Leading Indicators and Influencers

Sir Winston Churchill observed, "First we shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us." Like dwellings, an organizational culture is either a powerful tool or a hindrance to shaping progress. Cultures influence the beliefs and behaviors of new members and should be managed for breakthrough performance in any operating category. Is your organization shaping the role culture plays in success, or are your dwellings determining this for you?

Cultures can be understood, measured, and managed. The model below (see Figure 1) has provided guidance for many complex organizations and has facilitated the transformation necessary for the acquisition of new performance. Many have written about the obvious role the beliefs and behaviors play in culture. The purpose of this article, however, is to provide some initial direction on how to shape culture.
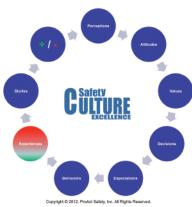

Figure 1. Safety Culture Excellence® Evolution Model

Perceptions Create Attitudes and Influence Decisions

When individuals join your organization, they have existing perceptions, such as "I believe it is a good idea to stop the job for a safety concern." Your existing culture has perceptions, as well, that often become culturally norming beliefs.

When someone holds a positive belief toward something, often what manifests is a positive attitude. The opposite is also true. If an employee believes leadership doesn't support safety improvement efforts due to a belief that production takes priority, it is likely that a negative attitude toward safety initiatives will be displayed. If an employee perceives leadership will not support decisions to join safety efforts or stop the job for an identified safety concern and his peers feel similarly, it is doubtful that when the opportunity presents itself, he will take action. If, however, an employee feels near-miss data is used effectively and reporting such information is "the way we do things around here," he will be strongly influenced to make the decision to report when an injury-free event occurs. What an individual or group of individuals perceives will play a large role in nudging decisions.

Decisions Create Expectations of Behavior

"All disappointment is based on a set level of expectations." It is important to remember this old adage. When an employee decides to intervene for a safety concern, report a near miss, or volunteer

for a safety initiative, he establishes a degree of probability of what will occur following this behavior. Decisions are made with the anticipated consequences that will follow the behavior in mind. Unless the individuals are gluttons for punishment, normal, rational humans do not make decisions knowing they will result in undesirable consequences. If decisions to help a new employee, conduct a job observation, or suggest an innovative new solution are believed to be supported and recognized by a supervisor, the desirable behaviors are likely.

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Behaviors Result in Experiences that Produce Stories

When someone takes action and behaves in a certain way resulting in a negative experience, stories are told to others throughout the organization that either confirm (+) or conflict (-) with the existing individual or shared perceptions. Moreover, negative experiences are known to be spread more virally than positive experiences. The worse the experience, the more people will know about it. Stories are the tribal characteristics of an organizational culture. Whether formal or informal, they are the most effective influence on decisions and behaviors.

Measuring and Managing

Through a proprietary mapping process, perceptions, decisions, behaviors, and stories have all been measured in many organizations. Remember, an imprecise measurement of the right things can often be of more value than a precise measurement of the wrong things. Leading indicators of culture change can be developed by beginning with answering the following questions, which can be determined through conversations, post event, or during an observation of work practice.

What are the current perceptions? What perceptions would be desirable? What decisions are people currently making? What experiences are shaping the current perceptions, decisions, behaviors, and stories in your organization? What behaviors would be desirable, and what is their necessary vs. actual frequency of occurrence? What behaviors do people need to display (situationally or by level) to create the experiences that shape the stories and perceptions? What are the current stories? (Rate them on a scale of negative to positive.) Who has the loudest voice — the individuals shaping the organization with stories of positive experiences or the naysayers working hard to maintain the perception of status quo?

High-performance organizations realize culture change is becoming the core responsibility of transformational senior leaders. If influenced appropriately, the organization's culture will be the best tool the executive has available. **OHS**

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