SAFETY CULTURE

Definition

Safety Culture is the way safety is perceived, valued and prioritised in an organisation. It reflects the real commitment to safety at all levels in the organisation. It has also been described as "how an organisation behaves when no one is watching".

Safety Culture is not something you get or buy; it is something an organisation acquires as a product of the combined effect of Organisational Culture, professional Culture and, often, National Culture. Safety Culture can therefore be positive, negative or neutral. Its essence is in what people believe about the important of safety, including what they think that their peers, superiors and leaders really believe about safety as a priority.

Why Is Safety Culture Important?

Safety Culture can have a direct on safe performance. If someone believes that safety is not really important, even temporarily, then workarounds, cutting corners, or making unsafe decisions or judgement will be the result, especially when there is a small perceived risk rather than an obvious danger. However, a typical and understandable first response to Safety Culture is:

"We already have an SMS, why do we need Safety Culture too?"

A Safety Management System represents an organisation's competence in the area of safety, and it is important to have an SMS and competent safety to execute it. But such rules and processes may not always be followed, particularly if people in the organisation believe that, for example, 'moving traffic' is the real over-riding priority, even if risks are occasionally taken. Where would people get such an idea? The answer ultimately is from their peers, but more so their superiors, including the person at the helm of an organisation, namely the CEO. To ensure the required commitment to safety, organisational leaders must show that safety is their priority.

So, organisations need both a SMS and a healthy Safety Culture in order to achieve acceptable safety performance. But with aviation, there is the problem that it is generally very safe, with serious accident outcomes occurring only rarely. This means that almost all organisations will assume they are already safe. There may be few incident reports, and these may be of low severity; safety cases may be well in hand for current operations and future changes. Real aircraft accidents are usually complex and multiple cause can be identified, so it is not always easy to see them coming. Even harder to see are contributing situations which affect and organisation's 'forward vision' in safety. For example, under-reporting of incidents due to fears of recrimination or prosecution; people running risks because they believe that is what they are supposed to do; different sub-groups not sharing information due to a lack of mutual trust; etc.

How do You Measure Safety Culture?

Safety Culture, like culture, is sometimes hard to see from the inside. It is like a fish swimming in water – the fish does not really think too much about the water. Therefore, Safety Culture surveys, in most industries, are usually a combination of internal and external perspectives: the 'outsider's view is used to help make objective the insider's viewpoint. However, they survey findings and the staff at all levels. This champion is typically the Safety Director of Safety Manager of the organisation

A typical Safety Culture Survey might proceed as shows below:

Safety Culture Improvement process

Questionnaire Analysis

Identify Key Issues

Understanding the Issues

Analysing the Issues

Prioritising the Issues

Solution proposal

Feedback to Management &Staff

Improvement Startegy

Survey the population
1. General Section
2. Controllers
3. Maintenance Engineering
4. Managers

Workshop

After the Workshop

It is a tried and tested process starting with 'prelaunch' discussions to explain the process, decide the breadth and copy of the survey, and to reassure the Air Navigation Service Provider that the approach is:

- Anonymous
- Confidential to the organisation
- Independent – not favouring any particular group

The survey process must lead to clear and concise actions being developed by the organisation to address any deficiencies identified. These may relate to either particular employee functional groups or to specific business or operational processes.

The overall timings of the approach are illustrated below:
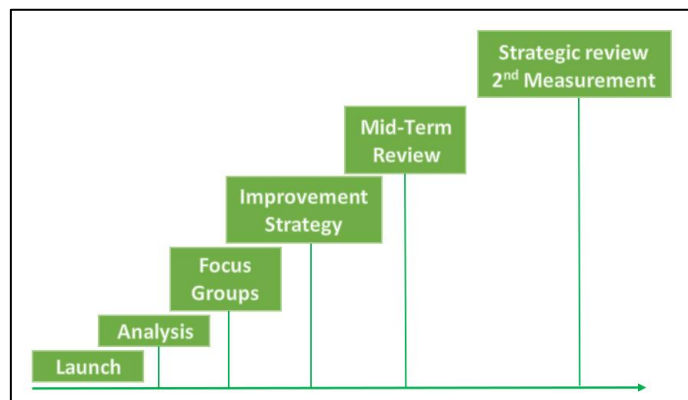
A typical of Safety Culture includes the components illustrated below:

What Does Safety Culture Deliver?

An optimum Safety Culture delivers a clearer and more comprehensive picture of operational risk, one that takes in all aspects of the activities of the organisation. This is possible through the achievement of a better information flow and the maintenance of an effective dialogue within the organisation about safety performance as priority.

Why Safety Culture Awareness Matters

As well as the 'macro' effect already described, a focus on knowing what the level of safety culture is and striving to achieve a level which is adequate brings a better focus on incident recording, incident analysis, staff training and the integration of maintenance safety and operational safety priorities.

Safety Culture must be seen as a key business target so that the people at the 'sharp end' feel empowered to act in the interest of safety in the knowledge that the management will support them. This enhancement of mutual trust is invariably accompanied by a positive impact on productivity.

Any doubts about the validity of a Safety Culture Survey as a means to benchmark organisational culture can be resolved, if resources allow, by carrying out two independent surveys in parallel, which in the past has produced comparable results both surveys.

Each organisation is different, and each will also its own national culture as a business environment, so the both the methods and the opportunities for achieving organisational safety culture will vary. However, the insights achieved by regular measurement of safety culture and the use of the results to identify where improvement effort must be targeted is essential

Five crucial barriers to cultivating safety in the organization.

1. Unclear Safety Rules & Expectations

Federal laws require companies to adhere to certain safety measures and standards of hazard control. However, safety rules expressed in legalese may not always be easy to understand. Instead of posting the "law" around your workplace, summarize safety rules and expectations in clear, concise terms.

If you haven't done so, have team leaders, managers, or supervisors to take time to explain safety procedures to employees in person. That way, employees can ask questions and clarify any misunderstanding or ambiguity on the spot.

2. Lack of Enforcement

Companies can't enforce safety rules with a few pieces of paper. They need people to make sure that the rules are not only followed but respected. Besides ensuring that company leaders are diligently enforcing and explaining safety rules, businesses should encourage every employee to report unsafe or potentially hazardous conditions and activities to their superiors without fear of repercussion.

3. Little or No Motivation to Be Safe

That may sound ironic; after all, who doesn't want to be safe? Yet, it's not always easy to be safe, especially when you are trying to accomplish numerous tasks with very little time. In stressful situations, it is easy to shove safety under the rug and hope for the best.

However, companies can motivate workers by giving not only verbal encouragement but also awards and recognition to those who have consistently upheld safety values.

4. Long Work Hours & Excessive Workload

Mistakes are most prone to happen when people are in a rush, tired, or both.

In addition to wisely delegating an appropriate workload to your employees, it's paramount to have a reasonable shift schedule and give your employees enough rest hours.

To ensure optimum cognitive ability and performance, it's vital for employers to establish a shift schedule that gives employees enough time for quality, uninterrupted sleep. Employees perform best, says WorkSafe BC, with at least 7.5 to 8.5 hours of sleep per night.

5. Settling for 'Good Enough'

If diligence and alertness are the characteristics of a safety champion, then complacency is safety's deadly foe. According to Safety Toolbox Topics, complacency is one of the most troubling problems workers face.

Once workers settle into a routine, it's easy to get comfortable and become oblivious to obvious problems.

To avoid complacency, companies should give workers constant safety feedback during shift hours and meetings. Additionally, offering safety drills and training to all employees will also help reinforce the importance of safety and help everyone stay ahead of the curve.

Online Training