

DEVELOPING A ROBUST SAFETY CULTURE

By Dr Brett Solomon
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The importance of having a robust safety culture gained prominence after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. The INSAG-7 report of the catastrophe concluded that the leading cause could be attributed to a deficient safety culture at all levels of the power station.¹

The Royal Commission into the Esso Longford explosion and Cullen Inquiry into the Piper Alpha tragedy had the same findings. The investigation of the Deepwater Horizon blowout concluded that “there was not a culture of safety on

that rig.” The oil spill was not an isolated incident; it was symptomatic of a larger issue.² The report exposed the poor safety culture in which it had become acceptable practice to take shortcuts and violate safety procedures.

Having a culture that embraces safety as an ideal does not just happen; it needs to be forged. Just like any other critical success factor, a culture of safety needs to be made a priority and receive the attention and resources that are necessary for success. Based on my conversations with Todd Conklin, I want to offer seven practical ideas you can be used to improve safety culture:

1. What we talk about

What leaders emphasise in their regular conversations sends a strong signal of what is important to them. Naturally, meetings gravitate to the drivers of the business; operational logistics, deadlines, budget and profitability. None of these will ever go away. The question is; if safety is truly an imperative, do we give it prominence by integrating it into our discussions regarding daily planning, production targets, strategy, HR and budgets?

2. What we measure

It is insufficient to talk about safety and then to measure only process efficiency and production performance. If workers are measured solely against production targets, then that is where their focus will be. It is understandable to measure tonnes moved, structures erected

¹ IAEA Report INSAG-7 Chernobyl Accident: Updating of INSAG-1 Safety Series, No.75-INSAG-7. (1992). International Atomic Energy Agency. Vienna.

² Adams, P. (2010). *Gulf oil spill: President's panel says firms complacent*. Retrieved 18 November 2013, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-11720907>

or minerals extracted; because they are tangible. It is a little more complex to measure whether someone is working safely.

That is why so many companies are over-reliant on compliance mechanisms and primarily monitor lagging indicators such as the frequency and severity of incidents. Unfortunately, this is a reactive approach as the near miss or incident has already occurred. It is an ineffective gauge of the health of the safety culture in the organisation.

Similarly, measuring the number of activities versus the quality of activities is usually futile. Knowing how many risk assessments were completed doesn't provide any significant insight. It would be better to measure how many hazards were identified and what actions were taken to make the conditions safe. In this way, we are moving away from a paper exercise to expecting people to take responsibility for the safety of their work area.

The challenge is that it takes some effort and consideration to identify and proactively monitor the behaviours, processes and leading indicators needed to create the desired safety culture.

3. What we reward

There is a well-known principle in life: what is rewarded or recognised gets repeated. Most organisations have a bonus system for meeting production goals. Surprisingly, not as many have a safety category in their reward scheme. In fact, many companies still have a punitive approach towards safety and focus on the things they do not want, instead of what they do want.

This is often because the leaders have not taken the time to decide how they are going to measure safety. If a reward programme is in place, it is often based on lagging indicators such as a million LTI-free hours. What is needed, however, is a recognition strategy that stimulates internal motivation, rather than one that encourages people to take shortcuts or hide accidents.

4. How we react to failure

One of the most powerful messages leaders give out is the way in which they respond when something goes wrong. It is wonderful to have a beautifully framed vision and set of value statements hanging in the foyer. However, the actual values are seen in the way in which problems are addressed and resolved.

In these moments, do we try to assign blame by finding the guilty party and discipline them, or do we first make sure everyone is okay? Do we reinforce a learning culture by facilitating a comprehensive investigation that not only looks into what happened, but tries to find out why and how it happened?

5. The allocation of resources

There is a saying: “put your money where your mouth is”. Very few things reveal what a company really deems important than where its time and money is spent. Does the safety department receive a reasonable portion of the budget? Is it financially empowered to do what is necessary to build a resilient safety culture? Are leaders seen on site or are they too busy stuck in meetings? The answer to these questions is a reflection on the real priorities.

6. Our criteria for selection, advancement and termination

Workers experience safety as mere lip service when people are promoted because of their production achievements, irrespective of their attitudes towards safety. On the other hand, companies galvanise their safety culture when they overlook leaders who have a meagre commitment to safety.

7. Our deliberate attempt to coach or model behaviour

At the end of the day, creating a robust safety culture is going to take dedication and leaders who are willing to put the time, effort and resources into giving safety the precedence it deserves. “Walking the talk” is no longer a nice catch phrase, it is an absolute necessity.

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