

## The Power of Tribes & the Case for SAFETY STRATEGY

by Shawn M. Galloway

**When values are shared, little supervision is needed. How would you describe your culture? Does it feel like being part of a tribe, where members are constantly looking out for each other and successfully imparting to new individuals the written and unwritten rules that govern behavior?**

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**Is little supervision needed** to accomplish the stated objective? Every company, over time, develops a culture. Common beliefs, behaviors, decisions, experiences and stories specific to the reality of the role safety plays in getting the job done are all part of this culture. We call this a safety culture. In *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger (2016) says, "We have a strong instinct to belong to small groups defined by clear purpose and understanding." These are tribes. Do you have a tribal safety culture?

### Tribal Safety Culture

Morris (2017) writes:

Tribal instincts affect the workplace in a multitude of ways. First, safety culture is born and cultivated by the individual tribal groups within the workplace. "Culture" of any sort is just the agreed-upon values held by the tribe as a whole; it's a very powerful thing, as most members of a tribe will feel pressured to uphold and embody the group's cultural values. But unless you have a very small workplace where everyone from the night guard to the president of the company belongs to the same social group, you will inevitably have varying safety cultures within the workforce. It is very important for safety management to understand that their tribal safety culture (very pro-safety) may not necessarily be the same as the safety culture in other workforce tribal groups.

Consider this: How many frontline supervisors are in your company? This answer reveals the potential for as many subcultures that may exist in the overall occupational culture. How well aligned are the subcultures? Do you have one safety culture tribe or many?

### Hire for Tribe

Armory, founded in 2016 and based in San Mateo, CA, is a leader in enterprise-scale continuous software delivery. Getting the right people with the right beliefs and capabilities who buy into the newly forming culture is a challenge for any start-up. Ben Mappen, the company's cofounder and chief product officer, took the challenge of developing the company's culture head-on. He wanted to build a tribe. A company blog post shares Mappen's thoughts on how the founders approached the creation of the company culture (Percival, 2019):

A strong culture is important because it fosters trust. If you have a high level of trust with your coworkers, the breadth and depth

of communication required to get things done sharply decreases. "I think we should do X" is typically followed by "Sounds good; I trust you to do the right thing."

A company without a strong culture (or trust) must implement strict rules and processes to get *anything* done. "Before you can ship X out the door, it needs to be signed off on by Johnny, Theodore, and Jessica, then you have to follow these 10 steps . . . etc." If you have a strong culture, you don't need as many rules. Think about your relationships with your spouse, your parents, your siblings and other family members. You know "in your bones" how things work and what each person's expectations are.

The blog post shares further thoughts from Mappen on the culture (Percival, 2019):

While politics shouldn't have a place within a start-up, tribalism should run rampant. Tribe members live in close quarters, support one another, hold each other accountable and respect status based on value add rather than name or title. This tribalism breeds incredible loyalty, shared purpose and an egalitarian ethos. When people belong to a tribe, their lives have more meaning and, when that tribe is a start-up, they move mountains for the company.

The effort is paying off. A senior account executive from Armory wrote a company review (2019) that reflected this culture:

Ensure that we hold true to our core beliefs and hire future Tribals that live and breathe our dedication to them. We may have to pass on some highly qualified and successful candidates that just don't fit our Tribal Culture. Other than that, let's continue to rock it!

Are your employees moving mountains to further your company's success while protecting your safety culture from competing priorities or demands (e.g., production, customer demand, quality)? What about competing perspectives of influential people who are newly hired?

### Guard the Front Door

As a culture matures and is successfully onboarding new members, guarding the front door becomes a new strategic priority. Companies with cultures of safety excellence should hire people to support and further the culture. As the author has written:

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE BRIDGE TO EXCELLENCE MODEL**



**Note.** Reprinted from *Bridge to Excellence: Building Capacity for Sustainable Performance*, by S.M. Galloway, 2023, SCE Press. Copyright 2023 Shawn M. Galloway. Reprinted with permission.

Hiring with safety excellence in mind, especially for key or leadership positions, must become a common practice. What must people know about safety? What must they believe? What must they be able to do? What experiences of theirs would tell you they are a great fit for your safety culture and would help it advance? These should all be key considerations. If a new hire is well liked and becomes influential, but has a negative attitude, undesirable beliefs and behaviors, could they compromise what you have worked hard to create? Yes, of course. Work to identify this during the interview process rather than being surprised during onboarding or orientation. (Galloway, 2016)

How well are you hiring for cultural or tribal fit?

### Rely on Culture?

What do you do if your tribe is not present or big enough to influence? Hiring for safety culture is a strategic priority and last frontier of safety excellence for many mature organizations. Relying on the tribe to normalize new members is an even better tool for safety excellence. But we cannot rely on culture alone in today's complex world where change seems to be the only constant. Rules, policies, processes, procedures, and systems are also important in the pursuit of both compliance and excellence in occupational and process safety.

A previously unidentified concern became apparent to executives during a workshop with senior leadership at a Canadian oil and gas producer. Leveraging the Bridge to Excellence model (Galloway, 2023; Figure 1), a discussion was facilitated to gain insights on where leaders believed they were on the construction of the bridge, whether they had all components in place and where focus should be concentrated.

One of the areas of agreement was the need to better define both the required and desired expectations with employees, especially with contractors, as much of their work on company locations is not self-performed. When contractors (who also work for other oil and gas companies that are not as dedicated to safety excellence) arrive on location, these expectations must be explicit and constantly reinforced with the right experiences and stories. Now realizing this glaringly obvious gap in their safety strategy, one executive quipped, "We have been relying on our culture." Considering that members of their tribe are not always with the contractors, this was quickly identified as a horrible approach to shaping desired performance. Relying on culture is indeed critical to shape new members of the tribe until the tribe gets overtaken.

While beginning an engagement with a large chemical plant in the U.S. to develop an effective long-term safety excellence strategy, the project began with an assessment

of the company's management systems, culture and existing strategy. Previously, the site had celebrated many successful years in safety as measured by traditional lagging indicators until the new plant was built on the complex. Once this new plant was operational, the population more than doubled in size. Many problems arose, with losing ground on safety performance among them. In providing feedback on our findings on what was leading to the current culture and results, and pausing before offering recommended areas of strategic importance, the plant manager nodded and offered, "That makes perfect sense. It seems we outgrew our tribe."

### Strategically Focused

Leadership was surprised by the results of the workshop. When a leadership team is surprised by significant results, it is an indicator that they do not have an effective safety strategy that could have anticipated this. Strategy is a framework of trade-offs and small bets that an organization makes to determine how to capture and deliver sustainable value. Strategy is about value creation. Where, if you focused your efforts, would it create the most value and perception of value? When assessing data, if it is identified that 30% of injuries occur to individuals less than 1 year on the job, what will you do with this information? If you know the population will more than double in size 3 years from now, preventing the negative effects of the tribe being overrun must become a strategic priority. While culture does eat strategy for breakfast, the business strategy will eat the safety strategy all day long. How integrated is your safety strategy into the overall business strategy, including the short- and long-term growth trajectory? How well does your safety strategy consider the current versus needed culture and its effect on others?

### Cultures Form & Norm

What experiences and stories shape the beliefs and behaviors of new or temporary employees and

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contractors? Unless the tribe is overtaken, groups tend to normalize others to not only “the way we do things around here,” but also why. Sometimes, the why is based on accurate stories or experiences; sometimes it is not. When individuals join your organization, they have existing perceptions (e.g., “I believe it is a good idea to stop the job for a safety concern”). Your existing culture has perceptions as well, which often become culturally norming beliefs. When someone holds a positive belief toward something, a positive attitude often manifests. The opposite is also true. If an employee thinks that leadership does not support safety improvement efforts due to a belief that production takes priority, then it is likely that they will display a negative attitude toward safety initiatives.

If an employee perceives that leadership will not support decisions to join safety efforts or stop the job for an identified safety concern and the employee’s peers feel similarly, then it is doubtful that the employee will take action when the opportunity presents itself. If, however, an employee feels that near-miss data is used effectively and that reporting such information is “the way we do things around here,” they will be strongly influenced 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

It is important to remember the adage that all disappointment is based on a set level of expectations. When an employee decides to intervene for a safety concern, report a near miss or volunteer for a safety initiative, the person establishes a degree of probability of what will occur following this behavior. Decisions are made with the anticipated consequences in mind. Unless individuals are gluttons for punishment, typical, rational humans do not make decisions knowing that 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, then the desirable behaviors are likely.

### Behaviors Result in Experiences That Produce Stories

As the author has written:

When someone takes action and behaves in a certain way that results in a negative experience, stories are told to others throughout the organization that either confirm (+) or conflict (-) with the existing individual or shared perceptions. Negative experiences are known to 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. (Galloway, 2012)

How accurate are the stories being told throughout your tribe and to new members? Who has the

loudest voice? If you do not control the narrative, one will be created that is perhaps not the one you want. Whoever has the loudest voice is often shaping your tribal safety culture. Control the narrative, or you will be controlled by it. Control your strategy to shape performance and culture, or you will be surprised by undesirable results. How well is your tribe shaping new members? What is the efficacy of your safety strategy? Are you able to proactively detect early and respond, or are you routinely reacting to results?

Cultures are powerful tools. In fact, they are a leader’s most effective sustainability mechanism. However, there must be a strategy in place to support and prepare for company growth or reduction. Do not rely on your tribe alone. Never forget that your strategy will work because of your culture, not despite it. Work to ensure that the tribe supports the strategy and that the strategy protects and advances the tribe.

### Hand in Hand

The power of tribes and the case for a safety strategy go hand in hand. Culture is a crucial element in shaping behavior and beliefs, but it must be supported by a well-defined strategy that aligns with the overall business objectives. Hiring for cultural fit, guarding the front door and proactively shaping the narrative are all important considerations for fostering a strong safety culture as well as the overall occupational culture. By integrating safety into the broader strategy and actively managing the culture, organizations can achieve and sustain safety excellence and create a tribe to be proud of. **PSJ**

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