

Safety Is Free—Because Culture Is the Key

**Donald J. Eckenfelder, CEO
Social Operating Systems
Glens Falls, N.Y.**

Background

Meeting with Bill/Selling the Concept

In one sense, selling the importance of culture is easy; in another sense, it is very difficult. This seeming paradox needs lots of explanation since it is at the core of what has had very little *real* impact over the last decade in spite of being a generally accepted truism. I believe there are two reasons for the lack of application of a widely accepted concept, which is that culture predicts performance.

The first reason is that there is a severe paucity of measurement. And that is essentially what this paper is all about; so, I won't belabor the point here except to say that I will show you—in spite of generally accepted wisdom that it can't be done—that culture *can* be measured.

The second reason is that leaders generally lack vision and courage in this new world where almost no one wants to wait for anything nor do they want to work very hard to get what they want. They want it delivered as a finished product, assembled, and ready to go. Also, they want it to produce results immediately. It is obvious to everyone that culture enrichment simply can't be delivered that way and so the “discussion” ends.

In order to tell the success story that this paper is all about, I need to start at the beginning. Due to the Internet, web sites, search engines, and so on, I frequently get calls from all over the world about our work on culture measurement and management. I take some pleasure in calling people who have made email inquiries, as it normally comes as quite a surprise to them, especially if they reside on the other side of the world. This is one of my many sources of amusement and fulfillment.

One day, almost three years ago, I got a call from Bob Rivenburgh, the HR executive for Keymark Corporation. Keymark is a second-generation, family-owned company main business of which is the extrusion of aluminum. Their average employment is around 1,000. They are located in Fonda, New York, which is about 50 miles from my location in Glens Falls, New York. After about 20-years as a self-employed person, I have had clients all over the U.S. and in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and other places around the world. I had never had a client in New York. Bob mentioned that he was interested in the human side of safety, as they had all the prescribed “programs” and still were not getting the results they wanted. He said that he had

read about me in a “concrete magazine” and, since I lived nearby, thought I might visit with him and give him some advice on the behavioral side of safety. I pointed out that my work focused on culture rather than the so-called behavior-based safety, which I had actually written about in a less-than-complimentary way.

Bob said he was fine with that and was wondering if I’d come to Fonda and meet with the Keymark CEO and owner, Bill Keller, and himself to explain how I might be able to help them. I explained that I normally don’t do that because I have found that often results in my being taken advantage of, but that since they were nearby and I’d have access to the decision-maker, I’d make an exception and do it. On reflection, that was one of the best decisions I’ve made in my life and, as this story unfolds, you’ll see why.

Cognizant of the very valid “Covey” habit (from his *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*) of listening first to understand before speaking to be understood, I started by asking Bill to give me a little history on his company, and why he wanted to meet with me. In less than 15 minutes he did that very well but was anxious to get on to what I might be able to do to assist him.

As I discussed the importance of culture and our approach, Bill began asking questions I’m sure he knew the answers to, but he was probing to see if I knew the answers. He then commented that our work applied equally well to overall excellence and was not just applicable to safety. He clearly wanted to address the safety issues but asked how long it would take to broaden the approach to cover general organization excellence. Bill had witnessed some regression in the culture at his company and, with his great instincts, had an idea of what had happened, and some things that could be done to correct the situation, but he wanted some tools to help him focus his efforts, and allow for him to discern if what he was doing was working. He quickly saw the potential our methodology had.

There are several messages in this history. The *first* is that you need to get to a decision-maker. The *second* is that you will probably not make much progress unless that person has some vision and is, or can become, invested in the culture enrichment scheme. *Third*, for safety professionals, is the need to display the scalability and sustainability of culture enrichment. While most executives recognize, to some level, the importance of loss prevention, they almost always have a much wider view of their work and mission and, if the safety solutions don’t harmonize with that larger vision, they quickly lose interest and, more importantly, passionate support.

The History Behind the Concept

The history behind the recognition of the importance of culture is important for any practitioner as “the past IS prologue.” If you get into the middle of the process and display ignorance of some of the essential history, you will almost surely lose credibility. Without credibility, you will be sunk. For purposes of this paper, I’ll give a brief history and refer the reader to the last section of the paper or the suggested resources.

A good case could be made for Tom Peters’ book, *In Search of Excellence*, for starting the keen interest in culture and association of culture with performance. MBWA or “management by

walking around” became part of the vernacular of many enlightened managers. Some CEOs gave all their managers copies of the book. Now we have Jim Collins, author of *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*, not only talking about culture but citing lots of data accumulated by graduate students to validate the importance of organization culture to achieve exceptional performance. In 2000, about ten years ago, the National Safety Council looked to the future and said that, in the 21st century, culture would become “mainstream” in safety. It is talked about a lot more, and many organizations have relabeled their work integrating the word culture in their “speak” and marketing materials. But has anything really changed? I think not!

This begs the question: Why not? Here’s what I think. There has been a failure to define culture in a way that is universally understandable; a universal measurement system has not been adopted; correlation with all aspects of performance has not been demonstrated and accepted; and, lastly, and I think most importantly, beliefs and values have not been tied to culture in order to stimulate some passion for the subject. It is said that, “A belief is not merely an idea the mind possesses, it is an idea that possesses the mind.” (Robert Auzton Bolton) Culture is all about values and, until we recognize that and integrate it into our thinking on the subject and devise a universally acceptable way to quantify culture, it will just be talk with no real progress.

Selecting and Working with Mr. Inside

I have concluded that, while we have some very powerful intellectual property that can produce remarkable results, it can’t happen without a capable and passionate person inside an organization who has the full confidence and support of the organization leader.

In the case in point, I suggested that the top executives select the most credible and capable young executive in their organization to head the culture enrichment effort. They indicated that they did not have such a person. I then suggested I’d recruit the person for them. That idea was considered but it would take time, and the person would arrive unfamiliar with the resident culture. The owner, Bill Keller, asked the HR executive, Bob Rivenburgh, if he’d take on the assignment. Bob had been instrumental in heading the institution of basic compliance related safety “programs,” had done it well, and was very familiar with the safety basics.

The problem was that Bob already had a full-time job. At first Bob declined. Then, as he became familiar with our methodology, he became enamored with techniques, and saw the potential for wider applications and some personal growth. He figured out how he could delegate some of his current assignments and took on the task.

In retrospect, this probably was the key milestone that predicted our success. That is because of several factors. They were:

- Bob “hit the ground running,” as he knew everyone, was intimate with the current culture, and had the support of the leader and the respect of virtually all the employees.
- Bob was a seasoned professional who had a record of success in various assignments in sophisticated organizations.
- I (the outsider/consultant) bonded quickly with Bob and he with me, as we generally saw the world through the same lens.
- Bob came into the assignment with a passion for the process.

Instituting a culture measurement and management process requires lots of things and the “great idea” is just the beginning. The process can be derailed in many ways. Without the right person inside the organization shepherding the work, the likelihood of success is very low.

Results Achieved

An Overview

Any time someone brags of achievements, it is appropriate to ask for some numbers to support the assertions. On the other hand, the saying that, “figures don’t lie but liars figure” is a truism. Look at the field of safety, and the claims made for the so-called behavior-based safety process. All kinds of cost savings were demonstrated, and now the process has been widely recognized, even by some of the founders and strong proponents, as having some serious flaws and creating some endemic, long-term problems that seem to have no easy solutions.

Why is this? In a nutshell, it is because complex problems rarely have simple solutions; when there are lots of variables, holding them constant is not possible and ignoring them guarantees inaccuracies. So, what is the answer? We must look to numbers but temper their relevancy with an understanding of the vagaries associated with the subject at hand.

In our field of loss prevention, one of the most interesting and revealing papers ever written was published in *Professional Safety* under “Other Voices” in December of 1995 and was entitled “Caution: Beware of OSHA Statistics.” The paper all but proved that OSHA statistics were inversely proportional to accident prevention. Several of the conclusions reached in the paper could be questioned but it certainly provides lots of “food for thought.”

The Numbers

Having said what I have said about the trouble with using numbers to demonstrate the efficacy of the application of new thinking to improve performance, there are numbers to suggest that the culture measurement and management process used at Keymark has made them a safer and more viable company.

There have been significant reductions in their costs associated with safety performance, and the trend line that was headed up is now headed down. That has been substantiated by a significant change in the way they are viewed by the insurance industry. Internally, there have been changes, as there are with any organization over time, but they have been minor, and the culture enrichment efforts have been major. So, it would not be out of order to assume that the improvement is largely due to the culture enrichment process, except that there have also been enormous external changes. The economy has taken a significant downturn. This has resulted in effects that could both increase the potential for higher injury costs and lower them. Higher costs would be due to insecurity among the workforce, who may find workers’ compensation attractive; lower costs could be due to lower turnover, and a desire to demonstrate loyalty to sustain employment. There are numbers that will be presented as part of the paper presentation but they need to be viewed with some skepticism.

The Attitudes

I think attitudes, or the “climate” they produce in the workplace, are more suggestive of the positive impact of a culture enrichment effort than anything else. That is graphically and statistically validated by subsequent data collections and visual comparisons, which can be buttressed by interviews that were done at Keymark. I interviewed over 40 champions and asked a series of questions, which included one about whether they could feel the difference, a second that inquired if they attributed that difference to the culture enrichment initiatives, and finally, if they wanted to go on. The answers were unanimous and affirmative. That is very powerful and suggests future success in applying the scalability of the process, and fewer accidents, lower costs, and the associated viability and profitability of the business.

The Future

In a bad climate, periodic bad weather can be assured. In a good climate, severe weather may not always be avoided but is less likely. That is what a better and stronger culture does for you. It reduces the likelihood of bad outcomes and suggests that adversity is more likely to be dealt with effectively. Having been through almost three years of culture enrichment efforts, I don't think a single person at Keymark would say that they are not better off now, nor are they not better equipped to respond to difficulties that may arise. It doesn't get much better than that.

The Process

Identifying Champions

Culture change will either happen “where the boots are on the ground” or it won't happen at all. So, it is essential that the role models and thought leaders “in the trenches” understand and support change. I call these people champions. At Keymark, the selection process was pretty easy, since the people who meet our criteria had been afforded growth opportunities and virtually all the thought leaders were now in leadership positions as managers, supervisors, or group leaders. In most organizations, there are people who don't hold official leadership positions but are viewed with respect by others, and play a significant role in setting the tone in the workplace. They need to be identified and made champions. If they are not, and decide to be obstructionists, the process can run into roadblocks.

Educating Champions

Once champions are identified, they must be educated. At Keymark, this involved PowerPoint presentations, workbooks, and some individual attention, followed by workshops for champion representatives to establish desired attributes. That was followed by the creation of the customized general organization excellence (GOE) culture barometer and associated scorecard.

Educating Associates and Collecting Data

The first time I collected data with Steve Arblaster at a GE locomotive servicing location in Nebraska, I realized that the data collection was an education for the participants and reinforced our mantra that, “the process is the product.”

It was midnight and a crew of imposing mechanics in bib-overalls—some bearing large wrenches—was about to start their shift. They were gathered in a break room, sitting at benches and chatting. As we explained the data collection process, there was still some whispering.

When we handed out the data collection documents, the room became quiet as the men began to read the forms. Then some of them looked up and around at their fellow workers. I said to Steve, “Can you feel the culture changing?” As the men began to process the values that are likely to predict injury resistance, and think about how their workforce stood with regard to those values, they were already pondering how they got to where they were, and what they may need to do to achieve a higher score. So, the culture change was beginning.

At Keymark, we provided each person using the data collection document with a bi-fold to take home. It not only included the scorecard but the full culture barometer, the desired attributes upon which the values were established, and an explanation of the core philosophy behind the culture measurement and management process.

Analyzing Charts & Prescribing Solutions

Once the data is collected, it is entered in a spreadsheet from which a chart or profile can easily be generated. We have some proprietary tools to create a report and analysis but it can easily be done according to the way an organization tends to display other types of analyses.

As to the analysis and prescriptions for improvement, we have developed generic-suggested “exercises,” but these are just the starting point. This process can be totally culture sensitive and the best results will occur when those applying the thinking do a lot of thinking themselves, because the process is the product.

Providing Feedback

Transparency and providing feedback and soliciting comments and reaction is an important part of the enrichment process. This can be done simply or in a well-conceived and elaborate fashion. At Keymark, we provided some graphic design, and then they created 2×3 foot laminated posters that displayed the results and, for each value described, the rationale for the value, and solicited suggestions as to how the organization could live the value. A few suggestions were offered to stimulate the thinking and response.

Involving Everyone and Empowering Champions

In order to change culture, there must be broad involvement. The postings and “toolbox meetings” to discuss the postings are designed to get every associate involved. Some will join in more readily than others, and there may always be some “naysayers.” The only way to overcome negativism is by sheer social force, which can only be generated by discussing benefits and then demonstrating them.

Expanding the Scope/Demonstrating Scalability

The process of culture enrichment applies everywhere and is totally scalable. It applies to families, as well as to companies and other work groups, and even to schools and other institutions. It can even be applied to whole countries. We have a culture barometer and scorecard for the U.S. based on the values discussed by the Founding Fathers. At Keymark, we are contemplating applications to healthcare and strengthening families. These obviously extend outside the workplace, and will be optional. Some may choose to participate, and others may not. Gains made by those who do will be to everyone’s benefit.

Broadening “Explanations”

We believe that education is the solution to almost all problems. So, we encourage ongoing explanations, not only for the exercises to do but discussing the results and “fine tuning” the exercise. Periodic re-measurement will provide a report card on the success of the exercises. This can be done as infrequently as annually or may even be able to be done weekly on-line.

“Drilling Down”

Culture barometers and accompanying scorecards, together with all the other accoutrements as described above, can be generated for specific disciplines and even departments. They need to be subordinate to the more “global” values, but once you get going and get the hang of the process, that will not be hard to accomplish. We have lots of generic examples.

The End Game or Conclusions

At Keymark, we have produced a DVD and booklet, which was given to all associates to take home and discuss with their families, and which will be used to acquaint all customers, suppliers, and community members with Keymark’s values.

The “magic” in all this is linking desired attributes with beliefs and values and in the quantification. It is intuitive and, when done transparently and with sincere caring, almost everyone enjoys participating and feels like they are being treated like adults and are involved in a worthwhile endeavor.

Reference Material

Actually, based on specific information that was taken from books or reference material, there is no bibliography, as no one we have read has said anything we have said here concerning culture quantification with, one possible exception. That is the idea of a maturity grid that did come from Crosby’s book *Quality is Free*. And even then, what we have done is vastly different than his brief reference to the subject.

What I would suggest is that you find authors who peripherally deal with culture and read them to stimulate your thoughts on the process. I would suggest Jim Collins and Malcolm Gladwell as great reads. Collins has written *How the Mighty Fall*, *Good to Great*, and *Built to Last*. Gladwell has written *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, *Outliers*, and *What the Dog Saw*. The book *The Culture Code* by Clotaire Rapaille offers some interesting perspectives via international marketing. We use Lewis Gerstner’s quote: “When I started at IBM I thought culture was important; when I finished I realized that it was the only thing that was important.” So, I’d suggest you read his book, *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance*. But, don’t expect to get any “tools” to implement something like what he did. He doesn’t provide them, but he tells an interesting story of how he saved IBM from demise. I also liked Bollier’s book, *Aiming Higher*. Again, the stories are largely anecdotal and don’t provide specific methodology. But, you have that now as a result of reading this paper. Finally, you should go back and read Peters’ *In Search of Excellence*. Also, Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits* series of books provide some interesting insights. Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman wrote *First, Break All The Rules*, and gave the

keynote message at a recent ASSE PDC. Their book is another good read for safety professionals.

Happy reading and experimentation: If you do what I suggest, you will never see the world the same way again. You will be seen by your colleagues as an executive who happens to be concerned with safety, health, and the environment instead of a safety professional who has become a manager or executive. I think the distinction is important as it relates to what you can do for an organization.