



## Building a Strong Safety Culture

What does it mean and does your company have it?

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"Safety Culture" is a hot topic among safety professionals these days. A workplace culture, safety or otherwise, is something that evolves over time and is not built overnight. It reflects our basic values.

"Safety Awareness" is defined as employees keeping foremost in their minds the safe way to perform their jobs. The problem is that employees have many other things on their minds. With all those distractions, how can safety stay a priority? Safety Awareness seems a simple enough concept but achieving it is no small feat.

### **The Focus on People**

One very important element that determines your safety culture is your focus. The focus of safety programs and safety incentives should be on what people think and do, not on improving statistics.

Human attitudes and behaviors cause most injuries and incidents. If you put the focus on the numbers, you are focusing on people keeping the statistics down, not changing unsafe attitudes and behaviors.

Safety measurement systems should be built around safety activities. Great safety statistics do not necessarily mean a great safety program. They may just mean great luck. Is your company having safety meetings, investigating near misses, and educating your workers?

The role of rewards in safety programs is to acknowledge the excellent safety performance of employees and to express appreciation for their efforts. Employees need to be reminded that the primary value of safe behaviors is that they don't become injured or sick. In addition, they need to be reminded that their attention to safety benefits the company when key team members are not lost to injury or worse, and the company saves money. The message to your employee is, "You made a difference to yourself, this company and the people around you, and the real reward is our appreciation of that."

If people as a group are moving in the right direction, if they are being trained and planning and doing those safety activities that they have talked about, they should be rewarded even if they have a certain number of injuries. This would be a true performance based rewards system.

### **Characteristics of a Safety Culture Within a Company**

What is the culture toward safety in your company? A good exercise to evaluate your company's culture is to have your managers grade the company on these ten characteristics:

1. Safety goals are clear and shared.
2. The culture manages safety behavior without over-reliance on safety policies.
3. People are trusted to make decisions according to the information they know rather than their role in the hierarchy.
4. Rewards are balanced between production, safety and quality.
5. Mistakes are seen as an opportunity to learn.
6. Important information is communicated face-to-face.
7. Everyone in the organization has the right to refuse or stop an unsafe job.
8. Safety is seen as a strategic business objective by all.
9. Conflicts regarding safety priorities are resolved, not suppressed.
10. Systems to find and correct safety deficiencies are built into operations.

In a company with a healthy safety culture you will find a sincere desire to protect the assets of the company, including most importantly, the employees. Maintaining a focus on the well being of your employees will lead to a win-win scenario for everyone.

– Ed Bonkemeyer, Risk Performance Specialist, Occurrence Prevention