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# Misunderstanding the Role of Safety Culture Assessments

By Shawn M. Galloway | Mar 01, 2014

It is no wonder there is such a desire to improve the safety aspects of culture, but how to go about it is what appears to confuse many. After all, you are both managing and evolving your culture or being managed by it.

Safety culture assessments have grown in popularity with the increasing focus on safety culture, but are they identifying the right thing? Is the goal to seek out new ideas, create a three- to five-year strategy, compare to others in your industry, or identify gaps and improvement opportunities? Assessments that only identify "gaps" in culture, without first creating an aligned executive vision of what cultural excellence looks like within the company, compel organizations to allocate time and resources to close all possible gaps. Which gaps to close first? What ideas and improvement opportunities would provide the most value and allow you to strategically move forward, and which ones would take you in the wrong direction?

Safety is maturing, and more organizations than ever before are on the journey to Safety Culture Excellence<sup>SM</sup>. What many companies are doing today, both in safety management systems and around culture, is a leap compared to 10 years ago. Some are propelled forward as a response to tragedy, a defining moment in the company that provides the necessary nudging. Others, triggered by a sense of altruism and recognition of the potential for similar events, take steps more proactively.

Everyone makes mistakes in attempts to improve and advance safety, and we all realize it is better and less painful to learn from others than make our own. Searching for excellence is not exclusively about minimizing and preventing mistakes and the achievement of zero injuries. Additionally, assessing yourself with the goal to be more like another location or company is an exercise in futility.

Every individual has unique characteristics and capabilities. Further, every organization has a unique culture and, if you will, an existing safety culture. Trying to make one like another can be quite demotivating. Yet even with best intentions, this is what often occurs when we search for a better way to improve safety through perception surveys and culture assessments. Survey and assessments results that predominantly highlight how you compare to others often send the organization on a path to doing what others are doing, rather than doing what uniquely and strategically needs to be done.

### Aligning Safety Culture with Business Strategy

Safety culture is a term often used, providing context to discussing the norms, taboos, ideology, values and behaviors around safety. When referring to safety culture, we must not forget to consider the complete aspects of company culture, not just in regard to safety. When safety culture assessments focus primarily on the safety aspect of the culture and ignore the parental business culture, opportunities and potential ambushes are missed. Assessments of culture should focus primarily on the business culture and the aspects of safety and, like other important business endeavors, should be treated as a business exercise.

Few businesses choose their markets or products without a clear hypothesis (prediction



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and visioning of the future state based on observations) resulting in the utilization of business models (e.g., partners, activities, resources, value proposition, customers, channels, costs, and return) to complete their strategy. Those most successful in safety have a clear strategy and use assessments and surveys to validate their hypothesis, not solely to determine actions and priorities that could be addressed.

Statements such as "We need a safety culture," "Our culture could be better," or "We need to improve the culture" do not point out the immediate need for assessments. Rather, the statements and the performance data that confirm them indicate the strategy is either not as effective as it could be or is altogether absent.

Culture assessments are most effective as a data-collection exercise to validate the hypothesized future picture of the business strategy and how the culture and safety aspects will support them. Safety culture must be aligned with and contribute to the business strategy, which includes plans for the future. When it is not, it will be evident in the easier measurable aspects of culture (e.g., beliefs, behaviors, knowledge, stories), which is why it is logical to want to start there.

Unfortunately, assessments used to seek improvement opportunities without identifying first what you are trying to accomplish in the business, and what the culture and performance would look like when you arrive, will certainly send you in a direction in safety (if any direction will do). The most successful organizations use culture assessments to validate the vision of and proposed plans for achieving operational excellence, and then prioritize what needs to be leveraged or addressed that both help and hinder the strategic agenda. Effective culture assessments shouldn't prompt strategy; they should validate it and, most importantly, improve the success of execution.

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**About the Author**

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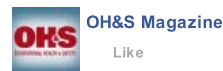



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