

Safety Culture: Principles and Cautions in Applying Lessons From Other Industries

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Why Safety Culture?

- Most serious accidents involve human error, operating outside the design boundaries, failure to report problems, etc.
- Experts have argued that blaming the person at the sharp end doesn't enhance safety
- Innovations that don't fit a culture are hard to sustain
- Measure of culture could be leading indicators of migration toward accidents

Measuring Safety Culture

- Usually measured as safety climate or self-reported attitudes, values, practices (Flin, Helmreich, Gaba)
- Existing climate measures have multiple dimensions, not standardized
- Questionnaires do not get very “deep”: culture is a system, not a sum (e.g., Schein)
- People think of culture very differently, so vague questions get improvised answers

Safety Culture Content

Rough agreement on the content of safety culture, drawn from Reason (1997), High Reliability Organizations theory (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2002), etc.:

- High priority on safety
- Informed, reporting
- Mindful, heedful, questioning
- Just, fair, respectful, caring
- Flexible, decisions migrate to front-line experts
- Learning, developing for the long-term

Surveys Are Part of the System

- Anonymous surveys are a workaround based on unwillingness to talk
- May be useful at some stages to get going with conversations about what and why
- Everything you do has an impact, including safety culture surveys (create enthusiasm or cynicism, etc.)
- People are watching what happens (expecting scapegoats and ceremonies)

Informative Comparisons

- Time
- Department
- Hierarchical level
- Variation may be as important as level!
- Culture does not exist in a vacuum – the usefulness of cultural elements depends on context, as the usefulness of any capability depend on strategy and context

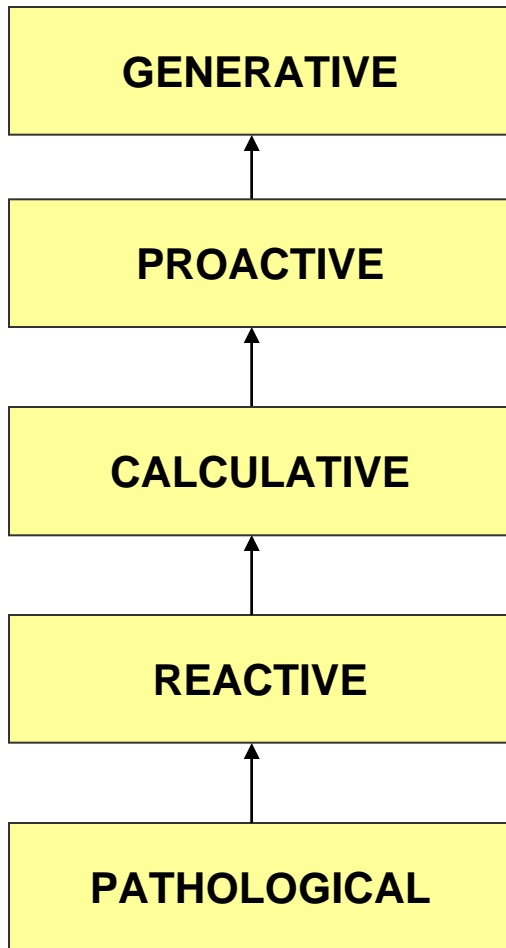
Changing Culture

- It is hard to change culture by directly opposing it, e.g., a direct assault by new senior managers with widespread change of personnel, new incentives, etc.
- Often, success comes by building on existing cultural strengths, i.e., by inventing and celebrating new ways to solve common problems that reinforce and reinterpret the culture and add new desired elements
- Start where people are now; different starting points require different approaches and expectations (e.g., a reactive vs. proactive culture)

Building On Cultural Strengths

- An alternative to opposing an existing culture is to identify cultural strengths that can be drawn upon for support and then “tilt” the culture (Schein, 1992; 1999)
- At Millstone Nuclear Station, deep cultural values of “**excellence**,” “**professional integrity**” and “**safety**” were reframed to support new values of “**mutual respect**” and “**openness**”:
 - “**excellent managers have no problems**” → “**excellent managers want to hear about problems and surprises in order to prevent more serious problems**”
 - “**professionals have deep knowledge in their field of training**” → “**professionals listen to and learn from other professionals in order to enhance safety**”

The Safety Culture Ladder



Chronic unease (Mindfulness)
Safety seen as good business
New ideas are welcomed

Resources are available to fix things before an accident
Management is open but still obsessed with statistics
Procedures are “owned” by the workforce

We have our Safety Management System, we cracked it!
Lots and lots of audits
We collect lots of statistics

We are serious, but why don't they do what they're told?
Lots of discussions to re-classify accidents
You have to consider the condition we are working in

We do what we can get away with!
I've done my bit for Safety this year
Of course we have accidents, it's a dangerous business
Sack the idiot who had the accident

Culture and...

- Health care systems are made up of technology, organizations, and people
- Culture is one element, but it must work with the technologies and work systems and the political realities of multiple stakeholders
- What helped the nuclear power industry was a collective industry safety effort

Principles

- Start where people are; listen to and understand them
- Engage broad participation
- Work on things that matter to people with visible resources/commitment
- Communicate; create shared symbols
- Walk the talk: actions speak louder than words
- Build relationships
- Cultivate distributed leadership
- Look for partners and role models inside and outside
- Align structures and people with the mission: incentive systems help, but people use them to get what they want

Cautions

- What worked in aviation or nuclear power may not work in your organization
- Don't just copy; understand how it works!
- Modify/localize innovations
- Speed up feedback: don't wait for lagging indicators like accidents or near-misses
- It's tempting to manage through fear; it doesn't work well for long