



## Strategy and culture, not either-or

**E**mployee behaviors are a byproduct of leadership behaviors. Zero injuries is the derivative of the value of safety excellence. A culture of excellence is the result of purposeful intent, which is driven by a comprehensive strategy. What is your focus — results, culture, strategy?

1986 was a defining year in the evolution of safety advancements. The Space Shuttle Challenger broke apart just over a minute into its Jan. 28 flight, resulting in the death of the seven crew members. Almost three months later, a catastrophic nuclear accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine killed 31 individuals and exposed many others. With these two events, safety culture became a contributing factor of incident investigations, a new phrase among safety professionals and a concern for board members of many major corporations.

Theoretically, there is no such thing as a safety culture. Safety is a part of company culture. We use this phrase to bring attention to that which makes safety either a priority or core value, not a situational value, within the occupational culture.

Culture is what is common — e.g., beliefs, behaviors — within a group of people. Management expert Peter Drucker reminded us our systems are set up just right to create the results we are currently experiencing. Like sales figures and market capitalization, your culture is a byproduct of your existing strategy.

Since 1986, academic and business methodologies have been created to prompt and facilitate change and deal with the common byproduct: resistance. More recently, there has been a debate about culture and whether its members do or do not resist change. Experts in this field discover an important nuance. People, individually and collectively, do not actually resist change. They change all the time when they want to, when they see the value in it and when the pain of not changing is greater than the pain of changing. It is not necessarily the change people resist; it's the force of *being* changed, which is why forced change is almost always temporary. Understanding this, one realizes culture is the most effective reinforcement mechanism. Drucker

also humorously reminded us, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

Throughout the current decade, there has been a new focus within corporations to leverage business strategy principles to improve both safety performance and culture. Michael Porter, university professor at The Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness at the Harvard Business School, when writing on strategy, proclaimed, "It requires you to make tradeoffs — to choose what not to do. It involves creating 'fit' among a company's activities." Our clients are taught strategy is a framework of choices, tradeoffs or bets the organization makes to determine how to capture and deliver sustainable value over time. Strategy, therefore, is: How do we win? Is your culture focused on winning or on failing less? The two are not the same.

Considering fit among company activities and sustainable value, what is your strategy to focus on the safety aspects of your company culture, ensuring you are adding value that, with minimal resistance, translates into new common behavior directly contributing to an improve-

ment in safety performance? It is not a zero sum game. There must be a focus on how culture benefits from strategic thinking and how strategy becomes a cultural practice. Culture will be why strategy succeeds and fails, and the culture you have today is due to yesterday's strategy. It is not strategy or culture. They are integral to each other. If you want to improve performance, what is your strategy? If you want a new strategy, will your culture support it?

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