Stop Trying to Create a Safety Culture

You already have one, but is it as effective as it could be?

Safety culture has become the new catch phrase, program focus, and desire of global executives, verbalized in the often expressed, "We need a safety culture!" Safety culture is not new. Stop trying to create it.

Safety practices, risk perceptions, and mitigation techniques have been and always will be a part of human conversation, probably more so among those who are more successful in navigating life's risks and able to pass this knowledge to their offspring and descendants. Safety is a part of every culture. Everyone to some degree has, or is influenced by, multiple safety cultures.

Organizational safety goals should not be focused on the creation of safety culture, rather on improvement to the existing and ranging cultural foci that already exist in the many influencing groups to which your employees are exposed. Rather than questioning, "Do we have a safety culture?" ask, "Are we managing our safety culture or being managed by it?"

According to cultural anthropology and now common knowledge, safety has played an integral role in group norms since the beginning of documented mankind. As we developed into societies, what to do and what not do contributed to the longevity of life and was passed from one generation to another.

Every organization has a safety culture. Moreover, every culture has a safety focus. Similar to the English joke, "You can't have your cake and eat it, too," we all want a safety culture of excellence, and we all want it aligned on the most important areas of focus. Therein lies the challenge.

Misunderstanding the existence of safety cultures contributes to the desire for "wanting one." Moreover, this often results in the program of the month, flash-in-the-pan, or management fad. Cultures are the ultimate sustainability mechanism. Programs and processes all work because of, or in spite of, the culture.

Cultures are not a program; they are the interconnectedness that explains why efforts work, don't work, succeed, and fail. Safety cultures need to be considered, leveraged, and managed just as importantly as contractors, projects, and key performance indicators. Organizations are either managing the safety element of the culture or are being managed by it. Stop searching to create a safety culture. You already have one, but is it as effective as it could be?

Your culture is one of the primary contributing factors to why

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initiatives fail or succeed and why you are able to achieve basic compliance or are still struggling to create obedience with rules, policies, and procedures. Your culture is your most effective sustainability mechanism, working hard to maintain status quo and, if leveraged properly, the most effective tool available to a leader.

How to Begin Cultural Evolution

Ten questions to consider:

1. What is the necessary focus for evolving or enhancing our existing safety culture?

2. Aside from perception surveys, what data determined the necessary cultural focus?

3. What percent of the population can recite from memory this desired focus?

4. What is the current focus within our safety culture?

5. How wide is the gap between the desired and existing cultural focus?

6. Once alignment is established, how would this benefit the cultural beliefs and behaviors?

7. What is the individual (not organizational) value-add to the employee to obtain the cultural focus?

8. How will achieving a culture of safety excellence benefit the employee off the job?

9. Who are the individuals at each level that can help carry the message forward?

10. How will you measure progress, rather than activities and results?

Consider prompting group conversations with these 10 questions. Research and experience has provided extensive validation that beginning cultural evolution starts with questioning the strategy and status quo. Leaders at all levels must move from the desire to create a safety culture to the realization that one already exists. Then, focus on how to strengthen the cultural beliefs, decisions, behaviors, and stories that influence the individual decisions carried out when no one is watching — the most important part of cultural reality, safety or otherwise. **OH&S**

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