



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHANGED OUR PERCEPTIONS OF RISKS, OUR BELIEFS OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT, OUR VALUES AND PRIORITIES, OUR FOCUS AND MINDSET.

## YOUR SAFETY CULTURE HAS A VIRUS!

*We can long for things to return to ‘normal,’ but the changes the pandemic brought will have a lasting impact.*

I have worked with clients for the past 25-plus years who desired to improve their safety culture. Some blamed their culture for a less-than-stellar safety performance and others viewed cultural improvement as a pathway to excellence. Still others saw attention to culture as the latest fad in safety and wanted to be perceived as savvy to current trends. Few truly understood what a safety culture was or how to improve it, at least at first. Among the greatest realizations in this learning curve was the discovery of underlying influences that shaped the culture.

Many leaders described culture as “what people do when I am not watching” or “the way we do things around here.” But that is not culture; it is



common practice. Culture is a by-product of other factors that form the reasons why common practice is what it is. These factors are often referred to as influences.

Influences shape perceptions, beliefs, values, focuses and mindsets. When the influences are common with a group, they shape the culture. In general, to change a culture you must change the influences. Sometimes, the influences change themselves.

We have just experienced such an influence. We called it the COVID-19 pandemic. It changed our perceptions of risks, our beliefs of what is important, our values and priorities, our focus and mindset. These, in turn, changed many of our common practices. We can long for things to return to “normal” and they may to some extent. But the changes in our culture that the pandemic brought will have a lasting impact. The world may return to something resembling its previous condition, but the people in it will not do so completely. They will have been changed in ways that will continue to influence the culture into the future.

Before discussing some of the potential changes

to be considered, remember that all cultures are unique. That means these changes will impact different cultures in different ways and to different extents. Unfortunately, that means that the culture will need to be assessed to determine how it has changed and its current condition. Even if the organization assessed the culture in 2019, it should not be assumed that the culture will automatically revert to its old self. This is not a phenomenon unique to COVID-19. Cultures can change over time, especially after significant events, and need to be assessed periodically even during normal times. Unlike the usual safety culture assessment, post-COVID-19 assessments need to also address specific areas with a high likelihood of being impacted by the pandemic. Among those are the following:

### FOCUS ON PRECAUTIONS

The triad of COVID-19 prescribed precautions could have improved your culture’s ability to focus on specific improvements. Getting a majority of the world to social distance, wear masks and sanitize their hands could have a lasting impact on safety cultures that could be redirected toward organizational-specific improvement targets. However, we also learned that a certain percentage of people willfully disregarded these precautions and sometimes did so flagrantly. A good assessment could use compliance with COVID-19 precautions as an indicator of willingness to focus on specific behaviors to address safety issues. Good assessments try to ask specific examples or parallel questions rather than hypothetical ones.

### SOCIAL DISTANCING

The lack of close contact for months will almost certainly impact future cultural tendencies in one way or another. Measuring workers’ reactions to social distancing through perception surveys or focus groups could create useful metrics for how the culture will react when the necessity of social distancing is no longer an issue. Will COVID-19 have changed the perception of personal space or not?

### WORKING FROM HOME

Real estate agents have reported a mass migration from downtown areas to the suburbs as people were allowed to work from home rather than report to an office. Polls indicate that working from home

positive for almost everyone who has been forced or volunteered into it. The common complaints involved family members and pets interfering with work, and most reported conquering those issues over time.

## VIRTUAL MEETINGS

While quarantine prevented normal in-person meetings, organizations used technology to address the issue. Zoom, Teams and other platforms were used to hold Internet meetings. This caused a period of adjustment with some organizations and individuals but seemed to work more smoothly over time. Even conferences went virtual and found attendance good and approval of the format quite acceptable. The savings in travel expense was also greater than some anticipated, and added to the acceptance of the practice. Several CEOs stated their initial skepticism over Internet meetings has dissipated and they are pleased with performance and willing to continue the practice. It is important to determine if your safety culture will accept or even embrace continued virtual meetings.

## LESS DIRECT SUPERVISION

Distancing also meant distance between workers and their supervisors. Less direct supervision could have impacted future safety cultural norms, and it is important to determine exactly

how and to what extent this has happened. There has been a trend toward less supervision and more independent work over the past decades. Has COVID reversed or reinforced this tendency? Also, supervisors had to learn new ways to impact performance. Will these continue or go back to old models?

Organizations have had to react to crises in the past, but most have been shorter lived and less impactful. Hurricanes and other weather events cause damage and despair, then have a recovery period and a return to something close to normal. The length and nature of this pandemic make it quite different from a weather event. Even if conditions do eventually return to a resemblance of what we used to call normal, people will have been changed. Having been ambushed by this event, many will be thinking of how to address a similar event in the future. Others will simply have learned alternate ways to get the job done and those ways will be incorporated into tomorrow's safety culture. Assess the changes and adjust your safety strategy accordingly. **EHS**

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