



ALTHOUGH COMPLETE RESTRICTIONS OF OUTSIDE VISITS MAY NOT BECOME PERMANENT, OUR THINKING ABOUT CONTROLLING SITE ACCESS WILL DEFINITELY BE CHALLENGED.

THE CULTURE OF COVID

Safety leaders should assess how COVID-19 will impact their specific safety culture and plan to either adapt to it or counteract it.

When John Wiley & Sons publishers asked me to author another book on safety culture, I reminded them there are already several other books including my earlier one on that same subject. They said that my recent articles and blogs had focused on the influences on culture and how to improve culture through identifying and managing those influences. They saw this as a novel approach largely missing from the other books.

The recent COVID-19 situation is a major influence on safety culture and will likely continue to be so into the future. Organizational and safety leaders will be wise to assess how this new influence will impact their specific safety culture and plan to either adapt to it or counteract it. Throughout the quarantine period I have been talking to such leaders and probing for their thinking and plans for the next phases of these restrictions and beyond. I have found three major schools of thought among these leaders:

REACTIVE

Some leaders are completely absorbed in the immediate situation and are putting all their attention and efforts into survival tactics. They cannot project very far into the future but are not worried about that since all their energy is absorbed in the present. When asked about plans for next steps they defer to discuss and turn the conversation back to handling the present. These leaders tend to brush off the ideas of social distancing and remote communication as temporary also.

HOPEFUL

Other leaders have experienced past emergencies and survived. They believe this pandemic will eventually just be another of those bad times and business will eventually return to its former state. They view this as a temporary situation that will evolve back to business as usual. They don't see this as an ongoing influence but do fear that a similar situation may recur in the future. They see social distancing and remote communication as handy skills to have in case of another emergency but not as permanent parts of their current safety culture.

PROACTIVE

A number of leaders are strategically planning how their organizations will prepare for the next phases of the epidemic and afterwards. They too are unsure of exactly how events will play out but can project best case, worst case and most likely scenarios and make macro strategies to address each. Like all good strategies these will need to be flexible, but these leaders don't want to be caught unprepared when things change. Unlike the other two kinds of leaders, this group is also considering the ways in which this experience has changed their safety cultures and how it will continue to do so.

The most common ways in which this third group of leaders' COVID-19 response may make permanent changes to safety culture include the ideas of social distancing, restricting access to company sites and remote communications.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

I had an immediate reaction to this terminology and suggested it should be called anti-social distancing. However, the idea has impacted the way people react to close contact with others. Some industries and organizations found distancing easy and caused very little disruption to business. Others found it quite difficult but innovated ways to address it or to create virtual distancing through various conditional modifications and improved PPE.

It remains to be seen how this will impact public transportation, but we get a glimpse of this when we see buses limiting passengers and airlines requiring face masks, body temperature screening and leaving middle seats empty. This thinking may impact the design of auditoriums, sports arenas and movie theatres over time. Whereas personal closeness was culturally acceptable just a few months ago, it is less acceptable now and this influence may become a future norm.

RESTRICTING ACCESS TO COMPANY SITES

After the World Trade Center attacks, we began to realize how open and vulnerable many of our



sites were to potential terrorist attacks. COVID-19 has taught us there are other dangers to having open access. Our consultants were set to visit a number of sites to do various types of work and were not able to proceed as organizations shut down access to anyone from outside.

Although complete restrictions of outside visits may not become permanent, our thinking about controlling site access will definitely be challenged. Future access may be much more controlled and future risks to site populations may be a more prominent part of risk assessment.

REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS

Several organizational leaders to whom I spoke (and some I was told about) have discovered that distance communication was more effective than they thought. Few originally thought Zoom or Teams meetings would ever permanently replace in-person meetings, but the quarantine experience has changed their minds. This not only applies to formal meetings, but it also impacts leadership collaboration and training.

Much of the training which was traditionally classroom-style has gone virtual. Some of this is in the form of modules of computer-based training (CBT), but more and more is live through distance technologies which allow for discussions, break-out groups and Q&A with the instructors. Safety meetings that were traditionally held in shift huddles or toolbox gatherings have been recorded and

delivered through recordings or micro-learning media.

Some sites have already begun to modify lunchrooms to increase separation and replace meeting rooms with individual computer-equipped rooms to hold virtual meetings. We have done several site cultural assessments through virtual focus group meetings, where we once did them through in-person groups of 10 or so. Even though these methods seem a bit awkward at first, they work well and become more comfortable with use.

This pandemic has resulted in some extreme measures to change some of our cultural practices. Although some leaders see these measures as temporary, others realize the potential they have to make permanent changes in our safety cultures. The technologies that make remote communications possible have become more sophisticated and less expensive. This has prompted changes in our safety cultures that have been further reinforced by the influences of our response to COVID-19. Don't be surprised if they become permanent. **EHS**

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