

THERE MUST BE A BETTER WAY A NEW ERA TO SAFETY

By Dr Brett Solomon
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Improving one's safety performance has become a burning issue for many organisations. The strategies being employed just haven't always delivered the results they were hoping for. It is evident that the adage of "you cannot expect different results by keep doing the same thing" is so applicable here. There is a definite call to a new approach to safety.

Stan Antonsen divides safety management into three broad phases; disciplines, regulated, and cultural. Each takes a different tactic, with distinct interventions, advantages and disadvantages.¹

1. Disciplined Safety: A punitive method to safety comes from the mindset that people are the source of all errors. The belief is that incidents are the outcome of unsafe actions of individuals. Improving safety is done by finding the guilty parties and disciplining them. In doing so, we successfully dealt with the problem. Thus, there is no reason to search further for systematic conditions.

¹ Antonsen, S. (2009). *Safety Culture: Theory, Method and Improvement*. Surrey, England: Ashgate.

This tactic is deeply rooted in classic behavioural psychology. Dr Sydney Dekker and other influential thought leaders such as Dr Scott Geller are strongly opposed to this philosophy. They advocate that human error is merely a symptom of faults deeper within complex systems. “The assumption is that people can simply choose between making errors and not making them – independent of the world around them.”² Nobody deliberately comes to work to cause an accident.

We should be cognisant of the fact that people make choices with the intent of doing a good job. Their decision-making process made sense to them at that moment otherwise they would not have made them. If we really want to understand human error we need to find out *why* it made sense to them. If it made sense to them, it is possible it will make sense to others. Thus there is a chance it can be repeated.

Dekker argues that mistakes are the beginning point, not the conclusion. It is from this perspective that we can find the root cause to learn from it and ensure that it does not reoccur. When the assumption is that people are the source of trouble the outcome is always predictable; further training, adding tighter monitoring or disciplinary action.³ From my personal experience, I have learned that if things go wrong, it is critical to find a better way to understand the context of the decisions that were made by the persons involved.

2. Regulated Safety: These companies have a safety management perspective where their focus is on the formal elements of safety. Leaders believe that the more procedures and work instructions they can introduce, the more they can regulate people to work safely. The downside is safety becomes the responsibility of management, and it is their duty to create safe working conditions through control.⁴

When an incident happens, management feels that by upgrading their protocols it will eradicate the problem. “It relies on achieving control through measures and policies calling for compliance.”⁵ The reality, however, is that by adding or trying to enforce policies does not guarantee compliance. In fact, according to James Reason, it can escalate the problem. Hence the saying “too much control is no control”. Even though a policy is in place, it can still be misunderstood, ignored or circumvented.

Also, no amount of procedures will be able to cover all the possible safe responses needed in the constantly changing and array of unsafe working conditions or situations.⁶ Reason

² Dekker, S (2006). *The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate.

³ Dekker, S (2006). *The Field Guide to Understanding Human Error*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate.

⁴ Barling, J. & Hutchinson, I. (2000). Commitment vs. Control Based Safety Practices, Safety Reputation, and Perceived Safety Culture. *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 14, 76-84.

⁵ DeJoy, D. M. (2005). Behaviour Change Versus Culture Change: Divergent Approaches to Managing Workplace Safety. *Safety Science*, 43, 105-129.

⁶ Reason, J. (1990). *Human Error*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

highlights the shortcomings by citing examples of where businesses added new and improved procedures only to see their safety frequency rates increase.

3. Safety Culture: The cultural approach came to the forefront from a psychological view that takes people's attitudes, values and perspectives into consideration, using informal and social interactions that impact safety. Hale pointed out that there is more than enough evidence to prove that an over-emphasis on the structural elements of safety is not working.⁷

The culture view takes people's attitudes, values and perspectives into consideration. It places attention on the informal and social interactions that impact safety.⁸ Managers must first find out what "behind the scenes" cultural forces influence people before they start to understand, why they make the decisions they do. Only then will they be able to address these underlying causes and find the right solutions necessary to create the safety culture they desire.

I have never consulted with a company where it is not abundantly clear that working safely is paramount. Yet, there is an apparent dissonance or disconnect from what is proclaimed to be a value to that which is practised. One of the issues we see on a consistent basis is that workers have a perception that production pressures require them to adjust, deviate or short-cut time consuming safe work practices (if it is true or not is another discussion).

Recently I was part of a morning's safety meeting where there was a strong plea for working safely. It was not hours later when a manager arrived on site and started making threats that people would lose their jobs if they did not pick up the pace. This message was taken literally by the employees that, no matter what, they must work faster because they do not want to lose their jobs.

Whether that was the manager's intention or not is up for debate. Nonetheless, because this was a regular occurrence; a culture has been created, where they talk about safety but in reality, working quickly, even if it means compromising on safety, is the actual value.

The hypocrisy, within this mine; is if someone is caught contravening one of the rules, they would be sternly reprimanded or disciplined. If they sincerely want to see genuine change, they are going to have to establish a new paradigm that while meeting production demands is crucial to its survival it cannot be at the cost of working safely.

Only when workers see and believe that their jobs are not in jeopardy when they work safely (sometimes slowing production but as an exception) and feel comfortable that management sees any refusal to perform unsafe work as carrying positive intent, unsafe behaviour will continue to be the norm.

⁷ Hale, A. (2000). Culture's Confusions. *Safety Science*, 34, 1-14.

⁸ Antonsen, S. (2009). *Safety Culture: Theory, Method and Improvement*. Surrey, England: Ashgate.

It is these types of underlying subtleties that can sabotage a company's safety culture. Cameron and Quinn, experts in cultural transformation, outright declared that all change initiatives that don't factor the powerful ingredient of organisational culture are doomed to fail.⁹ Managers are naturally prone to returning to their old ways of doing things. Lasting change can only take place when the fundamental drivers of a company's working culture are addressed. If organisations will not make real changes to the underlying values that make up their culture, there is little hope for any enduring improvement in safety performance.

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⁹ Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2006). *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework* (Rev. ed.). San Francisco: Jossey- Bass.