



Safety culture: A term quickly losing meaning

When you hear the term *safety culture*, what comes to mind? Some ambiguous, fluffy thing that you can't get your arms around? A buzzword with little meaning throughout your organization? Or is it a key focal point of your safety and business improvement or growth strategy?

The term *safety culture* came into exist-

ence primarily due to two events in 1986: the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger and the Chernobyl disaster. Three decades later, there is still mass confusion and even consternation when the term is used within companies with good intentions about improving safety. A quote attributed to Simon Fulleringer, "When everything

is a priority, nothing is a priority," is representative of what appears to be happening with the term safety culture. When everything is considered a *safety culture*, the term loses its meaning.

In articles, conference talk titles, news stories and safety improvement programs, the following phrases are appearing more and more: patient safety culture, employee safety culture, nuclear safety culture, leadership safety culture, holistic safety culture. The creative descriptive terms continue: contractor, food, driver, customer, construction, road, underground, high-reliability, sustainable, proactive, positive lab, total, workplace, process, organizational, firefighter, world-class, radiation, roofing, hospital, fire service, product, and even pedestrian and traffic safety culture.

When a phrase is used over and over again, it eventually reaches a point where it loses its meaning and the listener is left with perceived meaningless sounds. This is semantic satiation, a term coined by Leon Jakobovits in his 1962 doctoral dissertation at McGill University. Safety culture, if we are not careful, is becoming another example of semantic satiation.

Safety culture is the result of specific, common and influencing safety beliefs, attitudes, values, decisions, expectations, behaviors, experiences and stories that exist within an organization. Safety culture is therefore a byproduct of each of these influences. Safety culture is more than "the way we do things around here." Safety culture describes what is common and specific to safety in the organization and is a powerful influence on new members to the group. Because safety culture is a result, it cannot be directly managed. What creates safety culture, however, is precisely what should be managed.

Culture is organic, like a growing plant.

Plants require the right conditions, climate and chemistry. Safety climate is made up of four components: commitment, caring, cooperation and coaching. Safety culture chemistry contains nine elements: passion, focus, expectations, proactive accountability, reinforcement, vulnerability, communication, measurement and trust. How well are you doing in each of these areas? What component or element, if focused on, would create an improvement in "the way we do things around here"?

Safety culture is more than a buzzword; it is in fact the most effective sustainability tool available to you and your organization. When the desired beliefs, decisions, behaviors and stories are in place, creating shared values, little prodding and supervision is needed. Whether in a nuclear facility, a high-reliability organization, a lab, or with employees, contractors or pedestrians, focus on what you want people to know, believe, do, experience and tell others. Control the climate and chemistry necessary to create your holistic, total, proactive, positive safety culture, or whatever you want to call it. Safety culture, if properly leveraged, will become the strategy execution catalyst. Before the term loses meaning in your organization, understand what makes up your culture and ensure it is aligned with your safety excellence strategy.

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