

Assessing Your Safety Culture

in Seven Simple Steps

The American inventor W. Daniel Hillis said,
“There are two ways to build complex things:
engineering and evolution.”

BY SHAWN M. GALLOWAY

Cultures are one of those complex elements that result from a combination of both intentional design and unintentional consequence of cause and effect. Moreover, each culture is unique and often is made up of subcultures of level, trade, tenure, ethnicity and even university alumni.

For years I have been approached by individuals who say, “We need to create a safety culture because we don’t have one around here.” Often these individuals do not realize that they likely already have a safety culture at their workplace, just not the one they prefer. To transform an organization into one capable of sustaining excellent performance in safety, quality and other operational areas, it is ideal to begin by assessing the current climate and culture. After all, it often is said, “A culture is why we do what we do.”

Cultures most commonly are defined as common practices, shared attitudes and perceptions that influence behavioral choices at work and away. Experience has taught us that several things influence a culture, such as location, leadership, supervisory styles, peer pressure, workplace conditions and logistics, to name a few.

Through a coordinated assessment process, a safety culture can be measured, and thus improved. After gaining a better understanding of the assessment’s significant findings, the critical few findings that have the potential for the greatest transformational impact on improving the site’s safety culture are identified, prioritized and addressed. This article provides a foundation to guide the reader through an internal assessment of their site or company culture. These seven vital steps have been followed hundreds of times throughout the world with great success.

STEP 1 – REVIEW DOCUMENTATION, PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Familiarize yourself with documentation on current and past programs, initiatives and previous audits. Further insight can be provided by understanding the work order process, effectiveness of communication channels, safety committee(s), incident investigation process, incentives and rewards and recognition programs.



Consider performing a Pareto Analysis of the past 3-5 years' incident reports. Look for the vital precautions that represent personal prevention opportunities as a way to ground the data collected during the assessment. In addition, consider identifying trends within commonly collected variables that result from incident reports. An understanding of the safety roles, responsibilities and expectations of those in leadership positions provides insight into the support behaviors and safety leadership onboarding norms within the organi-

zation. This information is critical to provide an understanding of the cultural foundation and helps you identify where to focus discussions and identify transformational opportunities.

STEP 2 – COMMUNICATE PRIOR TO EMPLOYEE INTERACTION

This is your first opportunity to set a positive path for the culture assessment. While to some it might not be perceived as valuable, sites that skipped

this step reported uncomfortable first experiences and guarded responses.

Inform all within the organization of the activities of the assessment. Pay special attention to ensure all that the discussions will be anonymous and you only will be interviewed with your peers to allow for open and honest discussions. This principle is critical to the process.

The employees will need to understand that the purpose of the assessment is not to find fault, but to identify the opportunities to further proactively improve. Several site leaders have closed with the following statement: "I sincerely thank you in advance. Your feedback on the strengths of and opportunities to improve our safety culture is the only way we can ensure we are going in the right direction with our safety improvement efforts." Consider closing this step by validating communication occurred, rather than simply assuming.

STEP 3 – CONDUCT A LOCATION WALK

As early as possible in the visit, a site tour should be arranged. The tour should include the major (if not all) areas of the site where work is in progress. The goal of the tour is to give the assessor an overview of logistics, tasks and basic safety issues involved in site processes. If the assessor is familiar with the location, this tour can help provide an understanding of group and individual behaviors and how they differ when individuals are working in teams or alone.

STEP 4 – LEADERSHIP DISCUSSION

A half-hour briefing can be scheduled for management and key personnel, if needed and feasible, to build awareness. This is the opportunity to thank the leaders in advance for their support and to ensure they are comfortable with the initiative. The goal is to discover the facts about the culture and identify transformational approaches to excellence. While they should be aware that this is a high priority, the activities should not negatively affect operational activities. Moreover, it is critical that they understand the assessment is not a fault-finding process.

In organizations with represented



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work forces, it is critical to include the elected bargaining unit leadership in the safety improvement discussions/interviews. Unions typically consider safety one of their highest priorities and will help ensure the success of accident-prevention efforts as long as they have the opportunity to ensure these efforts do not run counter to other objectives. This initial and continuous involvement is an absolute critical success factor.

STEP 5 – UTILIZE A CUSTOMIZED SAFETY PERCEPTION SURVEY

While there are several off-the-shelf perception surveys available to organizations, this author strongly encourages organizations to develop their own. Generic perception surveys do not always measure the intended perceptions. They gather information on general categories and often miss out on specifics.

STEP 6 – CONDUCT GROUP & INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Measuring a culture involves a complex metric of perceptions, workplace realities, past incident history and interconnectivity of the people. Perceptions are only a component of the answer, not the answer itself. Current focus, definition of safety, communication effectiveness, knowledge support, past history of successes and failures, support for change and likes and dislikes are among the topics of discussion.

One-on-one interviews with key individuals can be used for obtaining a deeper understanding of the information collected from the customized safety perception survey. Focus groups can be comprised of a representative sample of all levels, shifts and major tasks within the organization. For smaller locations, the assessor is encouraged to speak with the entire population. Focus groups participate in highly interactive group interview sessions. They typically involve groups of

no more than 10 people and are led by a trained facilitator. Focus groups generally encourage interaction among participants. A well-led focus group tends to yield extremely rich insight.

Ensure the group discussion occurs by-level to protect anonymity. Standard safety culture interview questions should be used, but it is common for an interview to deviate from the prepared questions to explore responses in greater depth.

STEP 7 – PROVIDE A REPORT FOCUSING ON INTERNALLY ACTIONABLE ITEMS

Most safety culture assessments are performed with the objective to determine the nature, direction, perceptions and capabilities of the site or company personnel as they work together to prevent accidents. Additionally, the assessment should investigate organizational readiness for both rapid and sustainable safety improvement, and

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aim to discover factors that may facilitate or inhibit such improvement.

The author encourages the assessor to conduct an exit meeting with key personnel on the last day of the assessment to discuss preliminary findings (i.e., the general findings, factors that would support improvement, factors that could challenge efforts and initial internally actionable recommendations). Additionally, this session should address how the current organizational, operational issues impact safety success at the location. If the site has bargaining unit representation, the site is encouraged (depending on relationship and openness) to involve the union leadership in the closing discussions.

It is recommended that the final report focus on identifying internally actionable transformational findings and be delivered within a relatively short time frame following the completion of the on-site assessment activities, so as not to lose momentum.

THE REPORT IS DELIVERED, WHAT NEXT?

Assessing the safety culture often provides valuable, actionable insight. Consider integrating the steps mentioned in this article into your annual review of effectiveness. The tactics to develop an understanding from the many levels of an organization are usable in more than a structured assessment. Involving people in change has proven to be more effective than briefing them on resulting impact. Developing a culture, like communication and effective leadership, is gained through a continued journey, not an event.

I would like to offer a simple principle about cultures that has proven to be helpful to organizations that have achieved excellence in multiple operational categories. Your organizational culture is by far your most effective safety sustainability mechanism. Moreover, the cultural elements previously discussed have a far-reaching impact into the personal lives of those within it.

Developing a culture that focuses on achieving safety excellence offers principles to individuals that assist them in their personal quests to remain injury-free throughout life. Most importantly, it has a positive impact on the things most people care about more than anything in this world: their family and their family's safety. With this in mind, what could be a more noble cause than developing a culture of safety excellence? **EHS**

Editor's Note: Part Two of this series will discuss the strategies to take a safety culture assessment report and internally establish a culture of safety excellence.

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