Compliance Report

Got Safety Culture at Your Workplace?
What It Is and Why You Should Want It

After a good bit of research and numerous interviews we've concluded that safety culture has much in common with chocolate cake. It's highly prized, there are many different recipes for it, and people tend to be quite partial to their own. Similarly, safety culture comes in many varieties, and while some approaches to achieving it are precise, others succeed with fewer rules and more innovation.

Without advocating a particular approach, this article presents a sampling of several favored by consultants and in-house safety professionals. The emphasis on culture appears to be eclipsing behavior-based safety as the preferred direction for many businesses seeking a way to manage and improve worker protection.

What Does It Mean?

According to a British engineering institute, the term "safety culture" was first introduced by the International Nuclear Safety Advisory Group following the Chernobyl accident in 1986. The British Health and Safety Commission offers this definition:

> *The safety culture of an organisation is the product of the individual and group values, attitudes, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety programmes.*

Among other definitions and descriptions we found:

- "A general term for the degree to which the culture of an organization promotes and cooperates with safe and healthy work practices."
- "The way we do things around here."
- "Organizations with effective safety cultures share a constant commitment to safety as a top-level priority, which permeates the entire organization."

- "The corporate attitude or culture is the barometer that will predict the "weather"—the incidence rate, the workers' compensation mod factor, and the safety performance."

The last is a quote from Don Eckenfelder, chairman and CEO of Social Operating Systems (http://www.culturethesos.com). Eckenfelder, a former president of ASSE, corporate safety professional, and now consultant, believes it's not compliance or technology, but culture, that determines how safe a company will be. "What this means for the average safety professional is that the key to long-term success is tied up in changing the culture of the organization as it relates to loss prevention." He believes that for many organizations, "culture is achieved unconsciously and by default; it should be done consciously and by design."

Make It Measurable

Much like Sumo wrestlers or women gymnasts, according to Eckenfelder, companies with strong safety cultures resemble one another. In fact, he's quantified those similarities into a list of attributes that includes:

- Each employee takes responsibility for safety.
- Safety is integrated into the management process.
- It is seamlessly integrated into job training.
- There is an off-the-job safety effort.
- Leadership always sets the example.
- There is a recognizable safety culture.
- The focus is more on process than statistics.
- Negative findings are treated expeditiously.

Using tools he's developed, Eckenfelder helps client companies determine where they are in their quest for the values that lead to these attributes. And he's created exercises

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Recipe for a Strong Safety Culture

There's agreement among the experts on the basic ingredients for a successful safety culture. Among them:

- ◆ An abiding concern for employees and their well-being, both on and off the job,
- ◆ Authentic expressions of management commitment,
- ◆ A willingness to go beyond compliance to achieve lasting success,
- ◆ The existence and articulation of corporate values that translate into action, *and*
- ◆ Appropriate recognition for achievement.

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that help lagging companies get closer to the culture they desire.

Consider the example of accident investigation. Most efforts, maintains Eckenfelder, "are emotion-driven and driven by witch-hunting and blame." They rarely, if ever, succeed. One of his exercises is to review the past 10 to 20 accident reports and analyze them to determine if they were guided by logic and the search for root causes, or guided by emotion. The idea is to fault the process, not the people, relentlessly pursue real causes, and install universal solutions.

Culture Profile

What distinguishes Eckenfelder's approach is that the process and the results can be quantified. He's developed a culture profile that uses perception audits to measure a company's level of maturity in a variety of beliefs and values. The more mature the company, the better its safety culture.

For example, a business scores high when personnel at all levels are asked, "Who's responsible for safety at your organization?" and they respond "I am" or "we all are." This yields a higher rating than the answer, "the safety manager is responsible." And it reveals a more intact safety culture.

Similarly, a mature company is one in which management works to proactively improve safety, rather than reacting with quick fixes to problems once they occur. The profile also gauges whether a business emphasizes people over things. More mature organizations focus on employee involvement; culture and attitude are more important than physical defects. At a less mature company, safety is gauged by inspection and compliance.

Eckenfelder's system also measures culture indicators like safety expenditures, qualifications and performance of safety managers, and integration of safety into overall business functions.

Confessions of a Convert

Today's emphasis on safety culture is relatively new. Jack Dobson is a nearly 40-year veteran of the safety profession. He serves as current president of ASSE and is manager of occupational safety and health for Simplicity Manufacturing, maker of yard, garden, and snow-removal equipment. "I've been described in the past as a sort of 'meat-and-potatoes' kind of safety guy," Dobson reflects. Coming up through the ranks and teaching at the OSHA Training Institute gave him a strong compliance orientation.

But today he acknowledges that *merely* following the rules will lead, at best, to mediocre safety performance. A positive safety culture is the other big ingredient needed for lasting change. "You have to go above and beyond, and I'm finding now that 'above and beyond' has to do more with culture and not with regulatory compliance."

He, like others, believes culture development is taking over where behavior-based safety left off, giving practitioners a large, flexible arena in which to manage. Asked what safety culture means, Dobson offers, "To me, it is the deep-seated belief that one's personal safety is an important aspect of everyday life, whether at work or off the job. It's something that has to be taught, and has to be ingrained into people. You realize that this is for your own good, rather than somebody standing over you saying, 'Thou shalt.'"

Eye protection provides an illustration. Culture is the difference between a workplace where employees quickly shove their safety glasses down on their noses when the safety guy walks in, and one where PPE is consistently worn because workers understand and internalize the consequences of not wearing it.

Clarifying Culture

We asked Dobson to describe the vibrant safety culture he's helping build at Simplicity, which was recently acquired by equipment giant Briggs & Stratton. Among the characteristics he listed:

- A system of **Key Results Areas** (KRA) that encourage supervisors to pay attention to *leading* indicators (like safety meetings, audits, and training) rather than *trailing* indicators (like statistics describing incidents and losses). KRA performance is serious at Simplicity and counts for 20 percent of a senior manager's compensation. The relatively new emphasis is paying off, says Dobson. The manufacturer logged a 47 percent reduction in workers' compensation costs from 2004 to 2005; he credits the focus on leading indicators and active involvement.

- Strong **employee awareness**, a classic element in safety programs and an important part of culture, according to Dobson. Keeping safety in front of his people is key, and he does it in diverse ways. A weekly safety tip is e-mailed to every employee with computer access. For those without it, the message is communicated directly by supervisors. Topics include worker protection basics like hazard communication, first aid, injury reporting, and use of PPE.

- Keeping **off-the-job safety** in the mix. Dobson reviews product-safety recalls and informs his employees of any that might affect them, such as those involving camping gear or baby equipment.

- A well-developed **hazard reporting program** based on a system Dobson developed while with the U.S. Navy. Five reporting stations are located throughout the plant. Employees complete forms (anonymously if they prefer) and submit them in locked boxes. Dobson checks these daily and, if there is an imminent hazard, takes quick action. The program has resulted in some excellent improvements. "Any issues I can't immediately resolve I get out to supervisors," he says.

- **Leadership involvement,** considered essential to creating and maintaining safety culture. Dobson points to indicators such as attention to safety at key corporate meetings, and involving the safety managers in major business decisions.

Can Culture Be Motivated?

Dobson believes motivational strategies can play a role in an evolved safety culture. But like many safety pros, he urges caution in choosing and using them. "I'm not a real huge fan of incentive award programs because I've seen too many that inhibit reporting of incidents and then you end up with a more serious situation." He's currently looking into some possibilities for Simplicity,

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What Safety Culture Isn't

Sometimes it's easier to describe something by its absence. Simplicity Manufacturing Safety Chief Jack Dobson recalls a company for which he briefly consulted that was a poster child for a nonexistent safety culture. He explains:

When I would begin to work with a client, I'd first make sure we had top management involved. A couple of times I was told this would be the case, then we started the relationship and I wound up working only with mid-management with no corporate leaders involved. One client especially shielded me from top management. This was a company that also needed to be running fire drills and simply would not do it. I told them this and the HR person said to me, 'There's no way we are going to have fire drills because I'm not going to give the union 15 minutes off.' Obviously I didn't keep them as a client.

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including initiatives that award points for safe behaviors, but deduct points for failure to report incidents.

Dobson emphasizes that incentives don't have to be flashy or pricey to succeed. While with the Navy, he developed the Golden Hard Hat award, a gold-painted wooden hard hat given each month to an inter-departmental team that demonstrated exceptional safety performance. The cost was low, but the esteem in which people held the award was high. It was a simple, yet authentic expression that safety mattered, a key ingredient in culture.

Batteries Included

Another take on culture is offered by consultant Michael Melnik, president and owner of Prevention Plus, Inc. (http://www.preventionplusinc.com). Melnik is an occupational therapist who has developed a successful speaking and consulting business with a big focus on culture. "For years I was 'the back guy,' and they would bring me in to show proper lifting and I would do it, then walk away. Then I'd hear back from the client that nobody was doing what I'd recommended and would I come back and show them again." He concluded that the content wasn't the problem; rather, something organizational was preventing the message from getting through.

Melnik eventually determined that the key to improved culture is energy. "We found that in the area of quality, for example, there are many things that energize the equation—like being fired, getting docked in pay, or getting more money because you met a deadline. But in safety, the energizing source is getting hurt, which makes it reactionary." His approach seeks ways to energize people to work more safely before injury occurs.

He's developed a culture-boosting process known by the acronym REP. Melnik asks safety pros to consider if what they're asking of employees is rational (R), provides an emotional connection (E), and is supported by the physical environment (P).

He explains, starting with the "R" factor. "For example, I get invited into a workplace to teach back

classes. I'm introduced as 'Michael, who's going to teach you how to lift.' But that's not logical, because these are people who have been lifting successfully for 40 years. I've never had anyone tell me they were glad to see me because they've had something on the floor for the last 20 years that they've had no idea how to pick up!" More rational is to acknowledge with employees that strains and sprains are occurring in the workplace and to ask for their opinions about what's missing in the culture or environment that could turn the situation around.

As for the "E" in his formula, Melnik believes employees will only make changes if they have an emotional connection to what's being asked of them. Another way of putting it is "What's in it for me?" For example, if you ask workers to attend a training session and offer nothing more than a talking head in front of the room, you're not likely to get them to connect to the person or material. If, however, you offer coffee and pastries in the back of the room, you're more likely to strike an early emotional connection. It's a simple way for managers to show they care about people.

The "P" refers to a physical environment that supports what's being asked of employees. Are you asking people to lift more safely without giving them the necessary tools? If you're recommending that workers stretch periodically, are you providing the time and opportunity for them to do so? Putting a poster on the wall isn't enough—it's a matter of creating a culture that makes change possible, claims Melnik.

He believes that if safety is not at the level it should be, energy sources that drive culture are not receiving the attention they should. Among these: commitment, communications, respect, accountability, creativity, and recognition. As well, Melnik adds *fun* to the list. He's a firm believer that fun can and should be an important ingredient in a successful safety culture. He also shares his overall approach with clients like General Mills, The Home Depot, Northwest Airlines, and Best Buy.

The Soft-Tissue Dilemma— A Cultural Approach

Consultant Don Eckenfelder believes that preventing soft-tissue or repetitive motion injuries is neither a technical nor a behavioral problem, as has long been suggested. Rather, he points to culture as a primary factor. Eckenfelder cites an initiative in the early 1980s in which a well-known Maine shoe manufacturer experienced a surge in such injuries that spiked workers' compensation costs.

An ergonomic process was developed, but it wasn't enough. What ultimately got this employer back on track was a cultural approach that not only addressed improved processes, but included a return-to-work program, early intervention, employee and management education, and aggressive claims handling. In a word—culture change. Within 2 years, workers' compensation expenses fell from a high of above $10 million to below $1 million.

According to Eckenfelder, attitudes and beliefs changed the safety culture. "The onset and proliferation of soft-tissue injuries is more often related to the characteristics or culture of the work environment than to the actual physical exposures, profile of the workforce, or other easily quantifiable factors," he states.

Got Culture?

Based on the views of experts consulted for this article, the smart money is on culture. It's an imprecise yet essential safety component that goes beyond compliance, commitment, programs, and individual efforts. When it's present, a strong culture is easy to spot, much like a well-run restaurant or retail establishment, suggested one expert. Within minutes of entering the eatery or store, "you just get the feeling" that people respect one another, care about their work, and want to do things right. And when the end result is worker protection, culture can also make the difference between working safely and getting injured or even killed on the job. [33]