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Critical Success Factors for Implementing Operational Leadership Change Programs in High-Risk Industries: Insights from the SUOL Initiative

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Change management programs targeting operational leadership in high-risk industries face distinctive challenges due to safety-critical environments, high operational complexity and often, complex organisational structures. Despite the widespread use of leadership interventions following major incidents, there is limited empirical insight into how such initiatives are successfully implemented in practice.
This paper describes the process from a triggering incident to the implementation phase of a subsequent change initiative in a major energy company, focusing on the antecedents and success criteria of the so-called Step-Up Operational Leadership (SUOL) program. SUOL represents one of the largest operational leadership initiatives undertaken in Scandinavia, and the implementation factors identified, offer transferable learning to comparable high-risk contexts. Using a triangulated analytical approach, four critical success factors emerged as instrumental for successful implementation: message clarity, organizational readiness, stakeholder management and top management commitment. Practical implications for designing and sustaining change initiatives are discussed, offering insights for practitioners seeking to improve safety and security culture through leadership transformation.

Keywords: Operational leadership, leadership development, change management, implementation, success factors, high-risk industries

1. Introduction

In high-risk industries such as oil and gas, aviation, nuclear energy, mining etc. leadership plays a critical role in managing risk, ensuring safe and reliable operations and enabling learning in such contexts. Following major incidents organizations frequently initiate leadership-focused change programs. However, while such initiatives are widespread, there is limited empirical data on how large-scale operational leadership programs are implemented in practice and success factors in early implementation remains under-examined.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the implementation of a large-scale operational leadership change process in a major energy company. By focusing on the early implementation phase, the study contributes empirical insight into how leadership-driven change efforts can be translated from strategic intent to operational practice. The SUOL initiative represents one of the most significant operational leadership development enterprises in Scandinavian industrial history. This paper documents both the emergence and process of SUOL and investigates the important antecedents and criteria for success in the implementation phase of the change process. Transferable learnings to other organizations are discussed.

1.1. Major incidents and causation

High-risk industries typically operate in complex socio-technical systems, where low-probability, high-consequence events remain an ever-present risk. Historical disasters such as the 1988 Piper Alpha explosion in the North Sea (Cullen 1990), and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico (National Commission 2011) starkly illustrate how catastrophic events can fundamentally threaten organisations.
Incidents of this nature are not solely a result of technical failures, but also reflect organisational, cultural and leadership-related factors (Reason 1997, Hopkins 2012, Madsen 2022). Typically, following major events, organisations conduct internal investigations and regulatory bodies

conduct external investigations. These are aimed at identifying immediate causes and barrier failures (Le Coze 2013, O'Connor 2021, Årstad & Engen 2018). The technical vulnerabilities uncovered in such investigations are often addressed through engineering and barrier improvement. However, organisational contributors such as leadership practices, communication quality, organisational design, and shifting managerial priorities are more difficult to identify and correct. These factors evolve slowly, follow non-linear pathways and require analytical effort to uncover (Dekker 2011, Dekker Pitzer 2016, Hollnagel 2014). Consequently, organisational vulnerabilities over time in everyday operational practice remain, even after technical issues have been resolved (Weick Sutcliffe 2015).

1.2. The birth of the Step-Up Operational Leadership initiative

Following a fire at a liquified natural gas (LNG) plant in September 2020, the company initiated a comprehensive organizational learning effort to understand systematic contributors to the incident. Based on the findings from the internal investigation, the SOL (Styring Organisasjon Ledelse) project was established to examine governance practices, organizational structures and leadership factors that shaped operational conditions. The project involved managers, safety delegates, union representatives and specialists from corporate PO (HR) and corporate audit and investigations (COA), with the mandate to identify critical improvement areas and propose mitigating actions. In parallel, a separate review aimed at strengthening process safety across the organization's operational areas was launched.

Findings from the SOL project, combined with insights from the process safety review and other internal investigations revealed consistent patterns. In particular, the analyses indicated that strengthening operational leadership was critical to improving organizational robustness and strengthening risk-management. In response, the Corporate Executive Committee (CEC) launched a comprehensive initiative to ensure a robust pipeline of operational leaders capable of delivering high-quality risk management and leadership in an operational context. What followed was one of the largest operational leadership enterprises in Scandinavian industrial history to date.

The Step-Up Operational Leadership (SUOL) project was led by a tenured senior line manager reporting directly to the CEC and involved operational leaders from several business areas (BA). The initiative was supported by dedicated key resources from PO (people and organization, and SSU (Safety, Security and Sustainability).

Building on improvement actions identified by the SOL project, as well as insights from internal stakeholders, and external peers, the project was structured into four independent work-streams: operational leadership pipeline, assessment and prequalification, training, and continuous development and follow-up.

The initiative delivered several dedicated improvements, including a strengthened and transparent assessment and talent pipeline, a clear prequalification framework, and an operational leadership development program supported by regular training and systematic follow-up mechanisms. Governance structures and a senior advisory board were established to ensure long-term continuity and sustained organizational impact.

SUOL targets 1100 operational leaders at three leadership levels and 6 different operational business areas, ranging from offshore wind to oil and gas and major projects. Anchored in the company's common leadership principles, the initiative represents a substantial investment in operational leadership.

1.3 Operational leadership

Operational leadership represents a distinct form of leadership that is highly context sensitive and shaped by high risk and uncertainty in changing operational conditions. This necessitates skills that go beyond generic leadership.

Operational leaders must continuously adapt to contextual demands while simultaneously enacting leadership that supports safety, reliability, and performance (Krasnopevtseva et al., 2024, Fourie 2022). Their responsibilities span a broad range of activities, including risk management (Flinn et al 2008, Madsen 2022), supporting workers, fostering a psychologically safe climate (Dong et al 2024, Smith et al 2003), ensuring regulatory compliance (Ta et al 2022), and making adaptive decisions in complex conditions (Kremer Sott & Sott Bender, 2025).

From a human performance framework perspective, operational leaders play a central role in enabling safe adaptation to changing operational conditions (Hollnagel 2017, Aderamo et al 2024) and supporting learning and safety improvement from everyday work, (Macrae 22021, Sujan et al 2017, Furniss & Franklin 2021).

A substantial body of research highlights the importance of operational leadership in shaping the factors and systems that ensure safety, (Vego 2015, Fourie 2022, Kramer Scott & Scott Bender 2025, Aigbedion et al., 2025). Thus, Step-up Operational Leadership is, in this organization, both a major investment in leaders and an investment in safety, reliability and performance.

1.4 Quality in the implementation phase of a change initiative

As established in the previous section, operational leadership is highly context sensitive and embedded in everyday operational practice. Translating leadership principles into behavioral change depends therefore not only on program design but, but critically on the quality of implementation. It is widely accepted that high quality implementation is a prerequisite for the successful execution of change processes (Weiner 2009, Lewis, 2011, 2019, Nilsen 2015). Indeed, poor implementation quality is a primary reason for failure (Kotter1996). This study adopts a descriptive orientation to examine early implementation dynamics and the factors that enable change initiatives to succeed in practice.

Prior research highlights a range of implementation-related conditions that influence change outcomes (Avolio & Bass 2002). Such as alignment between change initiatives and overall change vision (Beer & Nohria 2000), organizational buy-in and engagement (Kotter 1996) and attitudes of change recipients (Bouckenooghe 2010). Additional factors such as perceived norm affiliation (von Hirsch & Utvik 2020), the structure of change methodology (Prosci 2018), and sustained commitment within the project team (Holm et al 2025) have also been identified as influential factors.

Empirical findings consistently point to high failure rates in organizational change efforts (Jones et al 2018, Burnes 2011, Boutetière & Reich 2018) highlighting the need for high quality implementation processes. Given the contextual characteristics of the organization examined in this study, the findings are primarily relevant to comparable high-risk organizational settings. Nevertheless, the identified implementation success factors may also contribute to a broader understanding of how large-scale change initiatives can be implemented in other organizational environments.

2. Method

To ensure reliability in this study, a triangulated research design was employed, where quantitative data sources were used to inform the structure and content of the qualitative investigation (Miles & Huberman 1994). The internal investigation report following the LNG plant incident, the SOL report, SUOL project documentation as well as the investigation report from the regulatory authorities jointly gave substance to the qualitative design.

Due to the large-scale nature of the SUOL initiative, informants that both had an aggregated and wide-spanning understanding of the projects scope were chosen. Interviewees held roles that led, coordinated, supported and monitored the progress of the implementation phase of SUOL. Individual interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To strengthen methodological rigor, a dual-phase validation approach was utilized. Firstly, manual content analysis was carried out by a researcher who conducted manual thematic coding using established qualitative content analysis principles and structures (Schreier 2012). Following the manual coding of content, an AI-driven text analysis tool was employed to cross-verify coding patterns and thematic composition. AI-assisted content analysis offers added validity by circumventing bias (Bajpai et al 2023), improving consistency in coding (Kuckartz & Rädiker 2022), and also through algorithmic reproducibility (Lindgren et al 2023). The few discrepancies that arose between human and AI coding were resolved by additional systematic attention from human researchers, thus reinforcing methodological robustness.

Inter-rater reliability between the human coding of content analysis and AI-driven coding yielded a Cohens Kappa of 0.74 indicating substantial agreement ($p<.05$).

3. Results

The main distinct thematic codes and patterns emerged with surprising inter-reporter agreement. This level of agreement and clarity between interviewees suggests a reliable degree or consensus in the reported factors that contributed to the success of SUOL implementation.

Four distinct thematic patterns emerged when respondents described the critical success factors of the SUOL implementation (see figure **1). 1- stakeholder management, 2- message clarity, 3- top manager buy-in, 4- organizational readiness.**

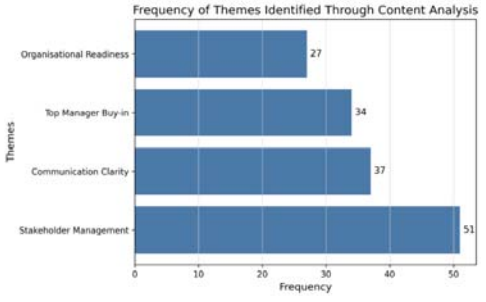

Table 1: Frequency of themes identified through content analysis

3.1. Stakeholder management

The most frequently mentioned, and spoken about in depth, was stakeholder management across the entire operational organization. It was coded 51 times and was volunteered most frequently. It was also offered as the primary explanation of success in early phase implementation by 3 respondents. This theme was characterized by statements referring to amount of time invested in stakeholder management and engagement as well as organizational locus of stakeholder management.

The substantial amount of time spent presenting to and meeting various stakeholders was described in detail by all 5 respondents.

> *"I don't think there was one stone left unturned in terms of who we spoke to and that took many months"*

> *"I feel like we spoke to absolutely everyone and then even more people after that"*

> *"In such a large and complex organization there are many viewpoints and opinions on what operational leadership is and what should be done to work on it. We (the project group) where conscious that everyone needed to get the same communication and message as well as the feeling that they had been heard"*

The pan-organizational nature of information meetings where highlighted, where stakeholders described the locus of communication and inclusion as occurring across all business areas and hierarchical levels in the operational aspects of the organization.

> *"There was ownership at all levels, we were in all the forums and keep it warm underway"*

> *"We used a huge amount of time in different forums at all levels in as BA's (business areas). We kept the heat up and kept the program relevant and in peoples mind by being high and low talking to everyone".*

> *"It feel like we spoke to absolutely everyone, I mean we had back-to-back meetings, presenting everywhere, in every management committee, in every corner"*

Respondents also reported a conscious awareness of the necessity for emotional buy-in by key stakeholders.

> *"We were careful to include absolutely everyone that might have felt they had a stake, not only the decision-makers. That took a long time and a huge amount of effort and commitment for members of the project team"*

3.2. Message clarity

Message clarity codes encompassed two distinct aspects of the message: the actual message….

> *"Storytelling and engagement from the project team and from the whole implementation project was absolutely vital".*

> *"The message was so clear and easy to understand"*

….and the wider communication plan.

> *"We created a communication plan early on which was our guiding star and which we kept going back to, that really helped us stay on track"*

A theme that all 5 respondents voluntarily offered was the importance of SOL findings as aiding in message clarity.

> *"Clearly defined actions on strengthening operational leadership was so important in creating support for SUOL. For this we needed to have a very clear vision of the product and be able to describe how it would affect each role and each level".*
>
> *"It helped greatly that the SOL report had outlined such understandable points".*
>
> *"We already had what we needed from the SOL report"*

3.3. Top managers buy-in

Although top manager buy-in was coded less frequently (n=34), participants provided detailed narratives indicating its importance. Managerial accept and support was described as a strong factor for implementation success at varying hierarchical levels.

Top- management support was explicitly mentioned several times as creating a wider understanding that the change process must be taken seriously.

> *"The heat map that we use in the advisory board shows that L2 and L3 as really having taken their responsibility seriously"*
>
> *"Once we had ….on board, everyone in his BA was supportive and we didn't notice resistance amongst leaders lower down"*
>
> *"Everything we knew about change initiatives in our organization told us that we had no chance unless the top-leaders where fully behind this"*
>
> *"We experienced so many high-level managers giving their full support once they understood the aims of SUOL"*
>
> *"The tone from the top was absolutely vital"*

The importance of managerial support and buy-in at lower hierarchical levels was also described

> *"Because we had such a clear and understandable massage from the SOL report, leaders could easily understand and support the need for a step change in operational leadership"*
>
> *"In many cases people follow their closest leaders' opinions. So that is why we had to be at all levels"*

3.4. Organizational readiness for change

This factor was coded 27 times. Keeping up with trends in leadership, or the need for investment in the existing operational leaders, were often offered as explanations for readiness.

> *"Many saw that operational leadership had to be strengthened, that we had in a way neglected to invest in our existing leaders"*
>
> *"It was a welcome message, we need to keep up with developments in leadership, and it was time to have more dedicated leadership programs"*
>
> *"We saw that others (peers) had dedicated programs for selection and for continuous investment in operational leadership development"*

Other examples of narratives of organizational readiness were:

> *"The pre-qualification plans really gave a picture of what people needed to know before they started their job – that was widely welcomed"*
>
> *"There was little resistance to the concept that operational leadership had to be strengthened and that it had to happen thru a large-scale initiative!*

3.5. Additional factors

Other factors that were coded in content less frequently but are worth mentioning as they appeared in the narratives where: locus of drive in the organization, and fidelity and quality in the implementation team.

> *"it was a challenging process but we stayed loyal to our plan"*
>
> *"we had to keep on track working away at all levels, it was exhausting work"*

Where in the organization the impetus and drive came from in the implementation phase was also mentioned several times. The people and organization function (read HR) was instrumental in driving engagement in the process, as were the dedicated and members of the implementation team. Narrators also noted that added attention, drive and support of the line essential.

> *"PO where invaluable and did so much of the legwork"*
>
> *"the hard work of concept-development and work in the individual work-streams was largely PO"*
>
> *"we should have been closer to the line…made then understand the scope of the involvement they were expected to have"*

4. Discussion

Four main themes emerge in this descriptive study as enabling mechanisms in large scale change initiatives in high-risk organizational contexts.

Analysis shows that *stakeholder management* emerged as the most influential determinant of early implementation success. Informants consistently emphasize broad and continuous engagement across hierarchical and functional boundaries as critical for reducing resistance and fostering psychological ownership. From a change implementation perspective, this finding supports research demonstrating that stakeholder engagement enhances alignment (Tarenekar 2021), reduces resistance (Lewis 2019), and supports execution in complex change processes (Ackermann et al 2024). Thus, extensive stakeholder management in SUOL served both a practical co-ordination function, and a legitimizing function enabling shared understanding and motivation among key actors. This inclusion appears to have created legitimacy that is central to creating long-term commitment.

Message clarity and quality of communication constitute the second most dominant analytical theme. The findings show that the SOL report combined with a disciplined adherence to a structured communication plan, enabled the implementation project to engage in coherent storytelling around the necessity and intent of SUOL. Existing change management literature identifies communication quality as a key predictor of implementation success (Zhao et al 2022, Lines 2004). The findings in this paper reiterate that relationship. Analysis shows that message clarity operated on two levels: first by supporting individual sense-making about the purpose of SUOL and the meaning and purpose of operational leadership; and second by allowing information to cascade from senior management down to frontline leaders and teams. Supported by previous research (Wanberg & Banas 2000, Armenakis & Harris 2009), this analysis demonstrates that message clarity reduces ambiguity, increases trust and aligns expectations during early implementation of change processes.

Top managers buy-in and *organizational readiness* emerge as the third and fourth strongest themes in content analysis and these themes are closely related in the data. Continued leadership commitment was described as essential for front line adoption. From an analytical standpoint, top manager buy in and engagement functioned as a sense making mechanism shaping how SUOL was interpreted and enacted in the organization. This finding is well supported in organizational psychology literature which highlights visibility, consistency, and symbolic action from top-leadership as vital for successful implementation (Huy 2002, Martens et al 2022, Carthey & Clarke 2023, Tasleem et al 2024, Hasan et al 2025). Similarly, Rindal (2024) demonstrates that sustained senior leadership attention reinforces legitimacy and ensures support for safety initiatives. In SUOL, top-management advocacy contributed to both the practical coordination of the initiative, and accepting its position as a strategic priority, thus aiding early implementation by priming the organization for change.

The analysis suggests that, taken together, the four factors interacted rather than being isolated contributors to success. These factors jointly created legitimacy, allowed for sense-making and built psychological ownership. Mechanisms that emerge as salient in this large-scale change effort.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to (1) describe conditions and events that triggered the SUOL initiative and the early implementation phase and (2) analytically examine the factors and mechanisms of early implementation success. Through qualitative interviews with key drivers of early implementation, the four inter-related success factors, stakeholder management, message clarity, top-manager buy in and organizational readiness, were identified. The findings demonstrate that success in early implementation phase of large-scale operational leadership change programs depend more on relational, social and organizational aspects that generate legitimacy and engagement, than formal program design.

While the primary empirical focus of this study was on early implementation of SUOL, the identified success factors are implementation conditions that are relevant to change initiatives in large other scale organizations with safety critical operational contexts.

A limitation of this study is the risk of bias inherent in relying solely on informants that were involved in the implementation of the program. Nevertheless, the chosen approach is appropriate for the aim of exploring the dynamics of early implementation as the informants had an aggregated knowledge of the complexity of the initiative and its early phase implementation.

Several data sets have since been gathered to assess the impact of the SUOL program, and particularly the development of operational leadership competence through structured training programs delivered by the in-house Operational Training Center. Analysis of these data sets will be presented in a subsequent paper.

In conclusion, the findings identified in this study contribute to a broader understanding of what influences success in early implementation of other large-scale change initiatives.

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