>> Building a Bridge to Safety Excellence:
The Role of Culture

Many experts propose ways to shape or manipulate the culture to achieve safety excellence. Some approach culture directly in a frontal attack and others suggest that culture is a by-product of other safety programs and processes and must be impacted indirectly.

If an organization already is successful in its traditional safety efforts, what else can it do to get to zero accidents? More and more, the answer seems to be "work on the safety culture." It could be argued that there is no such thing as a "safety culture" in the strictest sense; i.e. that safety is a part of the culture and not the only set of goals or influences that impact a group of workers. The term "safety culture" is used here to describe this sub-set of cultural elements and how they influence worker behaviors and the occurrence or absence of accidental injuries within the group of people comprising the culture.

So, what is safety culture and why is it important for excellent safety results? There are many definitions of culture, but these common components are some of the most important for safety:

> There is a lot of talk about creating safety excellence and the role of culture in such efforts. Some suggest that culture is the magic cure for all safety ills. Others assert that more traditional safety efforts and good safety management are the integral components of a safety culture.

COMMON COMPONENTS OF SAFETY CULTURE

Common Practice – "The way we do things around here" is one element of culture. What actually happens on the shop floor or in the field often only comes to light when an accident occurs. But culture is happening every minute of every day and these common practices are either safe, or have an element of risk. How well a group of workers recognize risks and whether or not the group has a tolerance for taking risks is one influence on common practice that defines a site or organizational culture.

Unsupervised Actions – "What your people do when you are not looking" is another element of culture. Does management and supervision develop safety-related behaviors that continue in the absence of the manager or supervisor? In today's lean work environments, direct contact with workers has diminished and the emphasis on self-initiated practices is of increasing importance.

Interpersonal Contact – "How willing and able workers are to approach each other to discuss safety issues" impacts the culture as well. A work force that looks out for each other and communicates openly can greatly, and positively, impact accidents. Some work environments inhibit worker-to-worker contact or even isolate workers from each other. Sometimes, the environment is not a barrier, but the communication still does not happen.

Perceived Value or Priority of Safety – "When safety butts heads with other priorities, which one wins?" Many organizations preach a "safety first" message; but few truly pass the test when the stakes are high. The true priority (or, preferably, "value") of safety is not simply a strategic executive decision. It is defined by every decision made in the workplace when priorities clash. Does your organization tolerate safety as a necessary evil or do you truly believe that safety is good business?

Consequences of Risk Taking – "When someone takes a risk, what happens?" Many organizations only act when the risk turns into an injury or when no injuries occur over time. This practice unintentionally can send the message that risks are acceptable as long as they don't turn into accidents. Organizations that intervene (positively or negatively) at the performance level rather than the results level regularly have better results.
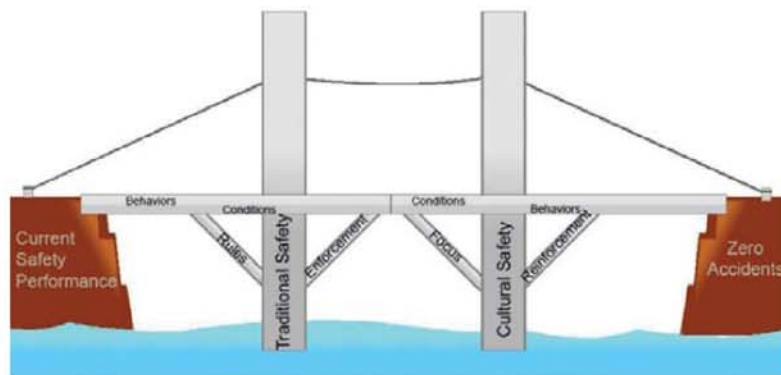
Common Attitudes, Perceptions, Competencies, and Behaviors – "What impacts workplace choices and determines common practice" on an individual and site basis is another component of culture. How do people think and feel about safety? What do they know and how do they perform? What level of agreement is there among workers and between levels in the organization?

Trust – "Does my boss have my best interest in mind in safety?" Organizations that have high levels of trust regularly outperform those who don't. Trust takes years to build and seconds to destroy. Does your organization manage the interventions that build trust? Are leaders willing to "look the other way" when safety is compromised?

THE ROLE OF CULTURE

There are other aspects of culture commonly discussed and measured, but it is easy to see how these elements could help or hurt safety efforts. As organizations begin to mature in safety management, they often begin to look at their culture as the next frontier in achieving safety excellence. Unfortunately, some work on culture by taking emphasis away from more traditional safety approaches. The thought is that if the culture is right, the enforcement will not be necessary. Others start to think how traditional safety influences the culture and utilize it only as a tool for cultural improvement.

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Rather than thinking of traditional safety as obsolete or simply a tool for influencing safety culture, think of the two working collaboratively. Traditional safety ensures and enforces compliance with mandatory conditions and behaviors. Cultural safety enables and reinforces personal empowerment with discretionary conditions and behaviors. The choice in safety improvement is not which of these two approaches to use, but how to best use them together.

Traditional safety largely is safety management. It involves managers and safety professionals assessing risks and addressing them through interventions in workplace conditions and practices. It also is an effort to ensure compliance with laws and guidelines designed to improve safety. The common tools of traditional safety include rules, procedures, permitting, training, audits, certification, supervision,

enforcement, punishment, measurement, incentives and others. The aim of these efforts is to accomplish the things in safety that are mandatory and prudent. The result of such efforts over the last several decades has been a significant reduction in workplace injuries. Unfortunately, these efforts seldom have eliminated all workplace injuries.

Traditional safety's limitations largely are built into its methodology. Efforts to expand these methods to impact culture have met with limited success. Traditional safety largely is about what management does, what is required and what the organization officially rewards or punishes. Culture deals with these issues but also is about what workers do, the willingness to go above and beyond the basic requirements and what the workforce unofficially rewards and punishes. The limitations of traditional safety often are supplemented well by the strengths of cultural safety.

THE BRIDGE TO SAFETY EXCELLENCE

So what would a model look like that utilizes safety culture to supplement and complete the traditional safety program? One possibility is the model (see Page 21) of a bridge that spans from your organization's beginning safety performance to where you ultimately would like to be (hopefully at zero accidents). The elements necessary to achieve safety excellence basically are conditional and behavioral, so the bridge surface is a layer of conditions that enables the layer of safe behaviors. Where one layer is weak the other needs to be strong to compensate.

The supports of the bridge surface are the traditional safety efforts and the cultural safety efforts. The traditional must come first and help to address the basic and required elements of safety. Where the traditional support begins to meet its limitations, the cultural support takes over and addresses the advanced and discretional elements of safety that are not required but critical to safety excellence. The braces of traditional safety are rules and enforcement. The braces of cultural safety are focus and reinforcement. Managers can enforce but the culture can more effectively reinforce on a daily basis. Enforcement creates compliance. Reinforcement creates cultural and habitual competence and uniformity of common practice. Between the two, there is little room for accidents.

If your organization is plateauing in its traditional safety efforts and considering addressing safety culture, don't diminish or compromise the traditional safety program as you begin your cultural efforts. One does not replace the other. They are both necessary and complimentary if done correctly. **EHS**