

HSE Human Factors Briefing Note No. 7

Safety Culture

Briefing Note 1 – ‘Introducing Human Factors’ explains the background to these Briefing Notes.

The Confederation of British Industry describes the culture of an organisation as "the mix of shared *values, attitudes* and *patterns of behaviour* that give the organisation its particular character. Put simply it is 'the way we do things round here'". They suggest that the "safety culture of an organisation could be described as the **ideas** and **beliefs** that all members of the organisation share about risk, accidents and ill health".

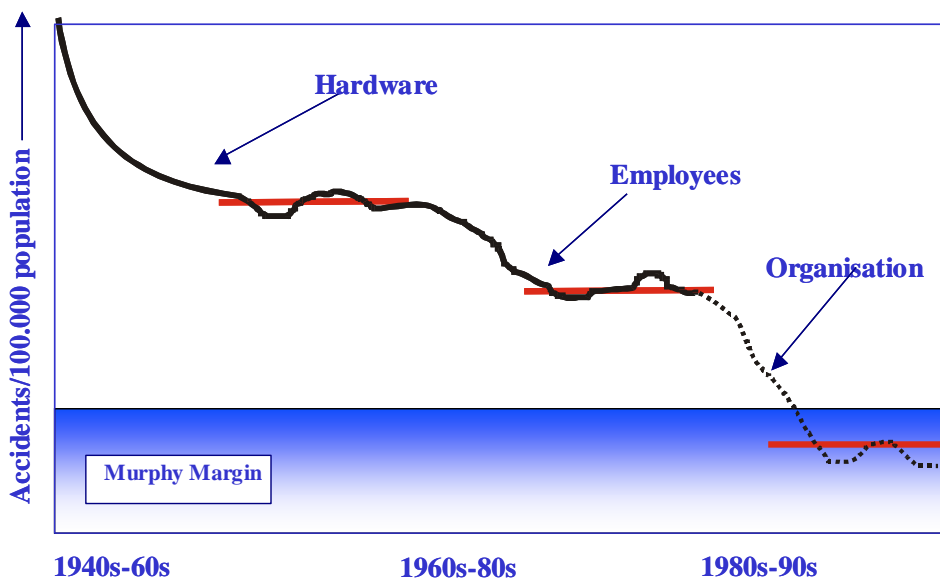
Case study

“The best Safety and Health Programs involve every level of the organization, instilling a safety culture that reduces accidents for workers and improves the bottom line for managers. When Safety and Health are part of the organization’s way of life, everyone wins.”

The following is an analysis of the safety and health program at a plant

Culture is very poor and does not encourage safe behaviour; rather, it encourages unsafe behaviour and blames employees when something goes wrong. Employees won’t participate as a result of fear. There is low trust and credibility, and probably poor communication within the organization.

Source: Ref. 1



Over the last 60 years or so, industry first reduced accident rates by improving: hardware (effective guards, safer equipment); then improved employee performance (selection and training, incentives and reward schemes) and, then changed the way they manage and organise – especially, by introducing safety management systems.

Each improvement reduced accidents down to a 'plateau' level where further improvement seemed impossible.

Now, most accidents (and other 'business disruptions') stem from employee errors or violations. The next big step change in safety has begun and is based on developing good safety cultures that positively influence human behaviour at work to reduce errors and violations.

Safety culture is not a difficult idea, but it is usually described in terms of concepts such as 'trust', 'values' and 'attitudes'. It can be difficult to describe what these mean, but you can judge whether a company has a good safety culture from what its employees actually *do* rather than what they say.

The term 'safety climate' is also used. This has a very similar meaning to 'safety culture': and the difference between them is unimportant here.

HSE concerns

Many companies talk about 'safety culture' when referring to the inclination of their employees to comply with rules or act safely. However, we often find that the culture and style of **management** is even more significant, for example a natural, unconscious bias for production over safety, or a tendency to focus on the short term, or being highly reactive.

Our company has a good safety culture because:

- Managers regularly visit the workplace and discuss safety matters with the workforce
- The company gives regular, clear information on safety matters
- We can raise a safety concern, knowing the company take it seriously and they will tell us what they are doing about it
- Safety is always the company's top priority, we can stop a job if we don't feel safe
- The company investigates all accidents and near misses, does something about it and gives feedback
- The company keeps up to date with new ideas on safety
- We can get safety equipment and training if needed – the budget for this seems about right
- Everyone is included in decisions affecting safety and are regularly asked for input
- It's rare for anyone here to take shortcuts or unnecessary risks
- We can be open and honest about safety: the company doesn't simply find someone to blame
- Morale is generally high

Learning more about safety culture

A large number of factors contribute to whether you have a good or a bad safety culture. The table below lists the main factors; indicates what would show that you had a good safety culture, and what would support the safety culture. This can be used as a very rough guide to assessing *your* safety culture or as a way of developing ideas for improving it.



A healthy safety culture is one where there is...	this is shown when management...	... and is helped when management...
Visible Commitment to Safety by Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Make regular <i>useful</i> visits to site ➤ Discuss safety matters with frontline personnel ➤ Will stop production for safety reasons regardless of cost ➤ Spend time and money on safety e.g. to provide protective equipment, safety training, and conduct safety culture workshops or audits ➤ Will not tolerate violations of procedures and actively try to improve systems so as to discourage violations e.g. plan work so that short cuts aren't necessary to do the work in time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Makes time to visit site (not just following an accident or incident) ➤ All show commitment ➤ Has good non-technical skills (e.g. communication skills;) ➤ Are also interested in workforce safety when they are not at work, e.g. provide information on domestic safety ➤ Shows concern for wider issues e.g. workforce stress and general health ➤ Actively sets an example (e.g. always conform to all safety procedures)
Workforce Participation and Ownership of Safety Problems and Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consults widely about health and safety matters ➤ Does more than the minimum to comply with the law on consultation ➤ Seeks workforce participation in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting policies and objectives • accident/near miss investigations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Supports an active safety committee ➤ Have a positive attitude to safety representatives ➤ Provides tools or methods that encourage participation e.g. behavioural observation programmes & incentive schemes that promote safety
Trust Between Shop floor and Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourages all employees and contractors to challenge anyone working on site about safety without fear of reprisals ➤ Keeps their promises ➤ Treats the workforce with respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Promotes job satisfaction/good industrial relations and high morale ➤ Promotes a 'just' culture (assigning blame only where someone was clearly reckless or took a significant risk) ➤ Encourages trust between all employees
Good Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provides good (clear, concise, relevant) written materials (safety bulletins, posters, guidance) ➤ Provides good briefings on current issues day to day and in formal safety meetings; listening and feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Encourages employee participation in suggesting safety topics to be communicated ➤ Provides specific training in communication skills ➤ Has more than one means of communicating
A Competent Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ensures that everyone working on their sites is competent in their job and in safety matters 	<p>Is supportive Has a good competence assurance system</p>

References

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