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Explore your own safety culture to improve it

Just like every city has its own culture, every organization already has a safety culture. How well do you know what is unique about yours?

I travel a lot for work. When possible, my wife joins me and we purposefully take time to walk around the places we visit to experience what the city has to offer. Recently,

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we have explored Boston, Massachusetts; San Antonio, Texas; San Diego and San Francisco, California; San José, Costa Rica; and New Orleans, Louisiana. All cities offer distinctive experiences. We live in Houston. Around this city, there are cultural differences in the many suburbs and you will hear residents talk of the different driving behaviors found on the highways across the region.

Every organization has a unique occupational culture including the hidden rules of how things get done and what is truly important. Good or bad, safety is a part of that. Culture is what is common among a group: common beliefs, behaviors, experiences and stories. All of these have a safety component. Perhaps within your company, stopping a job for safety concerns is perceived as a good idea, whereas in the past it was not. What are the stories of today? Are they reinforcing the desired or undesired beliefs? What is common among your groups and what is unique, department by department or shift by shift?

Several years ago, I was hired by a company in Georgia to validate what the plant manager thought were opportunities to continuously improve their safety culture and provide feedback on how the employees perceived an approach he was taking. While we found some hidden opportunities, I was impressed by how well the top leader knew his culture, what experiences were shaping the storytelling, and what was accurate and

not. How was he so in touch? He called it a "safety blitz."

Every Thursday, Mike, the plant manager, would take a new combination of department managers, supervisors and employees and walk the plant, spending two hours engaging them in conversation. He would learn their names and who or what was important to them. He would also inquire of this team what safety challenges they faced or improvement ideas they had. They took notes and followed up. Mike was relationship-building inside, getting to know his culture and shaping it during the walkabout.

As part of the project, I spoke with 20 percent of the 500-person population in individual and focus-group sessions. Every employee I spoke with firmly believed Mike knew them by name, and that meant something to them. The top boss knew who they were and what was important to them and demonstrated he cared. When I provided this feedback to Mike, he slowly dropped his head and a look of shame filled his face. He admitted that this wasn't true and said he didn't, in fact, know everyone by name. He

later worked with HR and had a screensaver created with all the employees' pictures and accompanying names. He also required his department managers to do the same with their specific employees and challenged them to memorize names with pictures within 90 days.

With the right questions and compassion, answers on how to continuously improve safety culture are often found within. Know your people, and you will know their challenges. When they realize you know them, they are more likely to be involved in helping you solve the issues. How in touch with your safety culture are you?

Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and co-author of several best-selling books. As a consultant, adviser and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry to improve safety strategy, culture, leadership and engagement. He is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®.

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