



**Prepare Now for the Next Recession:  
*The Role of Safety Culture***  
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***What works to establish and sustain a safety culture in good times will not work in a difficult period.***

*"Right now I'd rather be injured on the job, than have no job at all."*  
-- Anonymous

A global recession has no prejudices. It does not discriminate based on national origin, race, religion, gender, or marital status. A global recession is an equal opportunity offender. I would hypothesize that, if not affected yourself, you personally know someone who has been negatively impacted by the recent widespread financial decline.

What you might not realize is the ill-fated effect a market downturn can have on both occupational and personal safety. Should safety performance decline during this period, businesses will further struggle to remain competitive and individuals to remain employed. The impact of injuries escalates.

During a time of economic normalcy, establishing safety values within a culture is an invariable, universal difficulty. It is analogous to maintaining your head above water in a calm pond. It takes a constant, unrelenting effort that can never cease, for a homogeneous level of energy accomplishes the objective. However, should the environment alter, such as finding oneself in a turbulent ocean, a similar intensity of vigor will not suffice. This is the challenge one faces when the economy changes.

What works to establish and sustain a safety culture in good times will not work in a difficult period. To learn from this recent recession, we must appreciate the influential power of a safety culture. The purpose of this article is not to convince you of the positive attribute of developing a safety culture. Rather, it is to help you understand you already have one; it just might not be the type you desire.

### **Understanding the Problem: A Fear-Focused Safety Culture**

Several have argued that, perplexingly, the recession was itself driven by fear of a recession. Whether valid or not, fear becomes a debilitating state of being, harmfully impacting previously-held cultural norms, such as the aforementioned safety values. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world." Recessions have been known to drive people into a state of fear, perpetuated by the belief that they will be negatively affected: that they will lose their job and financial stability. This fear has proven to become an exceptional motivator that unconstructively influences individuals to expose themselves to risks, which they might have otherwise avoided.

Many companies have recently reported an increase in observed risks, incidents, and insurance costs. Frankly, we should have seen this coming. This should not be a surprise. Pressure to produce is a universal persuader on workforces, regardless of market conditions, industry, or source. This pressure is not just external; it is occasionally internal.

During a recently performed assessment of an organization's safety culture and climate, an hourly employee expressed to me privately, "Right now I'd rather be injured on the job, than have no job at all." This is a sad reality of many workers striving to provide for their families.



## **Hiring for Safety: Risk-Takers Need Not Apply**

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### **Recognizing the Solution: An Excellence-Focused Safety Culture**

Organizations that have maintained a vigilant effort investing in achieving and sustaining safety excellence have, with little surprise, continued to thrive. During a recent multi-industry executive meeting, a senior officer quipped, "Certainly, we try to plan for the future, but we realize that change is the only thing constant. We encourage all our leaders, formal and informal, to be prepared for the unanticipated. This is what we believe is our differentiation in our industry."

Regardless of industry, sites that recognize that change is constant continue to outperform others. Moreover, they continue to achieve new levels of accomplishments, while others are fortunate to maintain a performance flat-line. Such companies become conscious to the fact that their safety culture is their most effective sustainability mechanism. Once safety values have been truly integrated into, and reinforced with, the fabrics of their organizational activities, it takes more than market changes to modify the enviable universally-held beliefs.

Throughout most of the developed world, businesses have evolved from measuring employees on balance sheets as costs, to assets. Consider protecting these greatest investments by internally examining the current state of your safety culture. Is it the most desirable one that can be leveraged in the face of future recessions? This is not a pessimistic future outlook; it is a reality we must protect against.

A business truism is that, every year, organizations will rise and fall. To workers, the cultural improvement steps you continue to take will be among the most important ones they will remember, as, unlike other business objectives, it affects them personally. To most people, their family's safety is among their highest priorities. Creating a culture focused on safety excellence not only helps them and their family during good times, but fearful ones as well.