

The essentials of safety culture



Understanding what safety culture is

The safety culture is a set of ways of doing and thinking that is widely shared by the employees of an organisation when it comes to controlling the most significant risks associated with its activities:

- long-lasting changes to safety behaviours cannot be made without shifting employees' perception of safety and its importance,
- the ways of thinking (mindset) cannot be changed unless the concrete signs given by the chain of command evolve.

The safety culture reflects the importance the organisational culture grants to safety in all decisions, all departments, all occupations, and at all levels of management.



Sharing a vision of the most significant risks

A safety culture approach must target the most serious risks as a priority, i.e. those that jeopardise the survival of the organisation. This approach is more likely to be consensual, to rally all actors, and it can have an effect on the less serious risks – whereas the reverse is not true.

The most significant risks can vary depending on the activity, the site, the occupation, but they must be known and shared by all of the actors in the organisation.

Consideration of the most significant risks should include those that threaten internal employees, contractors, customers, local residents, the environment, the facilities, and the continuity of operations.



Improving safety performance thanks to 3 pillars

Improving the safety culture requires an integrated approach to safety through coherent actions in three areas: **technical aspects, safety management, and human and organisational factors.** The "safety culture" approach cannot make up for insufficient action in these three areas.

Safety approaches must include a **greater integration** of human and organisational factors.



Assessing the safety culture, analysing the current situation

The assessment is a crucial starting point for any organisation wishing to change their safety culture. It looks at both the practices of the different categories of actors and at their perceptions of safety management. **The more this assessment is shared by all stakeholders, the higher the chances of mobilising them later on.**

The assessment is not an objective in itself. It is best to avoid embarking on this type of undertaking if the organisation is not ready to collectively face and deal with the (often deep-rooted!) problems which the assessment reveals.



Finding the right balance between rule-based and managed safety

There is no "best" safety culture *per se*; rather, there are safety cultures that are more or less suited to the environment in which the organisation is embedded. Rather than importing models that were developed for other contexts, each entity must make strategic choices in order to strive to be exemplary in managing their own specific constraints.

Increasing managed safety – as a complement to rule-based safety, which is always necessary – is an often under-exploited avenue for progress. To do so, the organisation will need to invest in the skills of its workers – particularly decision-making skills –, give front-line managers some free rein, and encourage debate between professionals as well as group discussions about operational experience feedback.



Involving management and sharp-end workers

For most companies that are advanced in the area of safety, **the way forward lies in shifting from a bureaucratic safety culture to an integrated safety culture.** This requires both taking into account what experts and management anticipate as risky situations and listening to what sharp-end workers have to say about the reality of operations.

An integrated safety culture requires **strong leadership from management, increased involvement on the part of employees and their safety representatives, a redefinition of the role of HSE experts, and fluid interfaces between departments and with contractor companies.**



Targeting 7 attributes of an integrated safety culture

The organisational culture characteristics which are favourable to taking into account safety are known and grouped into seven major attributes. To steer an organisation towards an integrated safety culture, the following must be combined: a strategic approach, a willingness to mobilise all actors, and a small number of key processes on which to work.



Improving safety benefits the entire organisation

The safety culture approach proposes to improve safety performance by **working on the underpinnings of the way the organisation operates.**

From this perspective, safety is a **strategic lever for improving the company's overall performance.**

Because it can be a consensual subject, prevention of the most significant risks is a good entry point for working on the organisation. Any progress made will yield results not just in the area of safety, but potentially in all other areas.



Changing the safety culture is a long-term project

Changing the safety culture requires a **real plan for change**, with a wide consensus on the initial state of the safety culture and a shared vision of the level of safety culture sought for the future.

The change in culture is not restricted to safety only; **it must be based on deep transformations** of the different aspects of the organisation and of the management style.

Changing the safety culture **takes time.** Improving safety performance is an ongoing process which requires an iterative approach and unwavering commitment from all concerned.