

Activating Higher-Level Safety Culture and Performance

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There's been lots of talk lately about safety culture, right along with "behavior." How setting your sights on cultural change may be the A-1 approach for engaging the clutch of safer and more productive performance, especially during these beleaguered times.

I've witnessed how elevating culture can step up safety. But when it comes time to move beyond mere concepts towards actual execution, have you seen leaders leaping towards solutions before they look? Assuming they already know what they evidently don't? Adhesive taping on another company's answers that are unlikely to solve their own different problems? Only focusing on what's wrong, ignoring the need to solidify internal strengths?

In one of his last articles (perhaps summarizing the body of his work), Management expert Peter Drucker wrote that would-be leaders spend too much of their time trying to come up with the right *solutions* when they should instead endeavor to pinpoint the right *questions*. Drucker's consulting was notably based on his practicing what he wrote--asking executives a series of discerning questions toward helping craft most-effective strategies for their unique culture. Many clients reported they were at first frustrated (they wanted the expert to tell them what to do) but ultimately satisfied they arrived at best methods for their specific needs.

I see this all too frequently: some senior managers and professionals blithely assume they know what's needed to turn things around (usually revolve around others but not themselves embracing significant changes). Ready to do something they've heard or read about. But proof of the pudding, if they really knew what was needed, why do many organizations seem stuck in the first place, trying many interventions but not able to surmount stubborn problems?

In this article, I'll discuss 4 levels of Safety Culture, as well as two critical questions for activating higher performance Safety Culture.

The 4 Safety Cultures

Senior managers have become increasingly aware of Safety potential returns, well beyond loss reduction. And Safety culture is an especially hot topic among leaders who sense something is missing, that performance could be better.

Their instincts are probably right.

Culture is like the air we breathe, invisible, but very real. It's what people really believe but don't necessarily talk about - what you can get away with vs. what sparks the attention of Executives. What you have to do to get promoted, and much more.

There are likely thousands of cultures. In fact, many pocket cultures can exist within one company. And a plant's graveyard shift typically has very different "air" than its day shift.

So why bother focusing on Safety culture? If you, like me, are dedicated to significant, ongoing improvements, it's important to first map where you want to go. Identifying your level of Safety culture can also help communicate urgency for change up and down your organization.

Practically, I've found there are four *overall* stages of Safety culture. Many companies "graduate" up these cultural levels; others become mired at one level. If this is your case, consider how this 4-stage overview might provide perspective for becoming unstuck.

1. *Forced* Safety Culture. Here, Safety is "Done To" others – by command and control. These companies inherently view Safety as a blockage to business. So they do the least necessary to stay in compliance with regulating agencies. Managers similarly expect compliance from workers.

Safety people are typically understaffed and can think of themselves as Safety Police - enforcement first, surprise inspections to unearth violations. Punishment soon follows; so workers cover their rears in accident investigations and audits.

2. *Protective* Culture – where Safety is "Done For" workers. Performance is average. This type of company begins seeing Safety as important. They often proclaim, "Safety is #1!" (then lose credibility when production or other pressures take front seat).

They seek to make the workplace safe by controlling top-down, benevolent parent-like, and to bypass the need for strict compliance. Common thought process, "If everyone did as they were directed, all would be well." This culture is big on policies and procedures. And if one policy doesn't get results, "experts" write even more explicit directives.

Emphasis is on engineering fixes, dealing with injuries after they've occurred and incentives. This culture still seeks quick and cheap solutions to complex and longstanding problems (back-belts, safety bingo, etc).

Managers are often perplexed at lackluster performance – then blame workers for "not doing what's good for them."

3. *Involved* Cultures are "Done With" employees – and well done. Performance is above average. Managers see Safety as an opportunity to involve workers and boost morale. Emphasis goes beyond injury prevention to "soft benefits" – retention, building trust, receptivity to change, engagement, more. This culture trains supervisors and discusses off-work Safety. Training becomes geared to judgment, problem-solving and skills.

Involved companies approach behavioral auditing as a more positive process than do *For* cultures.

As one EHS Director said, these companies have done a good job of "picking off the low-hanging fruit." But there's still potential produce left unharvested on the tree.

After significant improvements, attentional/behavioral/statistical performance regrettably plateaus when the culture dwells on self-congratulations (like shoulder injuries from patting themselves on the back). Managers worry about workers becoming “complacent”, but often don’t see they’ve modeled over-self-satisfaction.

4. *Internal Leadership cultures* are those where Safety is “Done By” workers, for themselves. Performance is global class – and continuously watched.

People see Safety as energizing, interesting and practical.

Self-regulation is the norm; people engage in safe actions even when they know no one’s watching. This culture focuses on self-monitoring more than external auditing. Motivation moves towards recognition, beyond external incentives.

Executives often actively sponsor new initiatives.

Safety committees are active, have decision power, training, often a budget. Some employees become trained as catalysts of Safety improvement (trainers, coaches and reinforcement agents).

There’s a strong focus on off-work Safety training, with PPE to take home.

This culture has significant internal drive to remain cutting edge, pioneering new and effective initiatives, not resting on their laurels.

These descriptions are only the tip of an iceberg. There’s much more to each culture than I can cover here – motivational systems, leadership styles, approach to prevention and post-injury reactions.

Safety cultures strongly reflect overall culture. I’ve never seen a strong organizational culture that had a weak Safety culture, and vice versa. So by leading stronger Safety culture, you can in turn move your company to higher ground in performance, profitability and morale.

Each of us becomes good at what we practice, no matter what that might be. Ever met someone who’s effectively developed into a “Black Belt” in the Angry Victim system of organizational arts? Continuously complaining about how the world - or others - block their excellent attempts at moving ahead, ready to shower you with data to support their case?

Similarly, there are adept Blocked Leaders, mourning that people just won’t do what they’re told or what’s good for them, what’s the matter with them in the first place? Or those that blame outside or governmental forces. Of course, there are many other kinds of less than functional patterns of accomplished Can’t Do experts.

But the flip side is high performance people and companies also become expert at what they practice. From out of my experience with some adept internal culture leaders, and out of the tradition of Peter Drucker, the first question (of two) I offer is: “*What is our pattern of actions - what do we consistently practice doing the most?*”

While the most powerful leaders I’ve worked with can greatly vary in their styles, they all have at least one similarity - a willingness, a drive to dispassionately look at forces around them that both propel as well as potentially block their efforts - including their own strengths and limitations. But sometimes boiling down a complex culture into a few words can help leaders and others see

and then step out of ruts of disappointing performance. So, to put the first critical Culture question another way, given fewer than five words, how would you describe your own culture?

And remember I promised two critical Culture questions? The second question I offer you is most crucial: “*Are you/your company practicing what you really wish to become?*”

Stepping Up Your Safety Culture

Here are some proven leadership ways to make this happen, from A to J. All proven, all practical, all necessitate continuous application:

A. Begin by identifying your current level of culture. Consider the 4 levels of safety cultures. As a first step, dispassionately determine which culture is currently yours. Then focus on moving to the next level. You can accomplish this by “dressing for the job you want, not the one you have.” In other words, adopt one or more characteristics of the just-higher culture, even to a small degree. Arguably, attitude is a significant component to culture; you can best change attitude by engaging in successful actions. And in the back of your mind, know where the center of the bull’s-eye lies - where each organizational member sees safety as personal, with high-level autopilot.

B. Scope out obstacles to stepping up. Organizational changemaster Kurt Lewin found leaders were more likely to develop sustaining improvements by reducing forces that blocked higher performance, rather than pushing for more improvements. Become an obstacle remover. Look around, ask others, think through what snags, however minor, discourage safer actions and performance.

C. Develop a professional relationship with as high up the Executive chain as possible. A manager who believes in Safety - and these are becoming more plentiful - is someone you can learn from and work with in tandem for planning strategic change. Someone who’ll sponsor and spearhead new initiatives - or find a colleague to further enlist.

D. Employ scissors change. While significant cultural change requires topdown approval and resource allocation, it’s critical to simultaneously elevate employee leadership.

E. Enlist the principle of cognitive dissonance. Get naysayers and resisters involved early in new initiatives - even if only to critique ideas, participate in shared fact-finding or in setting leading indicators. This gives you early information you can use in planning, invites in fresh eyes on old problems, reduces resistance, and boosts buy-in.

F. Introduce breakthrough interventions. Those that bring new perspective, excitement, can be readily applied to work and home applications and are strongly participative.

Retire tired programs. Decide carefully who you bring in from outside to impact your Executives and line staff.

If you want higher-level cultural performance, you have to incorporate the right different interventions. Energy is high-test fuel for cultural takeoffs. Go beyond merely proscribing safety policies; instead, encourage the approach, “safety helps me live with more energy, effectiveness, getting things done that are important to me.”

G. Look for - and step through - Areas of Opportunity. Distinguish between different kinds of strategic piloting. For example, if you’ve arrived at an intervention you assess might drive your

culture higher, don't do the "typical" pilot in the areas or business unit that needs it most (there is a place for this in determining whether worst-case sites can be elevated). But to move up on in culture, get local/internal data and positive response by piloting this initiative in the most receptive area, that already has strong in-place support for reinforcement.

H. Nurture promising interventions, help them succeed. Don't let fate - or distracted leadership - allow promising-but-newly-planted initiatives to wither from inadequate care. Do what you can to make new growth successfully root and flourish through above methods, and more.

I. Look for and acknowledge heroes on all levels. Seek and provide recognition for managers, supervisors, line staff who exemplify those qualities and actions of higher level safety culture on which you are focused. For example, if you're focused on building engagement, internally publicize the worker who voluntarily leads a monthly meeting on home safety; likewise the Executive who took time to attend, even briefly, that same meeting.

J. Develop no more than three cultural safety objectives and make sure everyone knows these. Don't overspread. Select the most significant activities you wish to see happen (all should be aspects of next-level culture); review these and continuously remind others about your progress. When it's acknowledged you've made good progress towards one goal, you can move a different one into the high priority "Safety three."

Sports teams with a mediocre or even losing history can become winners through a watchful and strategic building process. Safety Culture change is even easier to accomplish and is happening all the time, worldwide, right now as you read this. With a simple and systematic approach, you can help step your Safety Culture up to significantly higher levels.

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