

Leadership and Organisational Safety Culture



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Chapter outline

Leadership and Organisational Safety Culture

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Introduction

It is recognised that leadership is important in the creation of a culture that supports and promotes a strong health and safety performance of an organisation. The Manager and /or the team leader are vital in inspiring employees to a higher level of safety and productivity, which means that they must apply good leadership attributes on a daily basis.

Leadership in terms of health and safety

Ask yourself, do my managers/team leaders:

- Communicate safety standards to their teams?
- Involve them in hazard spotting in the workplace?
- Prevent unsafe acts?
- Motivate staff to be safer?
- Monitor safety standards on a daily basis?

It is important that managers/team leaders are trained in their key role as safety leaders and that they are free to implement these skills at every level. It is also critical that the application of these safety leadership skills is monitored.

Training managers/team leaders in safety leadership skills and ensuring that they apply them on the job has been proven to greatly aid injury prevention, and can also contribute to quality and productivity improvements.

Creating a good Safety Culture requires a common vision and effort from everyone in an organisation. Research into the subject has demonstrated that the management philosophy of an organisation is the most

important factor determining its safety performance; for example organisations with the lowest lost-time injury rates have the highest level of management commitment and employee involvement.

10 Principles of Safety Leadership Behaviour

Clear leadership is one of the top priorities for the establishment of a positive Safety Culture. Here are ten safety leadership principles that a leader should not ignore, and which are likely to promote a positive Safety Culture:

1 Safety as a Top Priority

In making every business decision there are a number of competing priorities e.g. cost, quality and yield. It is imperative that senior management should give safety a high status in the business objectives, and safety should be prioritised in all situations.

2 Visible Management Commitment to Safety

This is leading by example. It is important that senior management demonstrate visibility and repeat their commitment to safety throughout all areas of the organisation. For example, if senior management fail to challenge unsafe behaviours they unwittingly

reinforce the notion that this behaviour is acceptable to the organisation. Senior management decisions and actions must match their words – this creates a shared vision of the importance of safety to the organisation.

3 Increasing Visibility around Safety

It is good to develop a habit of personally conducting safety walkabouts. This demonstrates commitment and managers will become personally aware of the real safety conditions in their area. These walkabouts will also provide an opportunity for managers to meet their teams in their work areas and to have proactive discussions regarding safety.

4 Safety Reporting

A positive Safety Culture requires effective reporting from staff of frontline safety issues and problems e.g. accidents, near misses and safety concerns. Communicating a problem or concern is only one step on the route towards a good Safety Culture. It is important that feedback mechanisms should be in place to respond to the reporter (if required) regarding any actions taken.

Effective safety leaders should respond to all incidents in a positive, learning way. They will lead teams to prompt and thorough

investigation of all reports (accidents/incidents/near misses), identifying root causes and implementing corrective actions.

This sends a strong message that knowing about anything that goes wrong is vital to creating the conditions necessary to eliminating the next injury. It also sends a clear message that management view safety performance as important as other business objectives.

5 Staff Involvement

Active employee participation is a positive step towards preventing and controlling hazards. Ownership for safety can be improved by providing effective training and providing forums for employees which assist in getting them to be personally responsible for areas of safety.

It should be made easy for staff to report concerns about decisions that are likely to affect them and feedback mechanisms should be established.

6 Create a Learning Culture

All employees should be involved in learning by contributing ideas for improvement, and should be encouraged to become aware of what a good safety performance actually means in terms of their own jobs.

The existence of a learning culture enables the organisation to identify, learn and change unsafe conditions and behaviours.

7 Provide Recognition

A safety leader will give recognition to the delivery of good safety performance e.g. recognise the achievements of employees who improve safety in the organisation, including those who voluntarily contribute to safety.

8 An Open Culture

Employees should feel that they are able to report issues or concerns without fear that they will be personally blamed or disciplined as a result. Leaders should demonstrate care and concern towards employees and should have an open door policy in place to demonstrate this.

9 Effective Communication

Effective communication from management to staff is vital for the success of safety leadership. This can be achieved by:

- A visible safety policy
- Emphasis on safety related issues and policies via staff communication systems e.g. memos, newsletters, messages from top management, quarterly reports, annual reports, safety sheets

- The communication of major accidents

Communication systems should be in place within the organisation for the effective transfer of safety and health information between individuals, departments, work groups and teams.

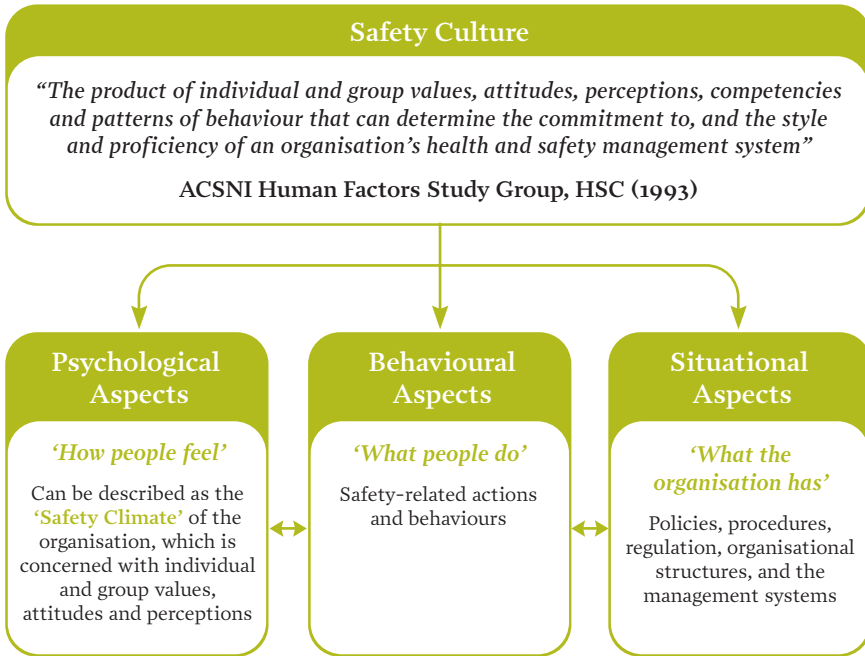
10 Safety Management System

Organisations should have effective systems in place for the management and co-ordination of safety. This should be led by the most senior person in the organisation, with the support of the senior management team and safety professionals (if required). Objectives should be set to monitor the performance of the system. Outcomes should be communicated to all staff within the organisation at regular intervals.

Safety Culture within an organisation

The term Safety Culture was introduced by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as a result of their first analysis into the nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl:

The Safety Culture of an organisation is the product of the individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies and patterns of behaviour that determine the



commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation’s health and safety management.

Put simply: The way we do things around here on safety! You can judge whether a company has a good Safety Culture from what its employees actually **do** rather than what they **say**.

A large number of factors contribute to whether you have a good or a bad Safety Culture. The list below covers the main factors to indicate whether you have a good Safety Culture:

- Visible Management commitment
- Good Safety Communication

- Safety over Productivity/Profit
- Learning Organisation
- High Participation in Safety
- Sufficient Health and Safety Resources
- Low Level of Risk-Taking Behaviours
- Trust between management and frontline staff
- Good Contractor Management
- High Levels of Competency

A Safety Culture consists of shared beliefs, practices, and attitudes that exist in an organisation. The culture is the

atmosphere created by those beliefs, attitudes etc., which shape our behaviour. Managers/team leaders have a key role to play in developing such a Safety Culture.

Safety Culture and Adverse Events

Well publicised major accidents such as Piper Alpha, Herald of Free Enterprise and Kings Cross Station have highlighted the effect of organisational, managerial and human factors on safety outcomes. Numerous reports of major disasters have identified Safety Culture as a factor that definitely influenced the outcome.

Within the reports of inquiries into such major disasters as the ones mentioned, observations have been made that accidents are not only as a result of human error, environmental conditions or technical failures alone, but also they are as a result of a break down in policies and procedures that were established to manage safety.

Where incidents occur it is important to identify what factors may have contributed to the outcome in order to avoid similar incidents in the future. Common symptoms of poor cultural factors can include:

- Widespread routine breaking of safety rules

- Failure to comply with the organisation's own policies
- Management decisions that appear consistently to put production or cost before safety
- Managers/Team Leaders not engaging in proactive safety behaviours

In relation to major disasters it is only the final outcomes that are rare and the specific conditions which produced this final outcome. The individual causal factors are usually present in the system all of the time. Removing a single causal factor from a system (e.g. poor Safety Culture), or reducing its frequency, will reduce the likelihood of a disaster occurring.

Sub-cultures

Cultures are not necessarily good or bad, but they are good or bad at achieving certain outcomes. Cultures are learned by their members, so changing the culture requires a lot of discussion, communication and learning.

Changing behaviours is difficult because people have very strong 'patterns' that they follow from habit, and are generally unconscious of their own assumptions. Leaders change culture by holding different assumptions and by making them visible through words and actions.

Sub-cultures are present in every organisation, large and small. In order to change these sub-cultures, there needs to be an understanding of those sub-cultures that may exist. The list below are categorisations of the most common sub-cultures that may exist in an organisation; typically these may exist and differ from department to department or from working group to working group:

1 The Executive Culture

→ Focuses on money, performance, measurement, production, processes, information and abstractions. This is a directing and controlling culture.

2 The Technology Culture

→ Focuses on science, equipment, automation, information technology etc. This culture type tends to want to eliminate the human being as an uncontrolled variable. This type of culture is rational, logical and resists the building of a real 'culture'.

3 The Operating Culture

→ Focuses on making things work, accepting the frustrations of 'the way things are' and can sometimes be seen as a group of people who 'live in the real world'.

4 The Regulatory Culture

→ Focuses on the role of authorities, the role of experts and the role of the public. Other work organisation cultures are influenced by a regulatory culture.

It is important to try to understand the various sub-cultures in one's own organisation, particularly if evaluating a culture change programme.

Barriers

There are a wide range of reasons why some organisations may be reluctant to assess their own level of safety maturity, such as:

→ Not perceiving there to be a need

→ Worries about what might be discovered

→ Resource issues

→ Difficulties associated with signing up to long-term commitments

→ Belief that there is nothing (positive) to achieve

→ Concern that the results of assessments may be markedly worse than those of other groups, sites or competitors

Management/Team Leaders need to overcome the above possible reasons for non-engagement or else it will be impossible to make significant progress.

If the senior management of the organisation are serious about culture change they must work hard to overcome the above barriers.

Panel 3.1

Barriers to Cultural Change

It is important to also recognise that barriers exist to achieving long term cultural change. Here are some examples to the barriers to effective change:

- Management styles may be different between departments. This may create inconsistencies in the right message been sent
- There may be weaknesses in the communication interface. Unclear lines of communication may cause confusion and a lack of involvement in the process
- Management's role in balancing the principles, policies, objectives, and Safety Culture among the functional areas is often constrained by an inability to communicate between the top and bottom of the organisation. The goal should be to make safety a value, not just a priority

- Organisational bureaucracy may often work against the Safety Culture. Oftentimes routine tasks become the causal factor of human performance errors because they are so routine that employees find ways to cut steps out of the process
- The formality of procedures and the clear lines of authority also constrain the competitive nature of empowering employees
- Risk of recruiting people who may not buy in to the organisation's Safety Culture. It is important that all new employees (at every level of the organisation) are trained in a timely manner and gain operating experience to match current employees, thus having negative effects on the Safety Culture

Panel 3.2

Measurable Features of Safety Culture

The following are a list of Safety Culture features that may be measured:

- Individual values, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours with respect to safety
- Group values, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours with respect to safety
- Commitment of management to having safety as a core value, providing resources and visible support to safety programmes
- Clear mission statement with commonly understood and agreed goals
- The current safety management system
- Quality of data from reporting systems
- The use of reporting systems
- Quality of training programmes
- Employee involvement
- New idea encouragement and capture
- Accountability of individuals and teams

Assessing Safety Culture

The Safety Culture of an organisation is an important factor in ensuring the effectiveness of risk management. The health and safety related behaviour of individuals in an organisation is influenced by the Safety Culture, and the behaviours in turn determine the culture. Therefore, measuring the Safety Culture should form part of the overall process of measuring the health and safety performance of the organisation.

Because of its indefinable nature, Safety Culture is difficult to observe or measure. In attempting to measure or assess the Safety Culture of an organisation it is necessary to identify what actually constitutes Safety Culture.

Safety Culture assessments should concentrate on the people side of safety, that is measuring the cultural processes that enable the health and safety management system to work – safety behaviours, communication, trust, leadership,

commitment, group norms and organisational influences.

In assessing the Safety Culture of the organisation, you can establish where it currently stands and where the culture can be improved and strengthened. Surveys and questionnaires have been commonly used to assess Safety Culture within organisations. Qualitative analysis can also be used, such as group discussions and case studies.

It is important that survey questionnaires are designed to reduce the possibility of bias. When conducting surveys ensure that a representative sample of respondents is achieved and that respondents are allowed to give open and honest responses. Do not repeat a Safety Culture survey unless actions have been achieved from the previous survey.

In conclusion, a Safety Culture assessment can be used as a starting point for change. It will provide the leaders of the organisation a realistic view of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses and this can often trigger real change.

Improving Safety Culture

The following outlines the steps that can be taken to improve the Safety Culture in your organisation:

- 1 Obtain Top Management Commitment
 - This is vital, and it is very important that it is achieved. If top management in an organisation does not buy into the development of a good Safety Culture, safety will compete against other business elements such as production and costing – this battle will not be won. Top management need to understand the requirement for change and be willing to support it. Being able to show the direct and indirect costs of accidents/incidents can be a compelling argument for change in an organisation.
- 2 Describe the desired culture in a structured framework
 - Policies, goals and operational plans must be defined. These will guide individuals during the cycle of change, and allow the organisation to remain focused on the improvement process.
- 3 Build a common understanding of culture
 - It is important that a shared vision for improving safety be established. Top and middle management need to set the example and drive the change process forward demonstrating this shared vision where possible.

4 Assess the existing culture

→ To get where you want to go, you must know where you are starting from. (See our earlier section 'Assessing Safety Culture').

5 Communicate the assessment results

→ Communicating results is an important method of maintaining the effort required for change to happen, and for keeping everyone motivated. Everyone needs to be updated throughout the process. Keep your communication process simple and ensure that everyone involved in the system has a voice, otherwise there will be a reluctance to buy into the process.

6 Identify gaps, root causes and key initiatives to improve

→ Develop an on-going measurement and feedback system. Drive the system with measures that encourage positive change e.g. numbers of hazards reported; numbers of inspections/audits; number of equipment checks; number of safety suggestions reported.

7 Communicate the direction and engage Team leaders and staff

→ The change process will not work if only management

know about it. The entire organisation needs to know and be involved in some form or another. All those involved must understand why they are being asked to change what they normally do and what it will look like if they are successful.

→ Awareness training sessions should be held to inform all staff of the new direction the organisation is taking for improving safety standards. Additionally specific Team Leader training courses could be held to ensure that Team Leaders are aware of the practical requirements needed to drive and achieve real change.

8 Implement change

→ This will be achieved via involvement of all interested parties e.g. management, unions (if present), contractors, and employees. The continuous improvement process will include:

i **Planning** -

The act of identifying opportunities for improvement and identifying ways of achieving these improvements;

ii **Doing** -

The actual implementation of the actions needed to effect the change;

iii Checking -

The act of verifying whether the implemented changes resulted in the desired improvements; and

iv Action -

What one does in response to the effects observed.

→ Management/Team Leaders need to identify, examine and overcome the barriers to achieving an improved cultural change

→ Improving the Safety Culture will take time and resources. Commitment from Top Management, Communication, Assessing/Improving the existing culture are essential in this process

Summary of Chapter 3

- Strong clear leadership from Management and Team Leaders is essential in creating a Safety Culture within the organisation
- The Safety Culture describes the management of safety in the workplace, and often reflects the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and values that employees share in relation to safety
- Management Commitment, Communication and Competency are examples of a positive Safety Culture
- Widespread failure to comply with company safety policies and rules creates a Poor Safety Culture
- Studies have shown that a poor Safety Culture contributes to major accidents