



Safety Culture:

A Matter of Characteristics or Capabilities?

During World War II, the American military gained a reputation around the world for having a “can do” culture. They tended to quickly identify problems and address them with creativity, tenacity and a lot of teamwork. This culture was seldom described by its characteristics, but it was known for its capabilities and for the results it accomplished.

The goal of forming a safety culture is to get better safety results. It could be argued that certain characteristics make a culture more likely to get better results, but the results will come from the culture's capabilities, not its characteristics.

The quest for safety culture excellence has led some world-class safety organizations to emulate this model. So what are the capabilities that characterize an excellent safety culture and how can these capabilities be cultivated? Below are six capabilities that most commonly have been found among organizations that have an organized approach to safety culture excellence:

Capability 1: The ability to accurately identify problems – In safety, problems are risks. Can the safety culture identify the risks inherent in the workplace and in the work processes?

Risks can involve the physical characteristics of the workplace (conditions), actions of workers to operate the processes (behaviors) or a combination of these factors. A critical skill in safety is “contingency thinking.” For example: If I do this activity in this setting, what risks are present and how could they result in injury?

This type of thinking accomplishes two important objectives: 1) It gets workers thinking upstream from the accident event; and 2) It addresses low-probability risks, which often are

more difficult to identify. This capability can be developed in a culture in two ways: Workers receive training in risk identification and compile their findings or the organization completes a professional risk analysis and briefs the workers on the results.

Capability 2: The ability to prioritize – Many safety cultures fail to achieve results simply because they try to do everything at once. A “can do” culture makes progress one step at a time and develops the ability to prioritize the order of these steps. The highest priority is not always the biggest risk or the most frequent accident type. It often is the quick win that will make rapid progress and motivate the improvement effort. It also can be the project that will teach the culture how to solve more complicated problems in the future.

The ability to prioritize is a science with a lot of art interjected throughout. It is factual, but subjective as well. There seldom is an absolute right or wrong decision, but rather several options with advantages and disadvantages. Like



many soft skills, it can be taught in formal classroom settings or grown through champions within the culture who have the training or natural abilities.

Capability 3: The ability to focus – The ability to prioritize enables the ability to focus, but they are not completely identical. Once the priority is set, every member of the culture needs to be informed and directed toward the specific

process issues such as workflow, material handling and the availability of tools and equipment; and organizational issues such as production pressure and training. The bottom line is, “If you don’t change the reasons why people take risks, you might not change the risks.”

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goal to achieve the focus necessary for meaningful improvement. Again, working on too much at once is the enemy of focus. The elephant must be divided into bite-sized pieces and everyone needs to be focused on the same bite at the same time.

Focus does not mean abandoning other goals or objectives. It is not necessary to neglect the basics of safety (rules and procedures and PPE requirements) to focus on solving a specific safety issue. Humans are capable of both focusing and scanning simultaneously, like they do when driving down the highway. While keeping in mind the basics of safety, it is possible to concentrate a culture on another important objective.

From the individual perspective, focus is about concentrating attention. From an organizational perspective, focus is about centralizing the attention of the group through communication and collective problem solving. These abilities can be taught, but they often are more a matter of learning by doing rather than of formal education or training.

Capability 4: The ability to address influences – The actions of people and cultures happen for specific reasons. These “reasons” are the factors that influence decisions and the range of choice in the workplace. They include environmental issues such as engineering and climate;

and a lot of literature on influences, but the basic principle behind the technique begins with asking “why?” Knowing that people take risks is important. Knowing why they take risks is empowering to a culture that understands and addresses influences.

Capability 5: The ability to measure progress – Without measurement, it is impossible to know if progress is being made. The safety profession is famous for relying on lagging indicators, which often are weak metrics for many types of change. The power of lagging indicators often is misunderstood and exaggerated because they are so representative of the goals of safety (i.e. accident reduction).

The process that produces the results must be measured if we are to understand cause and effect. If a culture prioritizes and focuses and attempts to change influences, it must measure the change in influences and the resulting changes in risks or risk-taking and understand how these changes impact the lagging indicators (accident rates, etc.). Only through multiple metrics can we determine if we have changed the culture and if the cultural change has impacted accidental injuries. Don’t be afraid of inexact measurements. It is better to have an approximation of the right things than an exact measurement of the wrong thing.

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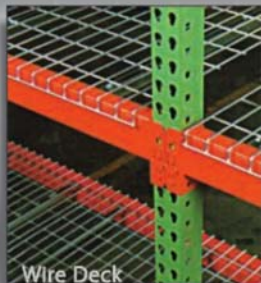
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Capability 6: The ability to make change permanent – Interestingly, the most effective ability a culture has to make change permanent is itself. Once a change becomes truly cultural, it tends to last a long time with very little effort.

It is not enough to become a shared value or a priority, which is the way some experts define culture; it must become common practice. A "can do" culture quickly turns ideas into action and aligns its members toward timely change. Just as culture is a sustainability tool for groups, habits are the sustainability tools for individuals. Certainly, not all safety actions should be habitual, but many of the most common ones should. Cultures, through their practices, can reinforce the formation of habits in their individual members.

A "can do" culture is one that accurately identifies and prioritizes its problems (risks), turns its priority to focus, controls its influences, measures its progress and makes changes permanent. Rather than focusing on characteristics that an excellent safety culture should have, focus on the capabilities that will enable the culture to win the war against accidents.

Grow these capabilities within the culture through training, developing champions and encouraging the kind of performance that produces results. Recognize and celebrate the successes of the new safety culture and begin to network with the other world-class safety organizations that also have embraced this strategic model. **EHS**

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