STEPS TO SAFETY CULTURE EXCELLENCE™
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There are two kinds of people in safety: the kind who care and the kind who do not care. Those who do not care do not work toward excellence because they do not care! The people who do care are the kind who change the world for the better and the ones we are proud to work with and to help. For these people, nothing short of excellence is “good enough” in safety. Whether you are a safety professional, a concerned manager, a union safety representative or the president or chief executive officer (CEO) of the organization, we would like you to consider what safety excellence could mean for you and your organization.

What is the public image of your organization now and what will be the legacy you leave behind? How would you like it to be known and remembered? Have you ever thought or dreamed that you would like to be part of the organization that cured cancer or heart disease? How about being part of an organization that conquered a bigger killer than either of those terrible diseases? We are talking about accidental injury! Do you realize that this terrible and preventable tragedy takes the lives of more people between the ages of 1 and 44 than either of these diseases? It is among the top 10 causes of death in every age group.

When you help your organization develop Safety Culture ExcellenceSM, you improve the quality of life for everyone who works there. You help them and their families to avoid not only the deaths but also the debilitating, expensive, and lifestyle-destroying injuries that can result from on-the-job accidents. If you truly change the safety culture at work, you are likely to impact off-the-job injuries as well. You will give the people you work with the gift of an accident-free life and the skills to duplicate it year after year. You will give them the structure and capabilities to attack safety challenges one at a time and to conquer them. That structure and capability will help you address virtually every process and significant element of business organization that impacts safety and will make them foster and reinforce excellence.

Development of Safety Culture Excellence is altruistically rewarding and not bad for the business bottom line either. You will find yourself among other organizations that have created safety excellence and expect it of their associates, clients, and suppliers. You will find organizations further along the path who are glad to help and those behind you eager for your assistance. You will find yourself among not only those with like minds but also those with hearts deeply committed to helping people through the pursuit of safety excellence.
INTRODUCTION

You will find that your culture perpetuates excellence and that its excellence in safety tends to grow into excellence in every other aspect of your organizational operations. Excellence produces pride, and pride produces even more excellence. This is not a poet’s dream or an empty promise from someone with something to sell; it is a reality that has already been accomplished by a number of organizations. Many others are beginning the journey.

Always remember that excellence is not necessarily perfection; it is more like personal best. Can your organization be its best and expand its capabilities beyond what it once thought possible? We believe it can. If you believe it also, come join the journey beyond bad, beyond good, beyond great to the highest level of performance possible within your organizational realities. Achieve excellence in safety and align your culture to ensure that it is sustainable into the bright future you will create.

The very idea of improving a whole culture of hundreds or thousands of people can seem daunting, but it has been done many times successfully and can be broken down into bite-sized pieces we call STEPS. When you begin to work on your safety culture a STEP at a time, you create momentum. You instill into your culture the seeds of excellence. A culture that can take a single STEP toward improved performance can take another, and another. Every journey, no matter how long, is made up of STEPS. Learning to STEP is learning how to improve. Learning how to improve is developing the basic skill of excellence.

Even though we focus on the safety aspect of excellence, the process we are proposing can be used to create excellence in any aspect of organizational performance. There are advantages to starting with safety. Safety is altruistic and tends to get the hearts and minds into the effort rather than simply hands and feet. It boldly answers the what’s in it for me (WIIFM) question. It benefits every employee, their families, the community, and the organization. Once it becomes a success in safety, it can be turned toward other targets and produce a wealth of organizational excellence.

The journey to Safety Culture Excellence will take you through a series of STEPS designed to help you reach seven milestones. Each milestone is an aspect of cultural excellence. You may find that you have already taken some of these steps and can reach a milestone quickly with less effort. Some STEPS may need to be revisited in years to come. The STEPS leading to the first five milestones are designed to create a culture of excellence in which continuous improvement is not only possible but also reinforced and empowered at every level. The STEPS leading to the sixth milestone are designed to create the capability within the culture to identify, prioritize, and solve safety problems and challenges. The seventh milestone contains STEPS to maintain and continuously improve the excellent performance of the safety culture.

Case Study: We were working with an organization that had multiple sites with varying safety performance. However, one site had a perfect safety record for over 15 years and was the only site without a safety professional on staff. We asked to visit the site and acquired the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and visitor identification. When we drove into the parking lot near the front office, a
INTRODUCTION

A worker in a company truck saw me approaching and parked next to us. He introduced himself and examined our credentials and offered to accompany us on our visit. We checked into the security office and proceeded to tour the facility. He told us of a well-respected safety professional who had established their safety programs many years ago and had then retired. We found out that our guide was not assigned, but that virtually anyone who saw a visitor approaching would have taken the same initiative. During our visit, everyone we observed was looking out for each other and offering safety information to us for each area we entered. The site had a relatively stable population with low turnover, but more notably, it had a safety culture in which everyone was focused and involved. It was the culture that was producing the excellent safety performance, even without an official safety leader. We studied it closely to help the organization adjust the cultures at the other sites and develop some of the same capabilities.

VISION

Excellence is a journey, not a destination. Those who think they have reached excellence and stop their travels find that their goal has evaded them. The perfect ending of every journey is not where it takes you, but what it makes of you. This journey to Safety Culture Excellence is ongoing and enhances your capabilities with each STEP.

We, the authors, believe that safety is both the ultimate humanitarian cause and the most valuable of strategic advantages for organizations. Those who are best in safety will attract not only the finest talent, but the most wonderful human beings. They will have workplaces that foster creativity and job satisfaction. They will be appealing partners to firms that need their products and services and will win the richest contracts. Those who are best in safety will be willing to share their safety successes with their business partners, their employees’ families and their communities. Safe organizations care about people and that caring does not stop when people go out the front gate.

The STEPS process will demystify safety. It will no longer seem impossible, vague, overloading, or evasive. An organization can determine a starting place and develop a map to success. The journey can be self-paced and will suit itself to the inevitable variables between cultures. The goal is not perfection, but personal best. Each culture can begin a journey toward its own ultimate level of excellence. No one will be required to make radical, sudden changes to their styles or practices, but rather gradual evolution toward a more perfect and harmonious way of working together and sharing the joy of accomplishment.

If this vision sounds idealistic, please remember that we who created it are among the most practical and successful safety excellence consultants in the world and that we are the staunchest critics of theories that cannot work in the realities of today’s workplace. This approach is based on research, but also on sound principles learned in the real world with real successes. The ultimate research is carried out in
the laboratory of human endeavor and the kind of peer review we seek is the success of those who utilize our ideas and methods.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF SAFETY CULTURE

“Safety culture” is a term in much use today in the safety community. Organizations are realizing that top-down programs and management tactics have limitations when they meet the real-world workplace. Culture was mentioned as an underlying cause in the most noteworthy recent disasters. Organizations such as NASA and BP were accused of not having a good safety culture that could prevent disasters such as Challenger, Texas City, and the Gulf Oil Spill.

The notoriety of safety culture has caused many organizations to question their own efforts. Are they doing what it takes to create and encourage the right kind of culture to avoid the costs and negative publicity of similar disasters? The number of articles written on safety culture has grown exponentially, as have the hits on related websites. Our own clients and prospective clients are constantly asking about culture. Even while pursuing other programs or processes, they are concerned how these will impact their safety culture.

No one wants to be ambushed with disaster and bad publicity, and it seems that nothing can produce ambushes so well as the unpredictability of safety issues. Most organizations put a lot of effort into safety, which can multiply the disappointment when things go wrong. So, how do we take the uncertainty and guesswork out of safety? Alan Kay of Apple computers said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” Developing a strong and capable safety culture is the best way to control (by creating) your own safety future.

However, unlike others in this field, we are not advocating “creating” a safety culture from scratch. You already have one! What we are suggesting is that the culture can be better and that a better culture will build sustainability into your safety efforts more effectively than any other approach known to date. A culture is what is shared among the members of an organization. Those shared events and perceptions influence personal and organizational performance, and can either encourage or discourage the growth of excellence. To shape your existing safety culture in a way in which excellence can and does grow is the goal of this book.

The title of this book contains several terms that should be defined clearly before moving on to the “how-to” parts. Clearly defining the crucial terms can aid greatly in making sure that everyone is on the same page, philosophically and strategically, before beginning the process. Clearly defined terms create common vision. One of the goals of this book is to achieve the type of clarity and alignment that excellent safety cultures possess. So, starting with the same vision is especially important to achieving this goal.

Before we address the terminology in the title, let us define and discuss a term implied in every safety effort: “accident.” If this word has negative connotations to you and you would like to use another term in your safety efforts, please do so. However, in this text, we will use the term and define it in this way: An accident is
either something that is done unintentionally or something that is done deliberately that results in an unintended outcome. In short, accidental is the opposite of intentional or deliberate. This term is going to be used as an adjective before the term “injury,” which is already well defined. Accidental injuries are injuries that were neither intentional nor deliberate and can vary in severity from minor to catastrophic. We will later discuss this and other definitions and suggest that you either adopt these or create your own. Definition is an essential part of clarity that helps lead to excellence.

The first term in the book title is STEPS. Each letter is capitalized because STEPS is an acronym as well as a word. It stands for Strategic Targets for Excellent Performance in Safety SM. So, the term STEPS is intended to connote both the steps toward an ultimate goal and as well as the process to choose and execute each of the steps. One of the main sources of failure in safety-improvement efforts is trying to do too much at once. Working on unclear goals or focusing on the wrong things is the next most common. For these three reasons, it is critical to take the right steps, the right-sized steps, and to take them in the right order.

The next term to define is safety. Almost everyone will tell you that they know what safety is, but when asked to define it, most will give you the goal rather than the definition. The most common responses are that safety is “not getting hurt,” or safety is “going home exactly the way you came to work (with all your body parts intact).” Obviously, these are the goals of safety, but what is the definition? If a group of people is going to work on a goal, the goal must be clearly defined and universally shared. So, let us begin with a very generic, 30,000-ft definition of safety: safety is knowing what can hurt you, learning the things that can keep them from hurting you, and doing those things.

We encourage you to create your own definition of safety, but we want to start here with a basic meaning to help you understand what success looks like. This is, of course, an oversimplification of all the ways we work in safety. It does not elaborate on the methodologies of mitigating risks, but it focuses us on the basic objectives. Obviously, if we are to anticipate and avoid injury, we must identify the risks and address them. Almost all accidents can be categorized as a failure to identify risks or a failure to adequately address the risks. We will use this dichotomy in our methods to identify the best way to prevent accidents. Asking the question, “Was the accident the result of an unidentified or underestimated risk, or was it a failure to adequately address a known risk?” can help to determine the best prevention strategy. Even though the difference between these two might seem slight, the methods used to address them can be radically different. Also, in our consulting practice, we have identified that the failure to recognize this difference often results in using the wrong solutions to solve safety problems.

There is a school of thought applied to safety called Human Performance Improvement (HPI). While HPI tends to focus on what they call “human error” and to classify the types of error, they readily admit that people get hurt for three basic reasons: they fail to recognize the risk, they fail to take a precaution, or the precaution they take is inadequate to address the risk. We would add to the first category that often the failure is not the failure to recognize the existence of the risk, but it is an underestimating of the probability of that risk to result in an accidental injury.
Taking this into consideration, one could develop a similar definition of safety: recognizing risks and taking adequate precautions to prevent the risk from resulting in injury.

There are two other concepts that should be mentioned in any discussion of safety: the idea of conditional safety and the idea that human behavior is often influenced by systems issues beyond the control of the workers involved. Safety cultures must, to whatever degree possible and reasonable, address unsafe conditions. We believe that some programs for workplace safety put unreasonable hopes on conditional fixes and that it is impossible to remove all hazards. That being said, almost all workplaces have additional opportunities to improve safety conditions.

As for the second argument about behavioral causation, we have always recognized that human behavior cannot be the root cause of accidents, simply because there is a reason for the behavior (another “why” in the causal chain). However, it is wise to recognize that worker behaviors directly impact safety outcomes, and that identifying crucial behaviors (such as precautions) and controlling the systems and other issues that influence them are valid methods to improve safety outcomes. So, a complete approach to safety must include workplace conditions and common work practice. STEPS includes methods to address both and to formulate improvement tactics that combine the two.

There has been a lot of discussion of late on the term “behavior.” There is an effort to challenge, at least, the well-accepted concepts that “unsafe acts” cause the majority of accidents and to what degree workers have control over these acts. In Europe, this discussion has spawned such terms as “multiple causation” or the idea that accidents can be caused, impacted, or influenced by multiple factors. Even if some of the terminology is nonstandard, these basic ideas are not new. The fact that they were not en vogue or widely accepted does not negate the fact that they have been often challenged. In fact, it is the addressing of these potential factors that influence human behavior and how we handle conditional issues that has given rise to the thinking underlying the approach recommended in this book. We cannot ignore issues that influence risks, even when they do not result in accidents. We cannot ignore “unsafe acts” even when they are beyond the control of the individual. It is important to remember that our goal is to prevent, not to analyze. Even accidents that are not “caused” by behaviors can sometimes be prevented by them. Likewise, we cannot ignore unsafe conditions even when we do not currently have the knowledge or resources to eliminate them. The STEPS methodology suggests that we systematically and progressively assess and address each of these issues and ensure that no element of our safety culture is reinforcing risks.

The third term is culture. It is this word that prompted the writing of this book. There is no shortage of books with the term “safety culture” in their title or subtitle. But after reading them all, we feel that we have significantly more to offer. Each of the books we read addressed the subject, but none of them, in our professional opinions, practically and holistically mapped out a path to help an organization achieve and sustain safety excellence. There is a lot of academic work on organizational culture that has been almost totally neglected by the academics writing about safety culture. One excuse for this diversion is that, theoretically, there is no such thing as a safety culture. Cultures have been traditionally defined as commonalities
of a group of people, not limited to a particular subject or goal. But almost everyone agrees that cultures impact safety and that improving the safety aspects of an organizational culture can greatly improve safety performance. This approach is what we refer to as Safety Culture Excellence.

A critical element to improving a safety culture involves changing a basic paradigm of what a safety culture is. Is a safety culture something an organization has, what the organization is, what the organization does, or why the organization is the way it is? Is it a state of being or a dynamic feature of performance? Is it passive or active? Most definitions of safety culture define the culture’s characteristics. The definition we propose involves developing a culture’s capabilities. The most basic capability of a safety culture is the ability to improve. That is the real challenge; not what managers or consultants can make of a safety culture, but what a safety culture can make of itself. Once a culture can take a STEP toward better performance, it can continue to take STEPS until it achieves its personal best. So, the real question is not, “What is our safety culture like?” but rather, “What can our safety culture do?” How do the norms of the group influence individuals within the group when they make safety decisions or follow common practice? Can the group learn to improve its own norms, common practice, and the ways in which it influences its members?

To use this active rather than passive definition of culture is a step away from the traditional notion that leadership is the primary element of culture. The underlying theme of many of the safety culture books is still the archaic notion that the workers should “do as they are told,” and there are some tricks to make them more docile. In our extensive experience with almost 2000 sites in over 40 countries, we have yet to see a do-as-you-are-told culture reach safety excellence. John Reinecke and William Schoell in their Introduction to Business said, “Leadership is a manager’s ability to get subordinates to develop their capabilities by inspiring them to achieve.” We believe that this type of leadership is the way to create a culture that grows in capabilities and thrives on achievement without being told to do so. These are the types of cultures that we have seen create safety excellence.

This is not to say that leadership has no role in the safety culture other than to inspire. In fact, they play a critical part in developing the culture and in establishing excellence as a goal. Without the right leadership and reinforcement, it is virtually impossible for any group of people to develop the capabilities and use them to achieve excellent performance. But the role of leadership cannot and should not be defined within the antiquated theories of command and control. The role of leaders is to set levels of expectations, provide resources, empower, and allow the culture to continuously improve. Leaders can expect excellence, but they cannot demand it. They can help it happen but cannot accomplish it by decree. Helping leaders understand their roles accurately and fulfill them systematically is absolutely necessary for Safety Culture Excellence.

An often missed or understated aspect of culture is that, once established, it tends to perpetuate itself for generations. Therefore, we want to reassert our position that culture is a sustainability tool. It will impact safety not only in the here and now but also far into the future. So, an investment in developing a safety culture can pay big dividends for years, if not decades. Culture, when developed at the worker level,
also tends to outlive changes in management, ownership, mergers, policies, laws, and other influences. When a culture develops safety practices, those practices become a norm that adapts and perpetuates in amazing ways.

So, the Safety Culture Excellence we are working toward is not a destination where everyone can rest and pat themselves on the back. It is a set of capabilities that enable continuous improvement in safety performance and create a chemistry and climate in which such improvement is nurtured and encouraged. In other words, it is a journey toward excellence, a journey with intermediate milestones along the way, but no final destination other than the ability to continually take steps toward greater excellence.

The final term is *excellence*. For our purposes, excellence is not necessarily perfection. Far too many academics and consultants tend to define safety perfection and challenge organizations to adapt their culture to a perfect model. Unfortunately, this seldom happens. Imperfect cultures do not completely remake themselves following a model of perfection. Excellence in safety is more akin to “personal best” than to perfection. Whatever the current level of safety performance in an organization, there is almost always a potential to be significantly better. Often, striving for perfection undermines the ability to become better. The perfect gets in the way of the good. When you try to take the whole safety excellence journey in one step, you almost always fail. When you take it a step at a time, choose the right steps in the right order, and develop a culture of always becoming better, you will almost surely succeed. Excellence is a journey toward perfection with the realization that perfection is a moving target, and there will probably always be another step between the organization and the ultimate goal.

So, the kind of culture we are aiming at is not academically perfect, ideal, or having every desired characteristic. We are aiming at a culture that can clearly understand its current state and target stepped improvements. This capability empowers a culture to improve its safety performance to a level of excellence that is not just sustainable but can be continuously improved. This culture will not be dependent on new programs or processes, but it will have an improvement methodology and mindset woven into the very fabric of the common practices and the addressing of workplace conditions that impact safety. As you begin the journey, you will find that each STEP helps you develop a capability. Each of these capabilities plays a crucial role in helping you to know where you are on the journey, maintain clarity of purpose, and have the kind of climate and chemistry necessary to address your risks and grow your safety culture to excellence.

We, the authors, think that there is a tendency to oversimplify safety into a basic, linear, and cause-and-effect model. We need to think more in a causal chain mentality and to create a balanced scorecard in which we recognize how much effort produces a change in perception, which creates a change in behavior, and which impacts accident experience by a certain reduction in frequency or severity. Simply trying to eliminate accident “causes” reactively has led to limited success. In a STEPS process, you can address and align all the major causes, contributing factors, influences, barriers, obstacles, and other factors that impact safety performance. By systematically looking at each of these, you can begin to gain a true insight into how safety excellence can be achieved.
We realize that there are endless philosophical points of view and countless research projects that could be used to argue that other criteria are more important than the ones we choose. However, we are suggesting that a course to excellence should include visiting each of these areas and then developing a methodology to address any and all other factors. Such an approach might have an imperfect beginning but will lead to a more perfect final destination.

Excellence is a journey, not a destination, an event, or state of being. It is best measured by progress, not status. The only status that should concern an excellence-based culture is direction and velocity. Like a great piece of music, excellence is something to be mastered and practiced, not simply played with a minimum of error.

We strongly recommend that you resist any urge to read only a chapter or two and jump into a safety-improvement initiative based on this methodology. The path to Safety Culture Excellence described in this book is dependent on constantly keeping the big picture or roadmap in mind while working on any given STEP. This means that you should read the entire book and make sure that you understand thoroughly how to proceed and what will be required before you begin. There are also some redundant sections in which we first ask you to consider certain elements while formulating a strategy and then come back to the same elements and ask you to address each one as a STEP to a more perfect safety culture. Reading the more complete information in the later section will help you better address each element in your strategy development.

Even if you are already on a path to Safety Culture Excellence and intend to “cherry pick” this book for ideas to enhance your efforts, we believe that you can do that best by completing the book before trying to implement any particular aspect. Even if you are only going to use a single idea, you will understand that idea more fully after a complete read.

We also believe that answers are important but that the right questions are even more important. In many sections of this book, we will ask questions, the answers to which will vary from one organization to another. It is not our goal to have every answer. It is our goal to help each of you to ask the right questions to learn the best way to achieve Safety Culture Excellence. In many of our projects, our clients have told us that the questions we asked helped them to self-discover the best ways to move ahead. We have tried to include many such questions in this book in the hopes that you will have a similar experience and make valuable discoveries with your own knowledge of your own organization. Put on your thinking cap!