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Health and Safety Culture

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What is health and safety culture? We hear this term on many occasions. I get asked what I think an organisation's health and safety culture is like. As a safety consultant I only get to a see a snapshot of health and safety culture, but there are some key indicators that indicate both positive and negative health and safety cultures.

I relate health and safety culture to the force as in the Star Wars one, "life creates it, makes it grow, its energy surrounds us and binds us". The same can be said for health and safety culture, organisations and people within create it, it surrounds the workforce and makes people with the same beliefs and behavioural characteristics connect and work in harmony. The difference between the force and health and safety culture is that it is visible.

There is no legal requirement to have a positive health and safety culture, however it can make compliance with legal obligations easier for organisations. Having a positive health and safety culture can result in increased morale of workers and productivity can be improved through reduced workplace absences.

We can find the definition of health safety culture as developed by The UK Health and Safety Commission as:

"The product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management."

Another definition can be found from the HSL (Health and Safety Laboratory):

"Safety culture is a combination of the attitudes, values, and perceptions that influence how something is actually done in the workplace, rather than how it should be done."

You may walk through your organisation and observe things being done the way you want them to be done, but can you say the same when your back is turned?

You should be able to feel and see a safety culture. Does your organisation promote an environment of fairness and trust where workers feel it is safe to report and learn from mistakes or process flaws? Therefore, some key aspects of an effective culture come from the top down, so to speak. There must be a commitment from management. This commitment produces higher levels of motivation and focus on health and safety throughout your organisation. This is evidenced by the amount of resources in time, money and people and the support allocated to health and safety management. It is also evidenced by the importance given to health and safety against production and cost – your values must be that safety is first priority.

All management should be committed to health and safety and this should be demonstrated by conducting regular safety tours in their areas of responsibility. This will allow the whole workforce to have an opportunity to discuss health and safety issues with management. Managers can demonstrate their commitment to health and safety by wearing the correct PPE they expect the workforce to wear or stopping processes to resolve safety issues. Section 2 of your health and safety policy must detail the roles and responsibilities for safety. These must be clear and communicated to the workforce so that everyone is aware and understands.

Communication must take place between all levels of the workforce. Do you have systems in place to communicate safety information such as at the start of a shift or when there is a handover of duties at the end of a shift? Your workforce should have all the information necessary to conduct their work safely and understand the information. A procedure must be in place for your workforce to report safety concerns. Management should be approachable so the workforce can feel comfortable to raise safety issues face to face.

The workforce must be consulted and involved in safety discussions. When people feel that they have been involved and consulted in safety matters ownership and empowerment can occur.

Not only is there a safety culture, but you should introduce a learning culture. Do you take steps to monitor known problems, identify new problems and detect trends over time and develop preventative measures? Lessons learned from accidents and incidents drive improvement actions to reduce reoccurrence.

A very strong indicator of a positive health and safety culture is one where an organisation accepts that ultimate responsibility for incidents lies with them. Investigations are not carried out to apportion blame but to learn from them and to prevent reoccurrence.

We can look to an example in case law where an example of poor safety culture has occurred:

An organisation had three accidents at their factory. One required the worker to have his left thumb amputated after his hand was drawn into and crushed by rollers of an unguarded machine. A month later a worker cut their finger on a napkin folding machine where the electrical interlock had been removed and then a further incident occurred where a worker lost all four fingers from their right hand after it was caught between unguarded rollers. The firm pleaded guilty and was fined a total of £85k and costs of over £30k.

The judge on this case said *"that senior managers within the company had been aware of the culture in the company and rebuked it for its poor safety record"*.

If you are wondering if safety culture within your organisation can be measured, then there are some tools you can use for this. Typically the tools come in the form of a questionnaire. You will find, though, there are many safety culture questionnaires out there and they come in many different styles and formats. So how else can you measure safety culture?

Try direct observation of people at work, observe their behaviours, are they all wearing the correct PPE and are they following your procedures and safe systems of work? Do they freely report safety issues to management face to face? Do both near misses and accidents get reported?

With all that I have discussed it is important to understand that there are numerous factors involved in a safety culture and changing the safety culture can be a very slow process. The benefits of promoting a positive safety culture are it can make compliance with your legal obligations easier and can result in increased morale of workers and productivity can be improved through reduced workplace absences.