Between Scylla and Charybdis

Between a Rock and a Hard Place
– the Small Business Dilemmas in the
Control of Occupational Health and Safety

Keynote at USE 2017

Denver, Colorado

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The owner-manager as the key person

The octupus tasks of the owner-manager:

- Attract and maintain customers

- Organise daily production

- Do paperworks (invoice, payments, tax, etc.)

- Secure financing

- Hire and personal management of staff

- Procurement

- Time for the familiy

- And take care of OHS

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Challenged by global economy

- Pressure from big players – both up stream and down stream

  - Small hotels and restaurants from AirBnb and the big chains

  - The small shops from internet trade, supermarkets and retail chains

  - From independent owners to franschising

  - The small construction, transport and cleaning firms by subcontracting to big players controlling markets

- The self-employed and the informal and black markets

- Lack of and expensive financing

- Red tape bureaucracy

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The owner-manager takes identity from the business

- How to secure the identify as a decent person, including

  – The crafts person who delivers qualified products and jobs

  – The successfull business person

  – The family caretaker

  – The responsible employer taking care of employees

- The identify is dynamic

  – with flexibility according to the context

- In daily work important to maintain social relations with employees and customers

  – 'the first among equals' in relations with employees

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The strategy dilemma

The high road

- Searching and finding niche markets

- Developing a stable customer base

- Maintaining a committed and loyal staff

- Adjusting to new conditions with agility

The low road

- Working long hours

- Keeping costs down

- Agreeing to still poorer sales conditions

- Squezzing employee conditions

- Accepting low personal income

Most small firms caught between both

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Is there a space for health and safety?

Good reasons:

- Higher risks and less resources for control
- Resulting in more accidents and diseases compared to bigger firms

The good news

- Owner-managers want to be decent and take care of employees
- They listen to peers, customers and employees
- They are solution and action oriented
- Search for the common discourse on the acceptable work environment
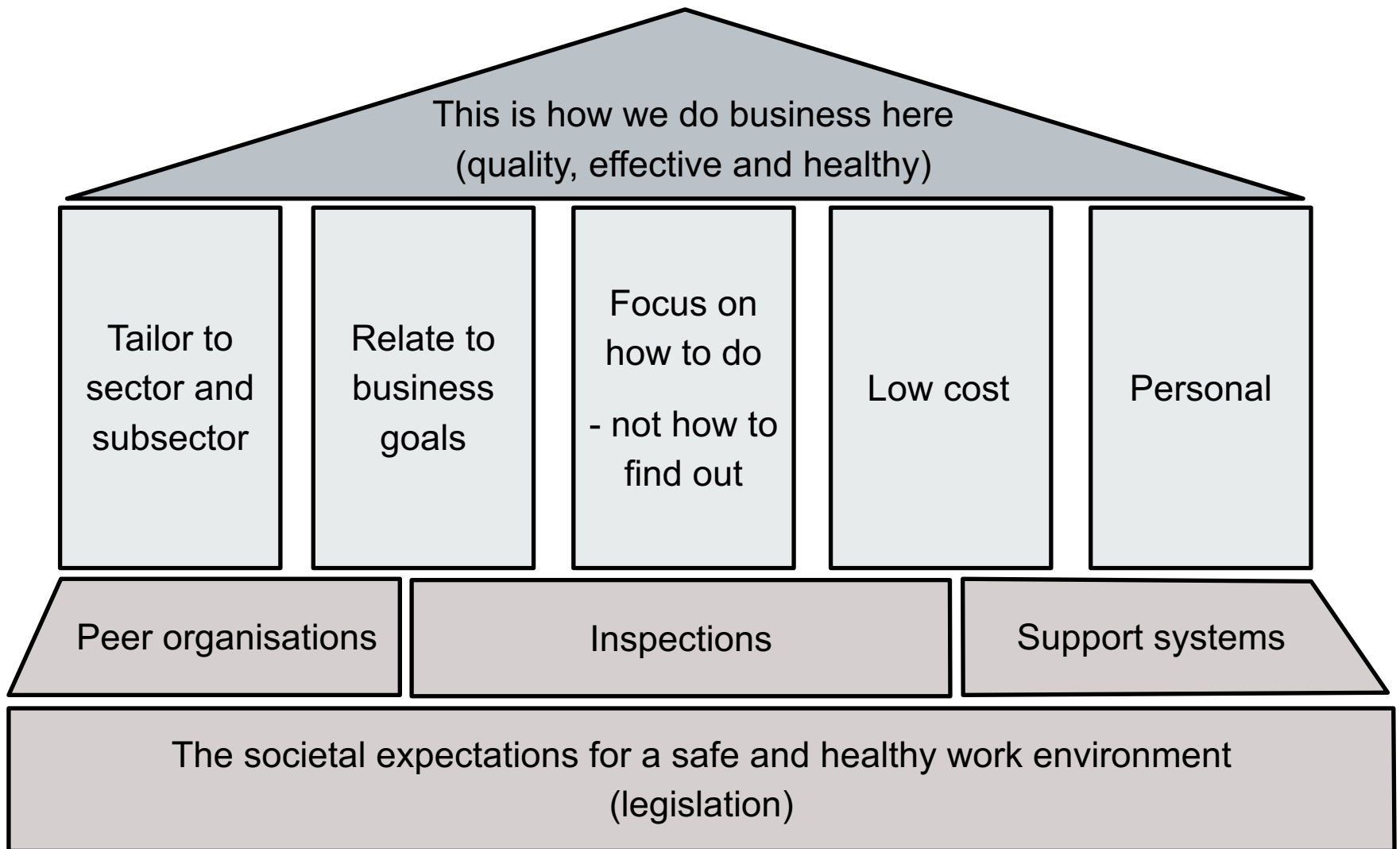
The bad news

- OHS a minor task among many more important ones
- They underestimate risks and overestimate their knowledge and control
- They don't like interference with their business
- Systematic risk assessment and OHS management will never work

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Policy strategies for regulators and support systems

The present dominating strategies

- OHS legislation and inspection

  - Limited due to cost, most small businesses never meet an inspector

- Development of simplified systems for risk assessment and OHS management

  - Will in most cases never be used in practice

- Information at the internet

  - Will in most cases never be read by a small business

- **With out throwing the baby with the dirty bathing water, we need new and complementary strategies**

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A strategy for the small business policy

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The role of regulation and inspections

- Owner-managers are looking for the acceptable risk level

- The main key is the standard established in regulation, backed by enforcement through inspections

- Owner-managers look out for regulation

  – in spite of a traditional reservation towards authorities

- Regulation is the foundation for the activities of other actors

  – peer organisations, advisory services as well as other actors

- Frequent and personal (although costly), tangible and respectful inspections work best

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Peer organisations

- Owner-managers look to peers to assess what is both acceptable and doable

- Employers associations, craft guilds, business chambers and others that have access and trust from small business

- Advise and recommendations from peers are considered legitimate

- Network groups and training activities (co)organised by peers are more likely to be considered relevant

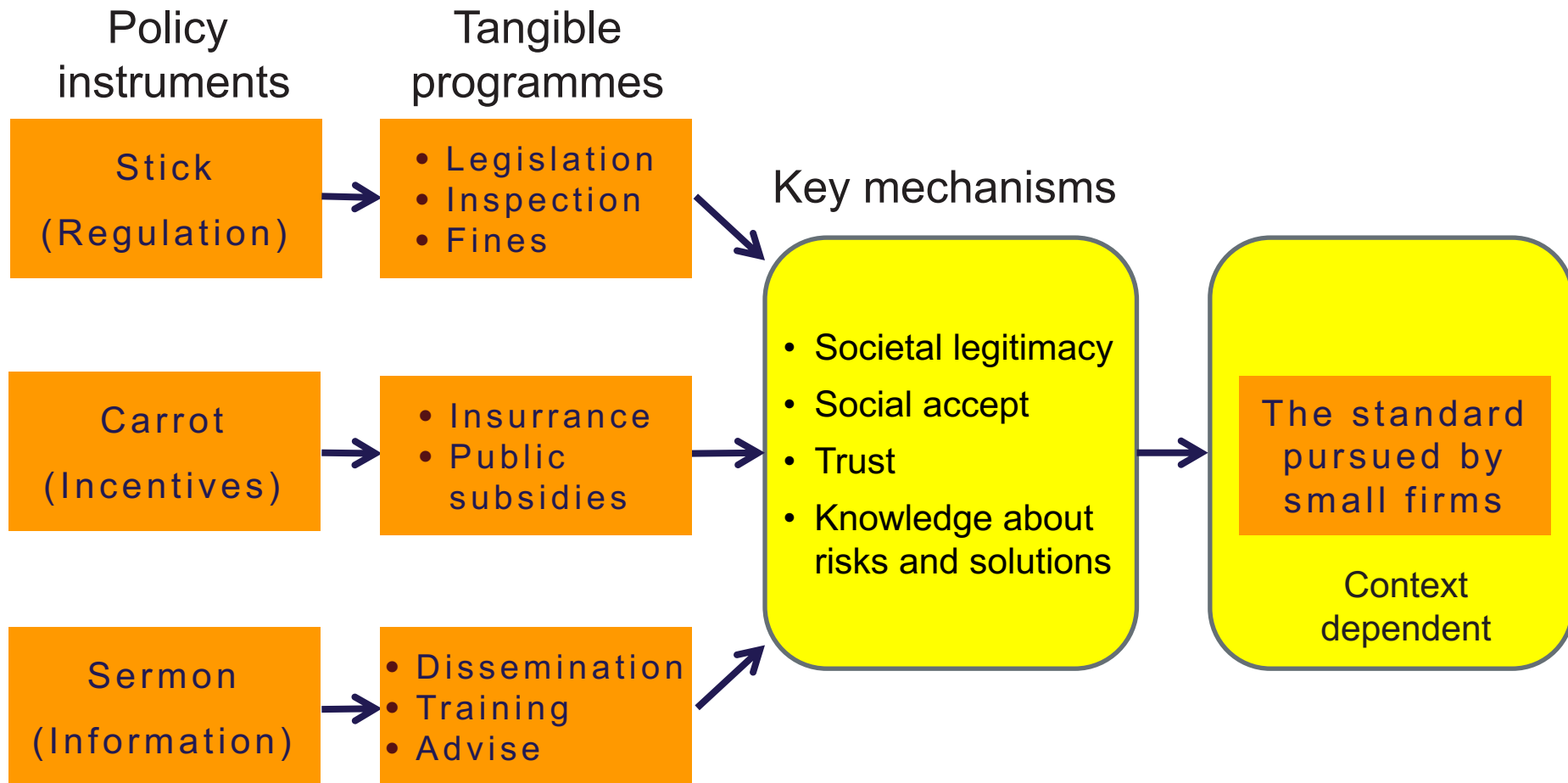- The question is whether peer organisations have the necessary funding and interest?

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Support systems

- Different countries have a wide variety of support systems

  – But in most countries they only reach a small fraction of small businesses

- Advisory service & occupational health services

  – Varies from compulsory affiliation to market based voluntary

  – Most often difficulties in reaching small businesses as full payment too expensive

  – Often substandard quality to fit funding possibilities

- It works when it is low cost, tangible, tailored and personal

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Alternative systems

- Insurrance funded schemes (Germany, France, USA and others)
  - Reduction in insurrance premiums
  - Inspections integrated with advise
  - Health service
  - Preventive advisory services
  - Secure funding

- Small business & entrepreneur advisory services

- Particular sector activities
  - Food inspection, integrated municipal inspections (UK)

- Employers associations & union agreements
  - Regionnal safety representatives (Sweden)
  - Shared advisory services in construction (Denmark)

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The need for coordinated action (orchestration)

Policy instruments

Tangible programmes

Stick (Regulation)	→	• Legislation • Inspection • Fines

Key mechanisms

Carrot (Incentives)	→	• Insurrance • Public subsidies

Sermon (Information)	→	• Dissemination • Training • Advise

- Societal legitimacy
- Social accept
- Trust
- Knowledge about risks and solutions

The standard pursued by small firms

Context dependent

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Orchestration in practice

- Who to initiate coordination?

  – Most often authorities or sector organisations

- Who to involve?

  – Authorities, employers associations, business organisations, labour unions, insurrance companies, advisory bodies

  – Most often in a sector approach

- Shared messages and coordinated actions key to influence

  – Trust, legitimacy and raise of acceptable risk level

  – The opposite results in paralysis

- Need to secure stable funding

  – Move from pilot project to sustainable policies and support

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Read more:

- Hasle et al.: Small enterprise owners' accident causation attribution and prevention. Safety Science 2009;47(1):9–19.

- Hasle et al.: A Model for Design of Tailored Working Environment Intervention Programmes for Small Enterprises. Safety & Health at Work 2012; 5 (3):181-191

- Hasle et al.: The working environment in small firms: Responses from owner-managers. International Small Business Journal, 2012; 30(6): 622–39.

- Walters & Wadsworth: Contexts and arrangements for occupational safety and health in micro and small enterprises in the EU – SESAME project. Bilbao: European Agency for Safety and Health; 2016.

Thanks for your attention
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