

Understanding safety culture

Understanding what influences the culture of your organisation can make a significant contribution to changing employee attitudes and behaviours in relation to workplace health and safety. For a safety culture to be successful it needs to be led from the top—that is, safety culture needs to be embraced and practised by the CEO and senior managers.

Strong leadership and management commitment is directly related to safety performance as it demonstrates by example to employees what actions will be rewarded, tolerated or punished, which in turn influences what actions and behaviour employees initiate and maintain.

What is a safety culture?

A safety culture is an organisational culture that places a high level of importance on safety beliefs, values and attitudes—and these are shared by the majority of people within the company or workplace. It can be characterised as ‘the way we do things around here’. A positive safety culture can result in improved workplace health and safety (WHS) and organisational performance.

As a safety leader you should ask yourself?

- how important is safety?
- is safety important most of the time or all of the time?
- is it okay to compromise on safety if it's going to be more expensive?

Companies that want to have a positive safety culture, which everyone owns, should develop and promote managers with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully undertake the responsibilities of the safety.

The [Construction Safety Competency Framework](#) identified nine broad behaviours, or culture actions, that are considered essential to the development of a positive safety culture. These are listed below.

1. Communicate company values
2. Demonstrate leadership
3. Clarify required and expected behaviour
4. Personalise safety outcomes
5. Develop positive safety attitudes
6. Engage and own safety responsibilities and accountabilities
7. Increase hazard/risk awareness and preventive behaviours

8. Improve understanding and effective implementation of safety management systems
9. Monitor, review and reflect on personal effectiveness.

The culture actions can easily be implemented by any company regardless of its size, and most of them can be introduced with little or no direct financial cost to the company. Each of the nine culture actions are outlined below.

Culture action 1 Communicate company values

Relate behaviours, decisions and attitudes that are expected, supported and valued by the company.

Organisational safety values vary from company to company. They can be based on zero incident programs or defined as a general preventive statement (e.g. ‘... prevention of work related injury and illness by providing a safe and healthy work environment for a company’s employees and subcontractors’). The real message for any safety values approach is *safety first*. Safety should become a part of your everyday values and action, and not be seen as an ‘extra task’.

Messages can be communicated and embedded via company work health and safety policy statements, safety posters, toolbox talks, ‘walk-arounds’ by management, regular reinforcement by all ‘non-safety’ managers or any other corporate communication method used by the organisation.

Culture action 2: Demonstrate leadership

Act to motivate and inspire others to work towards achieving a particular goal or outcome by sending clear and consistent messages about the importance of work health and safety.

Leading from the top down can be demonstrated by:

- seeking staff engagement and participation when developing ‘safety’ tools (e.g. checklist inspections, safe work method statements, job safety analyses)
- wearing personal protective equipment when on-site
- conducting periodic checklist inspections
- conducting periodic risk assessments
- conducting periodic toolbox talks.

Leadership attributes can be fostered among all workers by developing ownership. Consider seeking staff engagement and participation when developing safety tools such as checklist inspections or safe work method statements/job safety analyses (SWMSs/JSAs). Compliance with these is more likely if the individual has a sense of ownership of the task.

Culture action 3: Clarify required and expected behaviours

Clarify to immediate employees the specific behaviours required and expected of them.

Develop and standardise behaviours and actions by clearly communicating via:

- emails
- memos
- informal conversations
- toolbox talks
- other communication processes used in your company
- addressing inappropriate behaviours, actions or lack of action
- reinforcing appropriate behaviours and actions with praise or thanks.

Culture action 4: Personalise safety outcomes

Make work health and safety more obvious, relevant and emotional for the individual to personalise their role in preventing and eliminating risks and hazards.

Managers can personalise the impact of an employee injury or death by communicating:

- the personal impact of the risks of a process or distinct task when an individual is injured or becomes ill; or if his or her actions (or lack of them) cause injury, illness or death to a workmate
- why it is important to the individual and the project that employees ensure their own safety and health and that of others
- the behaviours your company expects everyone to consistently adopt.

The impact of an injury or fatality can be personalised by relating that incident is not just an anonymous statistic reported in annual workers' compensation reports, but a workmate who has a name, a partner, children, parents and siblings.

Emphasise that your industry still has far too many avoidable injuries and fatalities, and that in some Australian work health and safety jurisdictions, individuals may be held accountable under reckless conduct or workplace death provisions. Consequences of this accountability could include heavy fines and/or imprisonment.

Culture action 5: Develop positive safety attitudes

Foster the development of attitudes and beliefs that support safe behaviour.

The significance of 'driving down' the safety culture to the shop floor or work-site, where the risk exposure is the greatest, cannot be overestimated. Companies that encourage managers, employees and subcontractors to challenge unsafe behaviours and attitudes in others, and to also recognise and encourage those who have shown a positive attitude towards safety, will maximise the likelihood of positive attitudes and beliefs becoming shared values, resulting in a positive safety culture.

By developing positive behaviours and encouraging open and informed conversations, managers are creating an environment where it is OK for anyone to challenge unsafe behaviours and attitudes in others. The absence of safety policies and procedures or a lack of commitment to safety makes it more difficult to develop and maintain a positive safety culture. Some overall values, beliefs and attitudes that should be fostered and regularly reinforced as personally relevant are:

Values

- Workmates' lives and wellbeing are important — people should go home in the same condition they came to work in.
- Soing the 'right' thing is important.

Beliefs

- Speaking up about safety won't threaten my job.
- If I do speak out, something will be done.
- If I don't act, I would be responsible if something happened.
- Good construction is about working safely—it is not a separate concern.

Attitudes

- My personal safety is more important than money.

- Wellbeing and personal safety in the workplace are more important than money.

Culture action 6: Engage and own safety responsibilities and accountabilities

Increase input, actions and involvement in the safety management process by individuals.

At a safe workplace people will:

- understand what they need to do and why they need to do it
- think about what they are doing before they do it
- look for hazards proactively and manage risks before they cause harm
- take care of hazards themselves without needing policing
- believe they are responsible and accountable for making sure that they and their workmates remain healthy and safe
- follow workplace rules.

Ownership is one of the indispensable cornerstones of a successful safety culture. To encourage or develop ownership, senior managers can foster and maintain the following:

Engaging employees:

- Obtaining employee input into safety management on a daily basis — not just through work health and safety committees or other formal means.
- Reducing the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality through building trust.
- Involving all workplace management in the planning process.
- Sharing the information with workers.

Building relationships:

- Creating a sense of belonging through team building.
- Providing opportunities for people to meet socially (e.g. BBQs).
- Having regular conversations at a social level (e.g. enquiring about things important in colleagues’ lives).
- Generating conversations about safety — subtle weaving of safety into general conversation
- providing good amenities that promote interaction and show that management cares for the wellbeing of the workplace.
- Employees (e.g. clean and tidy staff rooms, tea, coffee and hand washing facilities and clean toilets).

Demonstrating support:

- Trusting people’s judgments on safety and opinions on work matters.
- Having an open door policy by encouraging people to speak openly about safety breaches.
- Empowering by rewarding those who raise safety issues and helping them to progress and resolve issues.

Culture action 7: Increase hazard/risk awareness and preventive behaviours

Increase the individual’s understanding of the work health and safety outcomes associated with their decisions, behaviours and actions.

Meaningful two-way communication is key to heightening hazard and risk awareness as it enables necessary preventive behaviours to be generated among employees and contractors. Proactive identification and controlling of hazards and risk exposure are required under work health and safety laws, but are also cornerstones of a productive safety culture that take safety beyond legal compliance.

The ability of senior managers to communicate clearly and concisely in oral and written format for formal and informal occasions is vital in ensuring the management of work health and safety performance. Effective communication for managers is a skill that is based on effective awareness raising, giving feedback and interpersonal skills.

Companies that encourage management to obtain these communication competencies will increase their likelihood of successfully increasing hazard/risk awareness and preventive behaviours. Well planned communication is critical if a company wants to increase awareness, and when speaking with people about changing or improving their behaviour. It can also help build mutual trust between management and the workforce.

Effective communication should:

- be clear and direct
- be relevant to those receiving the message
- avoid blame (as this is likely to create defensiveness and the message will not be heard)
- emphasise the personal impact of the action or decision.

Communicators are also active listeners. Active listening means really hearing what the speaker is saying, not just waiting for your turn to speak. By confirming the listener understands what is being said, there is an increased likelihood of the speaker and listener having a shared understanding of the matter. An important offshoot of good communication is creating an environment where messages can be listened to and heard. Active and better listening can happen by mirroring (matching/copying language and body language), reflecting (confirming understanding by repeating key points in sender's message), and paraphrasing (summarising what has been said to confirm shared understanding).

Regardless of the circumstances or the language used, the consistent message is always that safety is a shared responsibility.

Safety focused managers will provide:

- consistent communication of the consequences of 'at risk' behaviours and why they should be avoided under all circumstances
- consistent communication of the company's values, policies and procedures throughout the workplace, including management, workforce, contractors and subcontractors
- a shared understanding of key hazards and their risks, and engagement by everyone throughout the workplace and the company to achieve solutions
- hazard-specific training to their workforce
- a collaborative approach to hazard identification/risk assessment and control.

Culture action 8: Improve understanding and effective implementation of safety management systems

Enable individuals to increase their knowledge of specific ways in which hazards are managed, as well as their ability to apply and implement the actual WHS processes

Senior management can improve their work health and safety knowledge by getting involved with the people who are doing the actual work or specific tasks. Increased knowledge should result in:

- the ability to identify unsafe work practices and unsafe behaviours
- the ability to do things better (e.g. safer work methods based on continuously improved JSAs or SWMS)
- the ability to problem solve to achieve safer work practices and safer behaviours.

To increase uniformity, predictability and understanding of safety behaviours and their elements, many companies base their safety systems on Australian/NZ Standards (or equivalent tools). Regardless of the developmental stage of your company or the tools it currently uses, it is important that there is the ability to systematically:

- analyse and inspect the entire working environment to identify and assess risks as well as design and implement appropriate safety management systems and evaluate their effectiveness
- assess the resources needed to establish and maintain safety management systems
- prioritise hazards and appropriate controls according to assessment and evaluation of risks
- consider a range of control measures to address possible inadequacies
- consider when to seek expert advice.

Companies can demonstrate their commitment to safety by having senior managers periodically on-site, and taking an active interest in work health and safety. This can develop engagement and ownership of safety responsibilities and accountabilities.

Culture action 9: Monitor, review and reflect on personal effectiveness

Frequently use various sources of information to gain feedback on the effectiveness of culture actions and other safety related behaviours.

This culture action will enable you as a safety leader to fine tune and continually improve your ability to complete the other eight listed culture actions, through the use of various sources of information and communication to gain feedback on the effectiveness of culture actions and other safety-related behaviours.

Leadership style is also important in developing and maintaining a positive site safety culture. Central to any leadership approach is the ability to foster good relationships with other managers and the workforce. Better relationships increase the likelihood that people will behave in a way that will achieve the safety goals articulated in the company values. If senior managers have good relationships with their employees, contractors and subcontractors, and they behave in a manner that promotes working safely, workers are more likely to behave safely. For positive relationships, seek to develop a style that promotes close involvement with workers to build trust and respect, while still maintaining authority and adherence to the safety processes.

(Adapted from: A Practical Guide to Safety Leadership: Implementing A Construction Safety Competency Framework, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/27620/>)

How do I implement this step in my company?

To understand your organisation's safety culture, it is recommended you take the following actions.

Tick (✓) when completed.

- Establish your company's safety values and whether you and your senior managers are committed to them
- Measure where your company is at with regards to living and applying these values
- Identify what actions the senior managers need to take to drive, communicate and display the safety values
- Communicate these safety values to your employees
- Encourage senior management to lead by example to demonstrate your company's safety values
- Develop and communicate standard procedures and instructions/standards to all employees so they understand the specific behaviours required and expected of them to achieve the company values
- Include and communicate company values in subcontractor, tender and contract information
- Make sure ALL your contractors and subcontractors adhere to these site/project requirements and have:
 - a thorough understanding of the workplace-specific hazards and risks associated with their activities based on the
 - implementation of SWMSs and JSAs if appropriate
 - established systems for managing their ongoing WHS risks
 - their employees appropriately trained, and with competencies and licences required for the contract work
 - their plant and equipment appropriately licensed or registered and maintained/inspected regularly
 - their plant and equipment operators fully trained, competent and certified where relevant
- Personalise the importance of your employees' role in preventing and eliminating risks and hazards
- Motivate your workforce to think and act safely by encouraging worker involvement and collaboration, developing relationships and supporting your workforce
- Increase your employees' awareness of hazards and risks
- Train your managers to communicate more effectively – including becoming better listeners
- Review and improve the WHS knowledge of your managers by providing training where appropriate
- Encourage your managers to:
 - continuously monitor, communicate and review all procedures and related safety performance
 - achieve continuous improvement based on realistic and realisable safety performance indicators

- foster workforce engagement and collaboration with the development, practice and maintenance of safety reviews
- regularly promote the significance of ownership, a sense of belonging, the meaningful involvement of the site workforce in safety procedures and the advantages of sharing information
- reinforce the personal importance of safety
- embody safety behaviours in all procedures and written and oral instructions
- review the effectiveness of procedures and instructions
- check the understanding of instructions by the workforce at regular intervals
- ensure that educational and WHS objectives underpin procedures and instructions
- communicate and reinforce corrective actions necessary to remedy 'at risk' behaviours, attitudes and actions
- provide regular and consistent positive affirmation and reinforcement of 'good safety practices/attitudes'
- relate and share with the workforce the impact of negative and positive outcomes
- ensure that task and work competencies and other required WHS procedures are standardised, and
- assessment procedures communicated to the workforce and all levels of management throughout the workplace including contractors and subcontractors
- clarify and consistently reinforce and communicate required task competencies, associated WHS behaviours and why competent execution is important
- seek and use feedback obtained from consultations, 'walk arounds', collaborative decision making, self-reflection

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Workplace Health and Safety Queensland  www.worksafe.qld.gov.au  **1300 369 915**

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