factors associated with situational awareness such as attention, ability to recognise and retrieve patterns, workload, mental models and working memory. In fact, situational awareness is mostly about human ability to adequately focus, resist a tunnel vision and a capacity to self-reflect. When situational awareness works, we are aware that we are being aware. This is where individuals need to be to achieve safe execution of work and a local workplace balance between production and protection.

Can the same principle be applied to an organisation as a whole? Does an organisation need to be situationally aware? It makes sense that it does, especially in relation to management of business risks in all functions, and at all levels.

Organisations need to be constantly situationally aware in relation to their operational activities as this is where hazards and risks have largest potential to cause losses, specifically those with unforeseen and severe consequences. Organisational situational awareness relates to a collective mindful state of a large group of individuals involved in decision making processes and high level organisational activities. Some of those activities are management of change, management of contractors, human and reliability issues, resourcing, competency and training of people as well as implementation of integrated management systems.

Organisations really need to focus on signals their reporting, communicational and warning systems produce as ignoring or not noticing them has proven in many cases worldwide to have disastrous consequences. To be able to hear and understand those sometimes faint signals, organisation needs

to be situationally aware. This means that senior organisational decision makers need to routinely apply attention and focus to operations, understand current state and predict potential credible consequences.

This is not an easy task. Organisational focus on risks is often pointed towards the high likelihood – low consequence events as opposed to low likelihood – high consequence ones, mostly as a product of what is familiar, tangible and attention grabbing. When catastrophic events occur, investigations commonly find deep underlying organisational causes which have been in existence for a long time, hidden, not known or not recognised as significant and acted on in a timely manner. Logically, one view can be that in many cases organisations on the receiving end were not situationally aware to appropriate extent.

To increase overall organisational situational awareness, organisations need to revisit 3 critical states (past, present and future) and critically examine the following components:

- **Spatial awareness** - Is our awareness of operational activities, operating conditions, human performance issues, work requirements and management performance at the level where it needs to be? Do we need to make ourselves more familiar with operations and its components, to improve quality of our decisions?
- **System awareness** – Are we adequately aware of the critical systems of work, their efficiency, practicality and level of their implementation? Are we auditing for quality of integrated systems?
- **Task awareness** – What is our level of knowledge about the practical field work execution? Do we have a good understanding of the problems which exist on the sharp end? How skilful, knowledgeable and efficient are our front line leaders and what can we do to assist or upskill them
- **Pattern recognition** – Are we ‘tuned in’ to signals and messages from all of our warning systems and are those systems optimised and used appropriately? Are we constantly on the lookout for unexpected, seeking to identify where the next incident will come from? Have we ‘tuned out’ to some consistent warnings and are treating them as ‘white noise’?
- **Attention** – Is the ratio of leaders per team members appropriate? Do we have enough people on the ground to do the task safely and efficiently? Are demands of the job exceeding people’s and supervisors capacity? Are we paying attention to the right things?
- **Mental models** – Have we provided and implemented appropriate tools for making people aware of the critical systems, work methods and requirements. Do we have a good understanding of human factors and reliability and are our systems and tools adequately structures to help people store and retrieve the right information for the task at hand?

There are a number of useful approaches in becoming a situationally aware organisation. Field leadership goes a long way in observing the actual operational processes, providing focus and attention to those processes, auditing critical reporting systems and systems of work, establishing

efficiency of the front line leaders, interacting with employees, listening actively and aggressively, building relationships and becoming aware and cognisant of the issues on the sharp.

From the leadership perspective, paying systematic attention and understanding those factors is what makes one a situationally aware leader. Grouped together, situationally aware leaders can apply this awareness in practice through various risk assessment tools which will guide them towards the right decision. Ultimately, for an organisation to be a situationally aware one, its leaders need to be constantly asking critical questions outlined in this article, be in touch with their people and operational realities. This is the process which can never stop as we are only situationally cognisant when we are being aware of it.

References

University of West Florida, Military Psychology: Situational Awareness (2011) Retrieved 20/01/2015 from uwf.edu/skass/documents/Milpsy_situationawareness_000.ppt