

CHANGE

- “There is nothing so difficult as initiating change” Michavelli



Safety Culture and How to Improve it

Introduction

The author has been asked how to improve safety culture a number of times in recent years. This paper is the result of research into how to best respond to this question. He has turned to the Organisational Behaviour literature as well as the Health & Safety literature in his quest for answers.

Definition of culture

Culture is often defined as “The way we do things around here”. Schein(1990) defines organisational culture as the system of shared beliefs and values that develops within an organisation and guides the behaviour of its members. Culture (Woods) consists of observable culture, shared values and common assumptions. Culture is often reinforced by stories, rites, rituals and symbols.

Safety Culture

The safety culture of an enterprise comprises the beliefs, attitudes, norms and work practices of management & employees. Safety culture refers to what an organisation is like in terms of safety and health., it includes aspects such as managements attitude and actions about safety and, in particular, the attitudes and beliefs of individuals and groups at work concerning the perceived magnitude of risks and the necessity and practicality of preventative measures.(Safetyline Institute)

A positive safety culture is one that, among other things

Encourages and retains learning

Promotes open & honest reporting

Is just and is prepared to identify its own shortcomings as easily as it seeks to address any violation of orders or instructions

Rewards innovation and accepts willingly constructive suggestions for continuous improvement of itself.(Di Pietro,2005)

Senior managers are the key to a successful safety culture. A true safety culture is established when safety is valued as highly as productivity. Managers and supervisors need to be held accountable for safety in the same manner as production.

Safety culture is about good safety attitudes in people but it is also good safety management established by organisations. Good safety culture means giving the highest priority to safety. Good safety culture implies a constant assessment of the safety significance of events, and issues, in order that the appropriate level of attention can be given.(Bastin,2003)

Measuring and reviewing the safety culture

To review the culture of an organisation it is essential to go beyond checking that procedures are in place, to elicit an understanding of underlying beliefs and attitudes to find out what people really think It is important to understand perceptions of hazards by eliciting views on-

Perceptions of risks, of the effectiveness of safe working procedures and of control measures in general

Their perception and assessment of their own & others beliefs, attitudes and behaviour

The steps taken to eliminate or minimise sources of conflict between production and safety

The steps taken to identify individuals prone to macho behaviour and erode any peer approval of risk taking

The status, importance and effectiveness of safety officers and committees

Whether the safety training is high quality and appropriate(Safetyline)

The National Safety Council has a Safety Climate Survey that impressed the author as a good means of assessing safety culture.

The role of leaders in change

For about a year this author worked with a General Manager Operations who could best be described as a charismatic leader who had an overriding commitment to safety This individual would turn up at operating sites in the middle of the night to see how safety was being managed. He would jump on a haultruck and go with the operator while the truck was loaded, the manager would question the operators about safety and tell them that he expected safety to be their top priority. This manager let his subordinates know he expected nothing less than 100% commitment to safety, those who did not comply were not around long. Word quickly got around about the managers safety expectations, single-handley he raised the profile of safety in the organisation and contributed to the culture.

Krause describes what excellent safety leadership looks like

1 Vision

The most senior executive must “See” what safety excellence looks like. The leader must convey his vision in a compelling manner through action.

2 Credibility

When an excellent safety leader says something others believe it and do not question his motives.

3 Collaboration

Collaboration encompasses working well with others, encouraging input, helping others, expressing confidence in others support others decisions and gaining commitment.

4 Feedback & Recognition

An excellent safety leader provides effective feedback and recognises people for their accomplishments.

5 Accountability

An excellent safety leader gives workers a fair appraisal of safety efforts and results, clearly communicates peoples roles in safety and fosters the sense that people are responsible for the level of safety in their organisational unit.

6 Communication

As a great communicator the leader encourages people to deliver honest, complete information about safety (even if unfavourable) ,keeps people informed and communicates frequently and effectively up, down and across the organisation.

7 Values safety

An excellent safety leader acts to support safety values and principles. He leads by example and clearly communicates that safe behaviour is expected.

8 Action-oriented

An excellent safety leader is proactive rather than reactive in addressing safety issues. He gives timely, considered responses to safety concerns, demonstrates a sense of personal energy and urgency to achieve safety results and demonstrates a performance driven focus by delivering results with speed and excellence.

Krause speaks of nine factors that predict positive safety outcomes

1 Procedural justice

Does the individual perceive that the supervisor's decision-making process to be fair?

2 Leader member exchange

If employees believe the supervisor will provide support and look out for their interests positive results will be found

3 Management credibility

Do employees perceive that what management says is consistent with what it does?

4 Perceived organizational support

Do employees perceive that they receive the support they need to accomplish the organisation's objectives?

5 Workgroup relations

Do coworkers treat each other with respect, listen to each others ideas, help one another out and fulfill commitments?

6 Teamwork

To what extent do employees perceive that working with team members is an effective way to complete tasks?

7 Organisational value for safety performance improvement

The more employees perceive that the organization values safety goals, the more willing they will be to invest in those goals themselves.

8 Upward communication

Can the workers speak freely to their supervisor about safety concerns?

9 Approaching others

Do employees feel free to speak to each other about safety concerns?

Schein relates how leaders embed and transmit change

The most powerful mechanisms for culture embedding and reinforcement are-

A What leaders pay attention to, measure and control

B Leader reactions to critical incidents and organisational crises

C Deliberate role modelling, teaching and coaching by leaders

D Criteria for allocation of rewards and status

E Criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement and ex-communication

A What leaders pay attention to, measure and control

One of the best mechanisms leaders have for communicating what they believe in or care about is what they pay attention to (What is noticed and commented upon, to what is measured, controlled, rewarded and in other ways systematically dealt with) Even casual remarks and questions that are consistently geared to a certain area can be as potent as formal control mechanisms and measurements. Other powerful signals that subordinates interpret for evidence of the leaders assumptions are what they observe does not get reacted to.

B Leader reactions to critical incidents and crises

When an organisation faces a crisis the manner in which leaders deal with it creates new norms, values and working procedures and reveals important underlying assumptions.

A good time to observe an organisation is when an act of insubordination occurs. No better opportunity exists for leaders to send signals about their own assumptions about human nature and relationships than when they themselves are challenged.

E Criteria for recruitment, selection etc

Leaders who are trying to ensure that their values and assumptions will be learned they must create a reward, promotion and status system that is consistent with those assumptions. Whereas the message initially gets across in the daily behaviour of the leader it is judged in the long run by whether the important rewards are allocated consistently with daily behaviour. One of the most subtle ways culture gets embedded is in the initial selection of new members. Basic assumptions are further reinforced through criteria of who does or does not get promoted, who is retired early and who is excommunicated.

Design of physical space, facades, buildings

This category is intended to encompass all the visible features of the organisation that clients, customers, vendors, new employees and visitors would encounter.

Stories about important events and people

As a group develops and accumulates a history, some of this history becomes embodied in stories about events and leadership behaviour. The storey reinforces assumptions and teaches assumptions to newcomers. Leaders cannot always control what will be said about them in stories, though they can certainly reinforce stories they feel good about and launch stories that carry the desired messages.

Formal statements about organisational philosophy, values

The formal statement is an attempt by leaders to state explicitly what their values and assumptions are.

Top 10 ways to improve safety management(Occupational hazards)

- 1 Tom Krause-Recognise the difference between managing and leading
- 2 Richard Fulwiler-integrate all aspects of the safety program into a single comprehensive management system
- 3 James Kendrick- Police your safety program
- 4 Donald Eckenfelder-Integrate safety into the process of the business
- 5 Larry Hansen---Identify clients and internal customers who see value in your services and make these customers your boss
- 6 Michael Deak-Do not make safety a priority
- 7 Neal Leonard- Management commitment and leadership and employee participation are key to safety management
- 8 Donald Eckenfelder-Take a rational, disciplined approach to safety
- 9 Michael Deak-Make everyone accountable for safety
- 10 Larry Hanson-Get results or get fired

How to improve safety culture

Over a 14 month period in 1994 -5 BHP Minerals carried out an extensive international safety benchmarking exercise with “best in safety class” companies throughout the world.

25 locations throughout the world participated in the study. An approximate 100 page report on findings is available should anyone wish to refer to it

The following were recurring themes in the world’s best safety performers.

1. Executive management provides the impetus for safety performance. This means that senior management is not only committed to and supports safety, but that it insists on safety performance in a manner that is clearly understood and echoed at all levels.

2. Management focus is a key to quality safety performance.

***1 & 2 above were seen as key factors**

3. Existence of a company-wide framework or systematic, standardised approach to safety. The approach has performance standards that receive regular internal and external audits
 4. Objectives are set and organisations work towards set targets for implementation of the objectives.
 5. Safety personnel report in at the highest level in the organisations. They have mainly an advisory function. Management and supervision drives the safety programme not the safety personnel.
 - 6 Effective safety training targeted to identified needs at all levels. Induction training and detailed safety training for supervisors and managers was high on the priority list.
- Regular safety meetings were seen as important.
- 7 Active personal involvement of senior management personnel in the safety programme
 - 8 Safety is considered in performance evaluations of all staff
 - 9 Regular, detailed audits of the safety management system
 - 10 Formal approaches to hazard identification and risk analysis, employees were fully involved in this
 - 11 Formal emergency response procedures that were practiced and audited
 - 12 The best in class addressed contractor safety before contractors were allowed on site, they pre-qualified them based on safety and made safety performance a contract condition. Contractors were expected to perform at the same safety level as permanent employees
 - 13 High on the list of the ways the best in class built safety awareness were management participation and leadership, dissemination of information, safety meetings and rewards or recognition of performance
 - 14 Safety is a condition of employment and dismissals occur for non-performance
 - 15 Well-managed rehabilitation programmes are in place
 - 16 The best in class use medical examinations and testing to ensure fitness for duty
 - 17 There were E.A.P's in place
 - 18 There were off the job safety programmes
 - 19 There was an emphasis on vehicle / plant maintenance and driver / operator training programmes.
 - 20 There were extensive PPE training, maintenance and audit programmes
 - 21 Lock-out procedures were used instead of tag-out
 - 22 Best in class managers and supervisors respond positively to safety issues that are raised
 - 23 Best in class supervisors are responsible for safety auditing, investigating accidents, planned job observations and training
 - 24 All levels in the organisation make decisions that reflect the philosophy "Safety first-Production will follow"

It is suggested Safety Management Systems be built around the above benchmarking findings in order to develop a robust safety culture.

The author has written a paper titled "What makes a safety management system fly" The original was published by the American Society of Safety Engineers, International Practice Specialty Newsletter, Spring 2002, Vol.1, No.3, and it is incorporated in a subject of a OHS course at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. This paper is suggested as containing insight into improving safety culture.

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