Getting the
Safety Culture Right

Is the "operating system" for your safety programs sound? This safety leader offers a model and method for measuring and managing the most important element in successful safety.

by Donald J. Eckenfelder, CSP, P.E.

The Performance Map shows that work on beliefs and values can lead to an organization culture that supports safety and health.

We all know that organizational attitude will determine whether safety initiatives will be successful. The attitude flows directly from the culture. And:

1. Culture predicts performance.
2. Culture can be measured and managed.

3. Nothing is more important than getting the culture right.

This knowledge – together with the "tools" to act on it and the resolve to get on with it – can serve as a catalyst for every existing safety effort. It will overcome the deficiencies in behavior-based safety (BBS) and magnify its benefits. And, it will enrich every other safety initiative that is failing to reach its potential. But, it is much more than that.
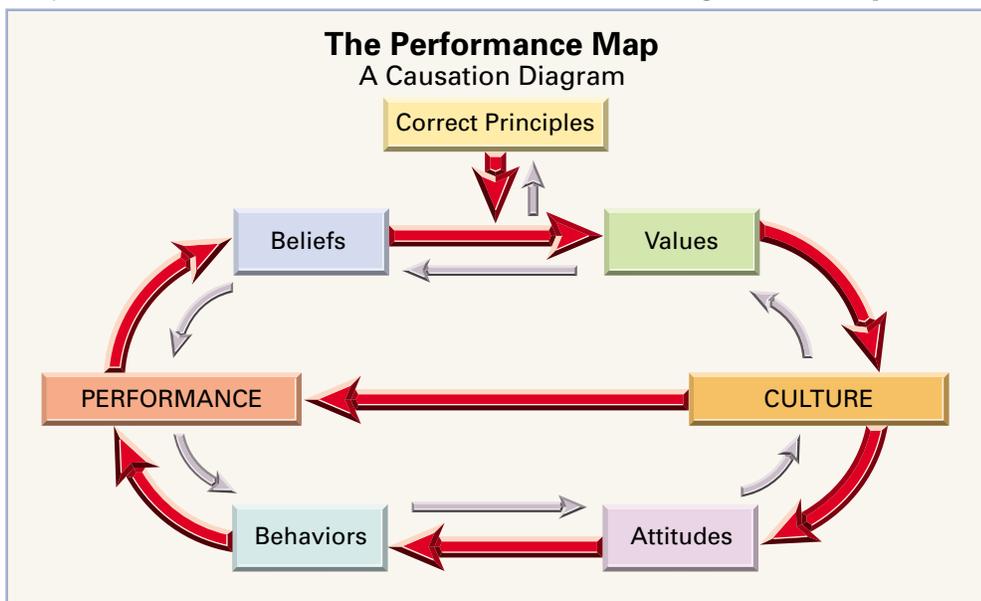
Culture Benefits

The benefits of a values-driven culture enrichment approach to loss prevention and risk management are many:

• *It predicts the future.* Our existing safety performance measurement systems are all retrospective. Measuring safety culture is prospective. It provides a much-needed crystal ball.

• *It is culture-sensitive and adaptable.* The process can be adapted to any industry and any existing culture. It starts by assessing the current culture and takes you from where you are to where you want to go. So, it is culture-sensitive and adaptable.

• *It facilitates excellence.* The process provides a model and method to measure and manage general organization culture. It also increases efficiency. Hence, it facilitates excellence in several important ways.

• *It appeals to all employees.* The approach

The Performance Map
A Causation Diagram

Correct Principles → Beliefs → Values → CULTURE → Attitudes → Behaviors → PERFORMANCE → Beliefs

treats employees as adults and empowers them. So, is it surprising that this approach appeals to all employees?

• *It only costs commitment.* There are no capital expenditures associated with safety culture enrichment and most of the time required is integrated into the normal management process. That means the only cost is commitment.

• *It is enduring.* Unlike most "safety programs" – like BBS – which are ephemeral, when safety culture is enriched, it lasts.

• *It provides a template.* Once you have applied a values-driven approach to creating loss resistance, you have a "tool" with which to judge every future action and to review past actions: Values-driven safety provides a template.

Cornerstones of the Process

How do you harvest all these benefits and apply this cure all? The answer is rooted in an examination of the cornerstones of the process. The cornerstones are:

1. The Performance Map
2. The Bridge Metaphor
3. The Safety Culture Barometer
4. Exercises for Improvement

1. The Performance Map is a causation diagram. It explains the relationship between culture and performance. It could be said to be the keystone concept of a values-driven approach to creating loss resistance in an organization and facilitating every other aspect of the loss prevention effort.

The Performance Map suggests that working on behaviors is too far downstream. We should be improving attitude by working on beliefs and values that lead to an organization culture that predicts the attitudes that will exist within an organization. The desired behaviors will then occur naturally. Attempting to change attitudes by the manipulation of behaviors is a risky business and often fails. Experiences with children probably provide the best example here.

2. The Bridge Metaphor is derived from Larry Hansen's award-winning article, "The Architecture of Safety," published in the May 2000 issue of *Professional Safety*.

If you fall off the bridge for any reason, you are in the water and experiencing undesired losses and the associated costs. The bridge must be strong in *all* areas. But, we have long attended to all the areas except the culture. We have allowed that to evolve unconsciously. I am not suggesting that any of the other areas are unimportant. I am saying that culture is most important and the best way to make the other areas strongest is to deal with culture directly and so change it consciously and strategically.

3. The Safety Culture Barometer is the measurement "tool." There is a generic version that can be used but the optimal result will be achieved when an organization customizes the measurement device to fit their specific needs.

The Safety Culture Barometer could be described as a maturity grid. It takes the beliefs and values that are designed to encourage the development of the attributes of safety excellence listed in last month's OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS article, "Why We Need an Antidote for Behavior-Based Safety" and establishes organization levels of maturity by collecting data from all employees or a selected cross-section of employees. The data is collected anonymously and leads to the creation of an organization Safety Culture Profile that can be displayed by shifts, departments, or levels of the organization or all the above and more. This illustrates where safety culture is weak and where it is strong.

4. Then steps to enrich the safety

The bridge metaphor shows that while all safety areas are important, culture is the foundation and should be dealt with directly.

The Architecture of Safety

Systems

Leadership

Behaviors

Compliance

Technology

CULTURE
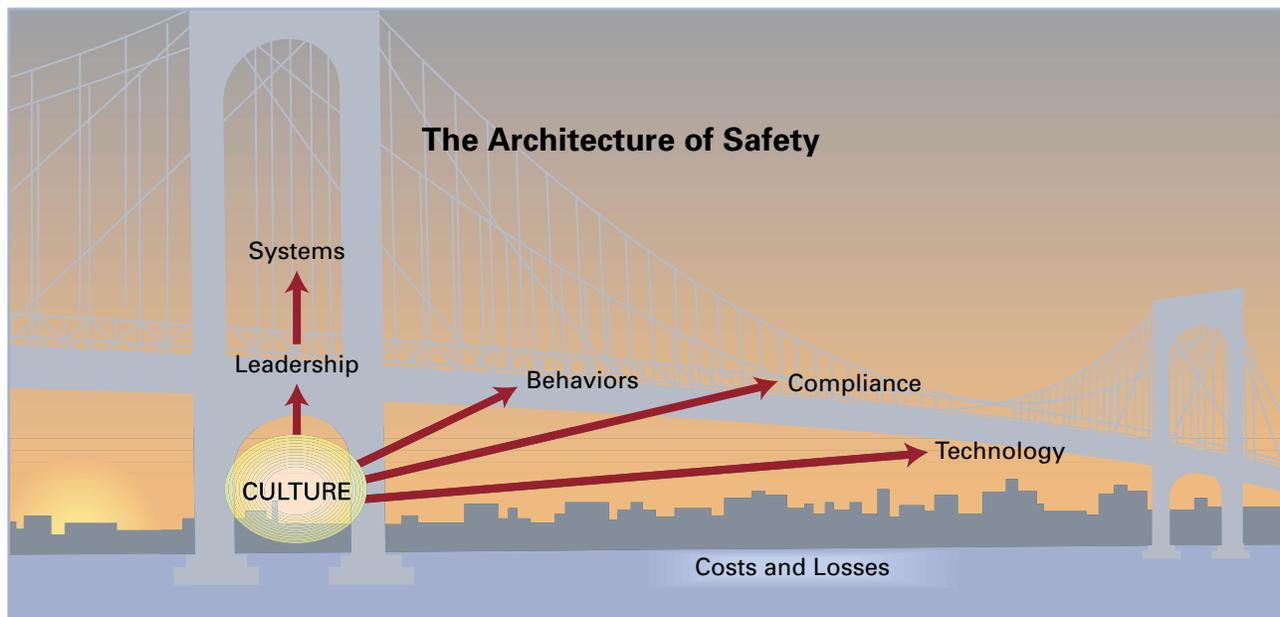
Costs and Losses

Ignorance:
Safety driven by regulation, management directives and cost of accidents

Safety Value	0 – Darkness Ignorance	1 – Dawn Entry Level	2– Mid-Morning Novice	3– Late Morning Mediocrity	4 – Noon Excellence	5 – Full Light Perfection
1. Do it for the right reasons.	Safety driven by regulation, management directives and cost of accidents.	Concern for people occasionally mentioned but not backed up with actions. Employees don't believe it.	Flashes of real concern for people occur, but cynicism is ever present.	Concern for people is balanced with compliance and injury costs but is seen as separate subject.	Concern for people is major safety driver but not in real harmony with goals.	Sincere concern for employees drives safety and is in perfect harmony with other activities.
2. See it as part of the whole.	Safety is handled independently of the rest of the management process.	Safety is occasionally considered at staff meetings and during appraisals.	Efforts have been made to integrate safety, but they have been token and often failed.	Safety has parity with other staff functions, and management has a vision of how it should be integrated.	A plan to totally integrate safety exists. Independent safety discussions are becoming less frequent.	Loss prevention is totally integrated and accepted as essential for business success.
3. Recognize there is no end.	Safety is managed by reaction and quick fixes.	Root cause determination and prevention efforts occur but are the exception.	Awareness that loss prevention is hard and ongoing is occasionally seen.	Management is initiating efforts that are self-perpetuating. Evidence of a long-term commitment to safety appears at times.	Critical behaviors and conditions are being defined and measured. A long-term commitment is evident.	Everyone recognizes that safety excellence is neverending, like the Shewart Cycle.

Excellence:
Concern for people is major safety driver but not in real harmony with goals.

culture can be taken consciously and strategically. If we need to strengthen ourselves physically or intellectually, we do "exercises." We need to do the same thing to enrich culture or to strengthen ourselves or our organization socially. There is no other way to do this. And, as Peter Drucker, the management guru, has said so many times: "If you can't measure, you can't manage." The Safety Culture Barometer provides the means and the methods to monitor progress.

Note: The full Safety Culture Barometer appears in the June 1997 issue of Occupational Hazards and in the book *Values-Driven Safety*. It will be described in detail with access information during a series of seminars Don Eckenfelder will be providing in November and December. See page 37 for details.

The fourth cornerstone of the process are the exercises. There are generic exercises that are suggested to enrich each of the suggested values. All this can be used in its generic form first, and then after some experience with the process, customization can be attempted.

The first belief/value, stated as an imperative, is: Do it for the right reason.

Here are some possible exercises that could be undertaken to strengthen this value in an organization:

1. Every time a safety subject is covered in any meeting, we will first consider the implications for employees individually or collectively. We'll do this for one month and document the impact on the discussion.

2. We will set safety objectives that have more to do with process than "safety statistics." An example would be, "We will analyze the results of our culture assessment and formulate a plan to enhance the three areas that have the greatest need for improvement. Within six months, we will conduct the assessment again and focus our attention on the areas we have worked to improve."

3. In company meetings and publications, we will place increasing emphasis on culture assessment numbers and less emphasis on incidence rates.

Summary & Conclusions

If you are ill and there is a medication that will relieve your discomfort, dosage is always critical. If you take the remedy in excessive concentrations or volumes, the cure can become a poison. Such is the case with BBS as it applies to loss resistance. In the proper amount and dosage, based on demonstrated needs, the application of behavioral science can be efficacious. In excessive quantities, it can poison other essential efforts. That has happened far too often.

But, an abnormal focus on any part of the "bridge" structure is something we should expect and be prepared to deal with. It is said that if you give a small boy a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail to him. The same could be said of adults. The regulator will try to solve every problem with regulation, the behavioral scientist with behavioral solutions, the manager with systems, programs and leadership, and the engineer with technology. It is for the generalist to put these disciplines and their solutions in balance and the proper perspective. That is what is suggested in this paper.

BBS advocates have argued that you can't change attitudes but that changing behaviors will, over time, change attitudes. That is one of the half-truths used to sell BBS; it rings false to anyone who has carefully analyzed history. Any time you change what people believe and value, you change their culture and in turn their attitudes. Beliefs and values change every day; that changes culture and consequently attitudes – sometimes over very short time spans in very large populations. The September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center changed forever what Americans believed about their vulnerability and, in turn, their culture and attitudes about fighting terrorism. That happened instantly; some other culture changes may take a little longer.

On the other hand, attempting to change attitudes by changing behaviors is fraught with danger if the behaviors have been changed by coercion. The new attitude may be diametrically opposite to that which you seek to engender.

If we think of this as a computer system, a values-driven approach to engendering loss resistance is the "operating system" for the programs, technology, behavior-based, regulatory and leadership "software." If the "operating system" is too weak or badly designed, the "software" won't work.   **OH**

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