

Identifying Cultural Hazards: Four Clues Your Organization Is Out Of Balance

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When we hear the words “hazard assessment,” we often think of physical and chemical hazards. These are the risks to our employees we can see with our eyes and feel with our hands. But what if the biggest hazard in your organization is the culture? Culture, defined as “the way we do things around here,” is created by the people working in the environment. If you can’t see culture with your eyes or feel it with your hands, how can you determine if you have a good culture or a bad one? This program looks at some clues that your culture may be contributing to the safety failures. For each clue, we will examine what could be behind it and what you can do to effectively change your current culture into a culture of success.

We define a culture of success as one that maintains a balance of productivity, quality, and safety. Since an organization is made up of individual contributors, we need to look at how the employees in the organization, from top to bottom, maintain this crucial balance. Each individual’s balance is influenced by four elements: experience, knowledge, pace, and focus. The four elements either expand or contract our internal risk manager to keep us balanced. As you would expect, the growth of experience and knowledge expands our internal risk manager allowing us to take more risks. However, as experience and knowledge increase, our natural tendency is for focus to decrease and for pace to increase. Problems occur when we get out of balance and due to a lack of knowledge, experience, or focus at an increased pace; we end up outside of our comfort zone and eventually make a bad decision, triggering an incident.

Clue No.1: “Management Won’t Do Anything Until Someone Gets Hurt”

If you have ever heard an employee say this, your culture may be out of balance. Employees truly believe that management does not do anything until someone gets hurt because their experience tells them that is the case. That is not because management doesn’t care or is not proactive in addressing concerns. It is because management’s representatives, in particular the front-line leaders, do not do a good enough job of communicating the approach to safety. If we have a consistent approach that can be described and communicated, then employees will be more likely to see management’s actions not just their reactions.

A consistent approach begins with understanding the physical and chemical risks in the work environment. We can gain this understanding by asking the right questions and truly listening to those who know the environment the best: the employees. Once we have the knowledge, then a consistent approach allows us to build trust with our employees because they know we will take appropriate action when reasonable risk is present. The following five questions will help a front-line supervisor establish a clear, consistent approach to safety issues:

1. Is there a reasonable potential for:
 - Electrocution;
 - Suffocation;

- Asphyxiation;
 - Engulfment;
 - Poisoning;
 - Falling from a height of more than six feet; or
 - Having the head or entire body crushed by machinery, equipment, or elevated loads?
2. Is there a reasonable potential for fire, explosion, or large chemical release?
 3. Is there a reasonable potential for the amputation of a limb or digit?
 4. Is there a reasonable potential for back, shoulder, arm or leg muscle strain?
 5. Is there the potential for this situation to occur:
 - Several times each day
 - Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Annually; or
 - Only once?

These questions allow us to ensure that our response to everything from an idea to a fatality is consistent. Recently, an operations manager asked me, “Does this mean we have to do a big investigation with photos and a thirty-page report for every near miss?” The answer is “No”. After an initial review based on the potential severity and frequency associated with the situation, we can minimize the time spent on those issues with low potential in either severity or frequency. This will allow us to focus our limited resources on the issues that present both high severity and frequency potential. The initial review is the key.

The level of severity or frequency at which the organization takes action is up to the organization. There is no rule of thumb. One organization may be struggling to review issues that could potentially cause a fatality. Others may have the resources to fully examine the issues that present the potential for a cut finger. The injury history of your organization and industry is probably a good indicator as to where you draw the line.

Once we have established a consistent approach, the front-line supervisor can start to create the culture of success. Creating a culture is based on the three E’s of success: Expect, Exhibit, and Emphasize.

- **Expect**

Before new employees enter the work environment, the expectation of safe behavior must be clearly established. In most cases, new employees bring at least twenty years of engrained habits and behaviors with them to the workplace. Although some of these traits will be desirable, everyone has a few habits that will result in unsafe behaviors. Although you will not eliminate your new employees’ unsafe habits immediately, you can clearly indicate that unsafe behaviors are not welcome.

Unfortunately, in organizations where safety training is required, most supervisors depend on that training to communicate and establish the expected behaviors. However, training only

introduces safe behaviors; it does not establish a culture that expects them. In fact, many supervisors see safety training as a hurdle new employees need to “get out to the way”...and then forget about. Furthermore, new employees may spend several days, if not weeks, in the work environment experiencing how things are “really done” before receiving their safety training. These factors sabotage safety training. If the supervisor does not expect safe work practices from the very beginning, any safety training will quickly be forgotten and existing unsafe behaviors will be more difficult to change.

- **Exhibit**

Supervisors must lead by example. Supervisors who say one thing but exhibit a different behavior send a confusing message to their employees. Employees will only exhibit desired behaviors if their supervisors consistently exhibit that behavior. The supervisor sets the standard for safety behaviors.

For supervisors to lead by example, they must understand their role as leaders. Unfortunately, many companies hire or promote individuals because they are the best at their job, they have been there the longest, or they fish with the top customer. Rarely are promotions the result of outstanding leadership skills—the skills that make supervisors successful. It hurts both the organization and the employee when an individual who cannot provide leadership is given authority.

All companies have a leadership development program, formal or informal. An informal leadership development program will perpetuate the leadership styles of the past. That may be fine for some organizations, but can you afford to take that chance? Building leaders is not difficult; it just takes a commitment from the organization. Investing in supervisors and their future not only reduces safety incidents and costs, it also increases productivity and quality.

- **Emphasize**

Finally, supervisors must emphasize safe behavior. Basic behavioral science and common experience suggest that although an individual is trained, that individual will not exhibit the desired behavior unless it continues to be emphasized after the training. The emphasis must be directly related to the desired behavior. Emphasis can come in many shapes and sizes: salary, evaluation, bonus, incentives, promotions, discipline, embarrassment, and so on. However, the most powerful emphasis is simple: positive verbal feedback. The supervisor—the person with the most frequent and meaningful contact with employees—can provide this positive feedback, creating a culture of safety one person at a time.

By taking a consistent approach and implementing the three E’s, we can create a culture of open and honest communication while building two-way trust.

Clue No. 2: “I Can’t Believe My Employee Would Do Something So Stupid.”

If you have ever heard a supervisor or manager say this, your culture may be out of balance. A supervisor might say this when they have lost focus as to their role in creating a culture of success. Something in the organization has allowed them to abdicate their responsibility for creating a balanced work environment and accepting the responsibility for their employee’s actions.

Safety committees can cause this abdication. The responsibilities of the common safety committee often include the following:

- Participate in the monthly committee meetings.
- Conduct regularly scheduled safety inspections.
- Provide current safety information to employees.
- Take the responsibility for averting imminent safety hazards.
- Provide an on-site safety presence on a daily basis and to serve as a good example.
- Participate in accident investigation.

However, compare the above list, minus the first bullet, with the role of the supervisor. In fact, compare the above list, minus the first bullet, with the role of every employee at your organizations. An amazing thing happens when we write down roles and responsibilities. The positive side is that by writing down this roles and responsibilities, we provide clear expectations to those involved. The negative side is that once the roles and responsibilities have been written and assigned to a person or group of people, those out side that group can say, “That’s not my job.” How come “safety” becomes the job of the employee wearing the shirt with “safety committee” embroidered on the front pocket? One client often complains, “He should have known better, he is on the safety committee.” Unfortunately, being on the safety committee does not make an employee immune from cultural influences nor does not being on the safety committee excuse an employee from promoting safety.

In addition to the roles and responsibilities of the safety committee, the structure of the committee may also be creating an unwanted culture. Traditional employee safety committees, sometimes overseen by a management steering committee, are chartered to address safety issues, investigate accidents, develop safety incentive programs, and participate in observations and audits. However, there are several inherent flaws in the structure of the standard safety committee. These flaws almost always render a group ineffective over time, and essentially reduce them to well-meaning participants in a monthly pizza gathering on the organization’s dime. Let’s look at the structure of a traditional safety committee:

- **Participants**

- Most safety committees are comprised of volunteers...or those who have been volunteered. Either way, we get a group of individuals whom we may not have selected to address a particular concern. Although these types of participants may bring ‘a new set of eyes’ to an issue, unless they have a vested interest in accomplishing the goal, they may not bring the value and buy-in needed. In addition, they very well may lack the technical expertise to efficiently resolve the issue.

- **Size**

- Often, the desire of the management team is to have each department or work group represented on the committee. Unfortunately, this creates a large committee which has a difficult time staying organized and on task let alone reaching consensus.

- **Time**

- Many organizations mandate that their safety committees meet monthly for a specific period of time, commonly one year. At the end of the year’s time, the members are rotated out with new employees brought on board. The idea being that by rotating members, the committee will become a vehicle to spread safety

ownership. Unfortunately, this model creates both short-term and long-term problems. Since the committee is often quite large, bringing them all together for an impromptu meeting is virtually impossible. Therefore, progress stalls until the next regularly scheduled monthly meeting. In the long-term, with finite time frames and rotating members, the committee is often slowed or stalled, reinventing the wheel each time there is membership change. If a committee has begun an initiative, it now becomes the responsibility of the new members to carry on the initiative with the same passion even if it is not a priority for them. When the initiative fails due to lack of support, it is seen by the employees as a 'program of the month' damaging the success potential of future initiatives.

- **Goal and Measurable Results**

- The success of an ergonomic improvement is easily measured through time and weight studies. However, measuring the effectiveness of other safety resolutions creates a more difficult challenge. Many safety committees see their job as reducing injury rates or workers' compensation costs. However, these traditional safety measures are driven by many variables and external influences. An attempt to track changes in these measures directly back to the committee's activities would be tenuous at best. Therefore, the success of a safety committee is almost impossible to measure.

- **Authority**

- Many safety committee members find themselves in the position of 'safety cops' wearing their 'safety' shirt and trying to identify and correct compliance and behavioral issues. For those members that are overzealous, this can become an issue with their co-workers and cause rifts within the team. For those members who were volunteered, this added responsibility becomes a burden and a nuisance.

- **Abdication**

- Committee members often become the eyes and ears of the safety department. As such, the members become the 'safety person' for their department or work group, allowing the supervisor to abdicate his or her responsibility in this area. This perpetuates the impression that supervisors are responsible for productivity and the safety department and the safety committee are responsible for safety. To further this point, we have to ask, "Who is on the productivity committee?" The answer, obviously, is the supervisors. So, the supervisors are responsible for productivity, and a group of random employees is responsible for safety? By creating a standing safety committee, we are allowing supervisors to abdicate their responsibilities for creating a balanced work environment.

If you are required to have a safety committee, the key is to maximize the use of these resources without undermining the supervisor's responsibility. One possible approach is to form small task-specific teams (you can call them a "safety committee" if you need to) to address a very specific safety-related issue. By having these task-specific teams, we resolve many of the challenges that most traditional standing safety committees face.

- **Participants**
 - By choosing a small team with the expertise and the interest, we can get better results that will be more readily accepted. Employees will better support a world which they create.
- **Size**
 - The size of the team can be limited to those with the expertise, knowledge, and ability to resolve the issue. This makes for a focused results-driven team that can get together as frequently as needed.
- **Time**
 - Since these teams are convened to address a single issue, the time-frame to resolve the issue should be established by the team and approved by the senior management. Due to the relatively small size of the team, quick, impromptu meetings are easily organized and completed allowing the project to move forward quickly. Once the issue is resolved, the team is disbanded and a new process begins.
- **Goal and Measurable Results**
 - By forming task-specific teams, the goal and the measure are inherently identified during the formation of the team. This format allows for managers to easily track the success of the team and their activities. With specific goals and measurable results, members will be motivated to join future teams once they have experienced the success of their task-force.
- **Authority**
 - Task-specific teams will not get drawn into the position of ‘safety cop’ since identification of issues is not their charter. Their task is to identify the engineering, administrative, and personal protective controls necessary to address the issue. The responsibility for the implementation of the changes then falls back where it belongs: on the supervisor.
- **Abdication**
 - Task-specific teams will not have the scope of responsibility to allow for this abdication. The overall responsibility for success remains with the supervisor.

By maintaining compliance in a cost-effective manner, you can then spend your resources effectively to create commitment. Remember, OSHA compliance does not necessarily mean a safe work environment. To be successful, your commitment to safety must go beyond the regulations.

Clue No. 3: “I Just New Someone Was Going To Get Hurt Doing That.”

If you have ever heard an employee say this, your culture may be out of balance. This statement is indicative of a “Be Safe” mentality. That mentality that says, “Get it done, just don’t get hurt.” To change from a “Be Safe” mentality to a “Be Successful” mentality, we must revise our

approach to from a focus on productivity to a focus on success. This can be accomplished with management and supervisors constantly evaluating the culture that they have created.

- **Be Aware**

Being aware allows the supervisor to understand the culture. In every organization, there are rules and then there are “rules”. If the supervisor does not know what rules are hard fast and what rules are flexible with the pressure is on, they will end up wondering why their employees would do something so stupid.

- **Be Present**

The supervisor can not possibly know what is occurring in their department if they are in the office or in another department fixing issues. Successfully balancing quality, safety, and productivity requires the supervisor to orchestrate the work flow. A single employee or department does not instantaneously get behind unless there is significant rework that needs to be completed. It takes time to fall behind. If the supervisor is in the area, observing the work flow and orchestrating his department, he can see these issues arise and make adjustments prior to anyone falling too far behind. Once we fall behind, the decision lines start to blur and the operation falls out of balance.

Being present is also about employee-to-employee communication. Today, supervisors are being pulled in so many directions that they have very little time to have constructive, purposeful contact with their employees. Therefore, when the supervisor does have contact with the employee, that contact better be useful and relevant. Effective employee-to-employee communication is based on listening and providing high impact feedback. High impact feedback take many forms, but the two most useful are coaching (offering a suggestion for improvement when an employee is already performing above expectations) and redirecting behavior (demanding change when an employees behavior is below the line of acceptability).

- **Be Balanced**

A balanced culture comes from the leader’s ability to communicate balance in what they say and what they do. According to research conducted by Kouzes and Posner, 70% of promotions are based on technical expertise and the ability to perform the job. That is, supervisors are often promoted because they are seen as dependable, knowledgeable, hard workers. These are qualities that we hope they will then instill in their employees. However, making the switch from worker to leader is not easy for some. The self satisfaction we get from completing a task is often lost when our job requires us to think, lead, and teach, and we are no longer producing a tangible product. If the new position does not provide this sense of accomplishment, they will tend to drift back to the activities that do. In other words, they will start working instead of leading. Effective leaders do not work in the physical sense of the word. Their work must be mental. Mental work requires them to use their listening, coaching, and redirection skills to get their employees to perform at the highest level. Kouzes and Posner also found that 80% of resignations, terminations or demotions are due to lack of interpersonal skills. An organization that does not provide the opportunity for a supervisor to learn and practice these interpersonal skills is rolling the dice that they will somehow pick it up on their own.

Clue No. 4: “You’ve Had A Lost Time!!! Well, What Are You Going To Do About It?”

If you have ever heard a senior manager say this, your culture may be out of balance. A senior manager might say this when they are more focused on the OSHA Recordable Injury and Illness Rate than they are on the overall effectiveness of their work place. The vast majority of incident analyses focus just on who was involved and what they did. We take the negative consequences resulting from the incident and work backwards to when the individual involved made the bad decision that caused the incident. We then determine if the person involved violated a policy or procedure. If they did violate a policy or procedure (which is usually the case), we either discipline them hoping that the instilled fear of discipline will dictate future behavior or we retrain them on a policy or procedure of which they were fully aware in the first place. If they did not violate a policy or procedure, we quickly develop one to remove the decision making process from the employee. These are identified as our root causes and we move on.

- **The Burner On The Stove**

Although the above process is expedient and relatively easy to implement, it is at best ineffective and at worst creates a management team of victims. These victims then continue to perpetuate this culture by assuming that health and safety failures within their organization are the result of employees behaving badly and that something must be done. So we think back to our childhood where we learned the following lessons:

- You do something that is against the household rules and you are sent to your room with a hefty lecture on right and wrong.
- You do something of which your parents do not appreciate but have never explicitly prohibited, you still get the lecture and your parents create a new household rule to prevent you from doing it again.

I speak from experience both as a former child and as a current father. I have many times implemented both of the above strategies with my children. The sad thing for all of us is that they tend to work for two reasons:

- First, I have ample opportunities with my children to provide sound guidance and positive reinforcement of desired behaviors to more than balance out the lectures and discipline.
- Second, my children have few other options for obtaining the necessities of life – TV, Xbox, food, money, lodging, and love. So they stay.

Neither of these two conditions is present in today's work environment. Frontline management has been thinned out and overburdened with dual supervisor/employee roles, mountains of paperwork, and hours of meetings. Therefore, as mentioned previously, they do not have the ample opportunities to provide sound guidance and positive reinforcement. I often speak with employees who communicate with their supervisor less than once per day. This meager amount of purposeful and meaningful contact can not put enough into an employee's emotional bank to counterbalance the withdrawals taken by discipline and lectures. As for somewhere else to go, the unemployment rate in the US has been below 6% for years. There are jobs available for those who want to work. It may not be their ideal job for the ideal wage, but there are options. According to some reports, the number of options will be even greater if the projected labor shortages come to fruition. In [First, Break All the Rules](#), Buckingham and Coffman write that people join companies and leave managers. Employees that are treated like children can and will leave.

Exasperating the problem, we unfortunately tend to forget another lesson we all learned as small children: the burner on the stove is hot. Now for you it may of not been a burner when you were three, it may have been a light bulb when you were five, or in my case, a metal screw when I was 38. Regardless of the particular elements and time frame, the lesson was one that we all learned: if you touch something that is hot, it will burn you. The key to this lesson is in the only word repeated. YOU! That is, you have control over your behavior and, most often, you will be the one to feel the consequences for that behavior. As I start down this path with many clients, they jump in here and say, “That’s it! My employees need to take more personal responsibility for their actions. We provide them with procedures, training, and the tools to do their job correctly. If they make a bad decision, it’s their fault. I can’t control their behaviors. If they would just ‘get it’ and stop having accidents, life would be great.” Once they finish their holier-than-thou diatribe on personal responsibility, I continue with my point that the ‘you’ I am taking about here is not the employee that made the decision that resulted in an incident. The ‘you’ is YOU: every individual contributor, front-line supervisor, product manager, general manager, division manager, director, vice president, and CEO. You are responsible for your behaviors and how they influence the decisions of the people who work for your organization. In other words, you are responsible for the culture and those around you will act based on what that culture dictates.

- **A Look In The Mirror**

“The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture...” Edgar Schein wrote in Organizational Culture and Leadership. Your actions create the culture in which your employees work. The best way to measure the culture is to take a look at the behaviors occurring within that culture. People’s actions, not their words, tell you what is really important to them. Your employees will do what they think you think is important.

So when an incident occurs, our reaction further dictates and establishes the culture. But before we try to fix the employee that triggered the event, we need to understand why that employee thought their decision was the correct decision at that particular time and place. Employees make decisions constantly throughout the work day. When they stop managing their risks, they do it for one of three reasons: they were unaware of the proper behavior; they were physically unable to do the task properly; or they were improperly motivated to do the task properly. To develop an effective correction action, we must determine the employee’s decision process.

- **Unaware**

To determine if an employee was unaware of the proper method for completing the task, we can simply ask:

- Have you completed this task before?
- Tell me what the procedures are.

If they have not completed the task before or they do not know the correct steps, then they are unaware and we need to reevaluate the training process and retrain the employee.

- **Unable**

To determine if an employee was physically unable to properly complete the task, we can simply ask and watch:

- Can you show me how you normally complete this task?
- Observe the employee completing the task.

If they can not physically complete the task according to standard procedure without putting themselves at risk, then they are unable. We need to reevaluate a number of items: the work process, the hiring/promotion process, the job assignment process, and the employee's role within the organization.

- **Improperly Motivated**

If the employee is aware and able, then his decision to take that action was based upon outside influences motivating his decisions. Due to something in the environment, he lost his balance of pace and focus. Find out what influence caused him to lose the balance and you can develop an applicable, effective corrective action.

If we chose the wrong corrective action or if we take no action when action is warranted, the result is an organization of employees who do not know what to expect from their leadership. This failure further reinforces and perpetuates the cultural hazards present.

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