

Safety culture, climate and leadership

What is safety culture?

Safety culture embodies the value placed on safety and the extent to which people take personal responsibility for safety in an organisation. Safety culture is often described as the 'personality' of an organisation, as it is a shared value of safety.

Safety culture is just one aspect of an organisation's broader culture. Culture forms naturally wherever there are groups of people working together to achieve a common goal. Organisational culture is invisible as most people aren't consciously aware of the shared beliefs and assumptions that influence their behaviour.

An example of how you might experience safety culture is when you start work in a new organisation. Initially, as a new employee you would try to gain an understanding of the safety practices in your organisation. At first you would be guided by the written rules, procedures, and training you have been given. You would also look to your colleagues and leaders, watching what they say and how they act. Based on this information and observations you would come to understand the safety culture of the organisation.

A positive safety culture exists when employees understand the importance of safety and exhibit positive safety behaviours. Examples of positive safety behaviours include wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) without being asked, completing risks assessments for all jobs and reporting all incidents. If an organisation has a negative safety culture, safety may be seen as unnecessary and this might lead staff to have poor safety practices. Negative safety behaviours include taking shortcuts or choosing to ignore safety hazards.

What is safety climate?

Safety climate is the perceived value placed on safety in an organisation at a particular point in time. Therefore, we can think of safety climate as the 'mood' of an organisation, based on what workers experience at a specific time.

As safety climate is a snapshot of safety at one point in time it can change rapidly, on a daily or weekly basis. For example, safety climate might be heightened after implementing a new safety procedure or after an incident. If that heightened safety climate is maintained over time, it can lead to changes in the underlying culture.

As safety climate captures the attitudes towards safety at a specific point in time, it is a useful indicator of safety performance. Measuring safety culture is usually done using an employee survey or team discussions.

What is safety leadership?

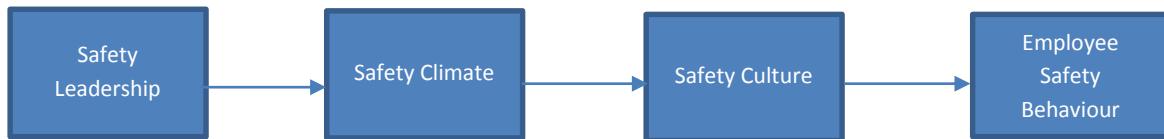
Safety leaders exhibit a strong commitment to safety, they get involved and inspire others to have positive safety behaviours. Safety leaders can exist at all levels from senior executives, middle managers to informal leaders among workers.

Leaders are important in any organisation as they provide direction to staff in terms of planning and supervising their work. They also provide motivation to staff to achieve goals by rewarding, inspiring and leading by example.

Safety leaders inspire others to have positive attitudes towards safety by setting a good example of safety and rewarding staff for good safety behaviours. If safety leaders are consistent they can influence the safety climate and over time have an impact on the safety culture.

Putting it all together

If safety leaders exhibit a strong commitment to safety, motivate staff and provide a positive example of safety, this will improve the safety climate. If we keep up our safety leadership efforts, over time it will cause people to reassess their deep beliefs and values about safety and have a positive effect on the safety culture. Through the actions of safety leaders, we can create a positive safety culture, resulting in better safety performance, which will help keep our employees safe at work.



By investing in safety leadership, we can start to influence the safety climate, and over the long term, build a positive safety culture. The end product are improved employee safety behaviours.