



## Shaping the Safety Culture of Project-Based Workforces

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If you have a project-based workforce that only is together for a few weeks or months, you might be struggling to find the right approach to produce excellent safety performance.

Improving a safety culture is a challenge for any organization, but it is even more daunting for those with project-based workforces that only are together for a matter of weeks or months. The leaders of these temporary groups have struggled to find the right approach to produce excellent safety performance. The impetus for safety excellence is driven not only by their desire for themselves, but also by their client organizations that often demand world-class safety performance from their contractors. Poor safety not only can injure workers and lose contracts, but also can make the organization ineligible to bid for future projects.

Traditional approaches to safety have not worked as effectively on project teams as they have on permanent workforces, and common approaches to safety culture improvement take too long to impact short-term projects. Organizations have reacted to this challenge by increasing the amount of effort and adding new programs or processes. These approaches have proven to be less effective than desired. The most successful contractors and project managers have found that traditional safety and safety culture efforts have several specific underlying assumptions that keep them from working in a project-based environment. Changing these basic assumptions can result in a successful step change in safety.

The most common assumption is the idea that changing thinking is the best way to change behavior (i.e., if you get workers thinking better or more about safety, it will result in safer behaviors). Organizations try to convince the new workforce through orientation, training and supervision to be serious about safety and exercise caution. This emphasis on safety works, but rarely to the extent expected.

Successful organizations have discovered that it is easier to change behaviors first and that a change in thinking usually follows. It's a bit like teaching a child to swim. If you never get them into the water until you have thoroughly convinced them that they can swim, you may never get them into the water. The underlying truth is that it is easier to behave your culture into a change in thinking than to think it into a change in behavior.

A second assumption is that safety is knowledge of, and compliance with, a lengthy set of rules. This assumption often results in overtraining, which confuses and overwhelms temporary workers instead of making them safer. Most organizations have more safety rules and procedures than a permanent worker can learn over years of service. Expecting that mass of information to be learned and utilized in a matter of months is totally unrealistic.

Successful projects focus workers on the most common safety issues and reinforce the focus in every meeting, training session and encounter with supervision or management. They also encourage interaction among workers to further reinforce the focus. Project teams have found that focusing on the most common risks tends to get workers looking for other risks also and that massive training in risk awareness is not

necessary.

A rules-and-compliance approach also can result in an attempt to micromanage the workers during the project. In many project environments, achieving a level of supervision capable of preventing worker error is all but impossible. The attempt to over-supervise also is an admission that rules-based training is not going to be effective. The sad truth is that workers are going to have a degree of unsupervised autonomy on a project and the best approach is to prepare them for that rather than trying to prevent it.

A third assumption is that an effective safety culture can be developed during the course of a project. Culture is formed by a complex set of influences mixed with individual characteristics that were formed before the worker ever showed up for this project.

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Organizations that attempt to develop desired characteristics among this group create more frustration than success. Organizations that focus on a few key competencies and truly make them common to the project team accomplish the formation of a mini-culture that addresses the highest-impact safety issues and moves on to other issues if they have extra time and energy. Working on making the key competencies of safety cultural empowers the organization to succeed more quickly. Project work happens quickly and a temporary group of workers can only create a few cultural norms before the project is completed. It is critical that they form the most important ones first and then move down the priority list if time permits.

Some organizations have found creative ways to utilize their best workers on multiple projects. This can be accomplished by timing projects back-to-back, finding interim work between projects or simply giving the best workers priority for future projects. Some unions allow workers with specific experience to move to their halls when their expertise matches a nearby project.

Workers who have worked for the same organization on similar projects bring a more advanced expertise and knowledge to the job. These more experienced workers often are used as mentors to short-term workers on the next project. Utilization of the same workers is not always possible, but when it is, it helps reduce the problems associated with project-based work.

Perhaps the biggest mistake made with project-based workforces is to ignore their differences and treat them just like any other workforce. Nothing about a project team should be worked out over time. Every issue is critical and every goal must be accomplished quickly in order to address the challenges.

Onboarding cannot be minimal, and new-employee orientation must be significantly more robust than it is in permanent workforces. Mentoring must be concentrated during the first days of work, and short-term employees easily must be identified to prevent supervisors from unknowingly assigning them complex tasks.

Trying to take a project-based workforce and create an excellent safety culture with deep knowledge of complex rules and procedures is like trying to make a Saturday morning sandlot football team into a Super Bowl contender. Realizing the scope of the project and realistically addressing the most important aspects of safety and culture are the keys to success.

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