



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Tips for installing a new safety culture

### Don't trash your old culture to build a new one

**T**he safety world has devoted significant attention and conversation to the “safety culture” of organizations.

How often have you heard, “If we could just change the culture around here, safety performance would improve.” Some of the longest safety-related LinkedIn blog posts focus on creating, changing, developing, and destroying a safety culture in an organization. The literature is replete with articles on safety culture.

A substantial number of safety professionals strongly believe installing a purposeful safety culture must begin with management commitment. There is no doubt management can influence the nature of an organization’s safety culture.

Or, can it really?

Over the course of my 40-year career, I have worked for companies with a high degree of concern for safety and for others with little to no concern for safety. Each of these companies projected their own unique work culture laced with a plethora of sub-cultures, including safety, which were both visible and underground.

As a roughneck for Shell Oil in the late 1960s, I recall arriving by a “Huey” helicopter on Rig 12 in the Gulf of Mexico and first meeting the Tool Pusher (i.e., the Rig Boss) who said, “Son, don’t get hurt out here, because you will die halfway back to shore on that helicopter.” To say this left a lasting impression would be an understatement. As it turned out, Rig 12 was not only one of the most dangerous environments I have ever worked in, the experience taught me the strength of a strong safety

culture with the rig crew’s profound attention to safety and each other.

### Beyond charisma

Changing a corporate culture, much less a safety culture, takes a lot more than charismatic rhetoric from the titular head of an organization. Corporate cultures — private, public, academic, non-profit — evolve over long periods of time and rarely change in the short-term. Even after catastrophic events, a corporate safety culture will not substantively change for any number of reasons with statements like “it was a rare event that will never happen again,” “it happened to those other guys, not us,” “it was that disgruntled employee again” or “it was a mechanical failure we couldn’t predict.”

Undertaking a culture change to improve safety performance requires the systemic engagement of the entire workforce from leadership to wage roll. Senior leaders who think they can change their cultures on their own are suffering from delusions of grandeur. Leaders who insist on improved safety without involving their leadership team and

the workforce will merely create a compliant culture, while driving the noncompliant culture and behavior underground.

Why does resistance occur?

Any attempt to change the status quo will lead to resistance. People have learned to succeed politically, financially, and professionally in their current organizational state. The last thing they want is to have to learn how to succeed in an entirely new organizational state. In fact, rather sophisticated barriers will

be erected to prevent the new state from manifesting regardless of the necessity of the change, the size of the need, the origination of the request, or the efficacy of the solution.<sup>1</sup>

Attempting to change your company’s safety culture could be as difficult as changing DuPont’s safety culture into becoming an unsafe culture. Cultures persist, so rather than pursuing a course of culture change that triggers resistance, why not pursue a course that complements the existing culture. Installing new safety values into an existing culture requires viewing the culture in a systemic fashion.

### Accentuate the positives

Edgar H. Schein, renowned authority on organizational culture and behavior, advocates thinking first of your culture as a source of strength. Concentrating on the emotionally gripping aspects of your existing culture can accelerate performance.<sup>2</sup> Your organizational culture is influenced by a variety of contributing factors to include the professional and educational backgrounds of its members, the geographic location of its headquarters, its customer base, the longevity and experience of employees working together, and the attitudes conveyed by its leaders toward workers. For each of these contributing culture factors there are underlying subcultures, each with their own unique characteristics, both formal and informal.

How can you install a “new” safety culture without launching a massive overhaul of all the existing cultures and subcultures? Drawing from Katzenbach and Harshak’s Aetna Inc. anecdote, here is a systemic approach to consider.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, pay close attention to how



New cultures can be built on existing foundations.

people interact with each other. Do they collaborate well or do they tend to make independent decisions? Do they share information or do they hoard their information? Do they talk openly about failures or do they keep it to themselves? Do they learn from their mistakes or repeat their mistakes?

## Conduct safety conversations

As you process these questions, begin identifying individuals in your organization who seem to exhibit influence over others who are not in supervisory-type roles. Informally approach these nonhierarchical influencers and ask them to help you understand the various cultures and subcultures in their organizations. Over time, introduce safety into the conversation by asking such questions as: How involved are you in safety matters? Is safety the first thing you think about before performing a work task? When is getting the job done more important than safety? What is your tolerance for risk? When is it OK to not follow safety rules and procedures? Do you think safety is a way of life? What happens when you raise a safety concern with management? What do you think are our shared safety values?

Your objective in seeking answers to these types of questions is to better understand what is really going on in the safety subculture of the organization as opposed to the publicly proclaimed and politically correct safety culture. Too often the public face of an organization's safety culture masks a subculture of fear of retribution; especially in organizations where speaking out negatively on any topic can lead to retaliation.

Now that you have a somewhat clearer picture of the safety subculture, enlist your nonhierarchical influencers to help identify the values, actions and behaviors that will instill safety as being value-based versus compliance-based.

For example, let's say a safety professional at headquarters has historically provided advice via e-mail that meets the reg-

ulations; however, lacks options to implement — "It's my way or the highway." The nonhierarchical influencers identify one of their values as "the commitment to meet the operational safety needs of internal customers." Expressing this value requires the safety professional to take action by getting out from behind his or her desk and visiting the operation to seek answers to the Why, How and What questions for applying a safety regulation or procedure to the operation. By repeating this action to express this value, the action becomes a routine behavior. Eventually, the safety professional will be viewed as the "go to" person for safety advice and, in all likelihood; the safety professional will gain greater pride in their work.

In tailoring Katzenbach and Harshak's<sup>4</sup> pragmatic practices to installing a new safety culture, you should consider:

■ **Start pragmatically** — Don't try to change everything safety at once. Focus on a select few behaviors that will resonate in your current culture, such as the example above.

■ **Reinforce the new behaviors through formal and informal means** — Provide formal metrics, incentives and guidance that encourage people to practice the new behaviors over and over again until they experience their value. Support informal networks that allow those closest to a safety issue to assess it and take action to dissolve it without an overly prescriptive process from a central office.

■ **Seek out role models for the new behavior** — Recruit your most effective safety practitioners to serve as role models.

■ **Enlist your current "cultural carriers"** — Identify a group of individuals who are the "linchpins" of safety execution — whose participation is indispensable to any serious introduction of a new safety effort. These are people who are well positioned to transmit safety

behaviors to others, while spreading the positive aspects of the current culture.

■ **Use the culture you already have** — Respect and adhere to the tenets of the existing culture by making sure you understand why current safety practices exist before you try to modify them through different behaviors.

■ **Model what matters most** — No matter where you are in the organization, be visible and consistent in modeling the safety behaviors you want to see in others because everyone is watching you.

■ **Clarify the specific implications of the new behavior** — Don't leave to chance the interpretation of the new safety behaviors you want in others. Be explicit. Give people examples of how to safely behave differently. Communicate reminders of key safety behaviors.

The culture and subcultures of an organization are manifestations of the behaviors its members, at all levels, expressed day-in and day-out. Understanding the organization's values and focusing on the actions that will lead to repeated and acceptable behaviors will ultimately deliver improved safety performance and enhanced productivity.

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