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De-Mystifying Organizational Culture for the Safety Professional

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Introduction

"Culture" is a widely-used term in the safety profession these days. Even a cursory glance through a year's worth of Professional Safety issues will reveal many articles either focusing on the impact of culture on safety, or identifying culture as an important factor in preventing incidents and injuries.

But "culture" can easily become a buzz-word, a vague and non-descriptive term that doesn't help practical people achieve practical goals. The purpose of this paper is take the important idea of "culture" out of the realm of jargon and mystique; to define it and explain it with sufficient clarity so that it can become a useful conceptual tool to help safety professionals improve safety performance.

Defining Organizational Culture

Here's an interesting experiment you can conduct: take a group of people and tell them you're going to give them a timed task that will last two minutes. Ask them to take a piece of paper and write down as many responses as they can to a question you will show them. Then put the following question in front of the group, on a flip chart or as a projected slide: "What is in the room right now?" After two minutes, ask them to stop writing. Then let them feedback verbally what they wrote down, without repeating anything said by someone else.

With most groups, you'll find the vast majority of people will list visible items in the room, such as furniture, clothing, books, or light fixtures. A small number of people might list invisible things like air or sounds. No one or only a few will write down abstractions pertaining to people, such as "emotions," "thoughts," "personalities," or "ideas." And usually no one will think to list abstractions that pertain to more than one person, such as "relationships," "shared history," or "culture."

Of course, everything noted above is "in the room." But we have a bias towards visual perception. Under a little bit of time pressure or perceived competition, we tend to focus our awareness on what we can see, and pay less attention to the ideas we have about an environment. This tendency gets amplified among those of us who are passionate about safety. Incidents and injuries usually take place in the visible world. The people who are most likely to get hurt at work are usually people who spend their lives dealing with physical things, not ideas. In other words, most safety professionals and the people they are trying to protect have a built-in tilt towards more concrete, less abstract ways of dealing with the world. No wonder people get mystified by an idea as abstract as "culture."

The concept of culture originated in the field of Anthropology and was first applied to explain differences between various ethnic and national groups. Anyone who has traveled outside of his or her region quickly realizes that people in different places do things differently. Men in the countries surrounding the Mediterranean stand close to one another when they talk, close in a way that many American men would find threatening. Families in many African cultures sit on the floor and eat from a common plate when they gather for dinner. In many parts of the world it is considered a serious insult to show the bottom of your feet or shoes to someone. People talk slower in some places, faster in others. There are countless examples of similar differences. We know that people in different areas behave and even seem to think differently, but why does this happen?

"Culture" is the concept that emerged to understand and explain these differences. The basic idea of culture is this: a group of people live together for a while and develop some beliefs and assumptions about the world they live in. They also develop behavioral methods for meeting the challenges of their environment. These ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting are successful in helping the group meet external and internal challenges. As a result they are shared by most group members and taught to new members. (Schein, 1992)

Social scientists have been debating over the exact definition of culture for many years. For our purposes, we can use any one of many general definitions such as this one:

"Culture can be defined as the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that knit a community together. All of these interrelated psychological qualities reveal a group's agreement, implicit or explicit, on how to approach decisions and problems: 'the way things are done around here.'" (Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa, 1985, p.5)

The idea of organizational culture simply extends the definition of culture to include groups such as businesses, clubs, associations, and so on. Company A has a culture where internal competition is valued and rewarded. Meetings are fast and aggressive; no one hesitates to offer their opinions. People assume you can say critical thoughts about others' work. In Company B cooperation is the norm. Pleasant relationships are prized. Confrontation is avoided, and people only criticize one another reluctantly and with great care. Many of the differences between the two companies can be attributed to differences in their organizational cultures.

There are a number of important ideas imbedded in these notions of culture. First, culture is a group phenomenon. When one uses this concept as a way to improve organizational performance, one is working on the group level, not the individual level. Second, culture tends to be invisible.

Our perceptual biases will often blind us to its existence or impact. Third, the components of culture are abstract but not imaginary. Norms, or expectations for behavior, are quite real. So are values, attitudes and so forth. These abstractions can't be touched or smelled but they still influence how we think, feel, and act. Fourth, culture is adaptive. Cultures are formed when their constituent components help a group successfully adapt to internal and external challenges.

Elements of Culture

If I were to say to you, "you need to improve your personality to get better results at your job," you would be justified in rapidly showing me to the door. If something about your personality were problematic, you would need to know which aspect of it needed work. Trying to change your entire personality would be an impossible challenge; not only that, but some aspects of your personality work well and don't need to be changed at all.

Similarly, it's most helpful to think about an organization's culture in terms of the specific elements that make up that culture. Many researchers organize these vertically, with more noticeable elements such as espoused values at the top, and less visible elements such as deeply-held beliefs and assumptions at the bottom. (Schein, 1992). Between these levels are found norms, a technical word that refers to the expectations that people have about the way things should be done.

Many organizations that attempt to work on culture spend most of their energy on espoused values, the official story about what's important to a group. This is problematic. Yes, espoused values have some importance. If a company posts placards saying "We don't care if anybody gets hurt," this will likely have a negative effect on safety performance. But putting up signs saying "Safety is our first priority" is not useful if supervisors routinely ask workers to do unsafe tasks because of production pressure. What is important are the actual values, not the value statements. And people learn what the actual values of an organization are by observing the behavior of key leaders, not by reading bulletin boards.

The deepest layer of culture consists of strongly-held beliefs and assumptions about reality. In one organization, the shared belief could be "I can give my boss news she doesn't want to hear, and I won't get in trouble." In another company the opposite belief might be held. Obviously, these different beliefs will generate significantly different thoughts, feelings and behavior.

Beliefs are usually formed in response to experiences. If the beliefs have adaptive power, in other words, if the beliefs help members of the group survive or prosper, then people will pass them on to others and will be understandably reluctant to change or even examine them. It is difficult to change beliefs in other people. Many people actively resist belief change when they perceive it as being driven by others, especially those with more institutional power. For these reasons, beliefs are hard to change, although the impact of successful belief change is very high.

Norms are a special kind of assumption. They are expectations about how things ought to be. The most interesting aspect of norms is that they take on the force of rules, enforced by peers: "It's the way we do it around here." For example, in some organizations there is a very strong work ethic at all levels. This takes place whether or not anyone is watching. If someone takes an inappropriate number of breaks or works too slowly his peers will let him know that he is out of

line. In other organizations it is “normal” for people to slack off when they are not being supervised. Someone who works very hard might get peer-level criticism for making others look bad.

As a general rule, norms are easier to change than beliefs. (Simon and Carillo, 1993) People tend to become more identified with their beliefs. A challenge to their beliefs can be experienced as a challenge to their sense of self. Norms can be changed by shifting behavior, whether or not people change the way they think.

Culture, then, consists of different components. It is useful to think of these components vertically, from shallow and visible to deep and invisible. Espoused values are an example of a cultural element that is shallow and visible. Beliefs about reality are at the deep and invisible end, with norms in the middle.

Safety Culture

Many researchers have noted that positive organizational culture is one of the drivers of good safety performance. (Geller, 1998; Petersen, 1988) We understand this on a common-sense level. If you live in a neighborhood where everyone litters, you’re likely to litter yourself. Similarly, if you live in an area where no one drops trash on the street, you are likely to avoid doing that. If an organization or department has a culture that applauds risk-taking in the interest of getting more work accomplished, it’s likely that a lot of members of that organization will take risks at the expense of safety.

Much safety management work is program-driven. Safety culture is the context in which programs thrive or fail. (Simon, 2005) A useful analogy is a large kettle of soup. The elements of the soup such as meat, noodles and vegetables, are comparable to safety programs such as accident investigations, training, auditing, and so forth. But it is the broth that is the most important element of the soup. If the broth is rich and tasty, the separate ingredients will take on that flavor and the soup will be delicious. If the broth is rancid, even the best ingredients will get spoiled and the soup will be inedible. The broth is analogous to culture. Culture surrounds and determines the efficacy of safety programs in the same way that the broth surrounds and determines the taste of the soup ingredients.

Positive norms around trust and clear communication are essential for high safety performance. Work environments and the people in them are constantly changing. Policies and procedures will provide one important level of protection against injury. But great safety requires people talking to each other, sharing information and looking out for one another. This is all common sense. These are aspects of an organization’s safety culture. How can they be improved?

Changing Safety Culture

The most important step towards changing culture is recognizing that culture exists and that it influences the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the members of an organization. “Failure to

understand culture and take it seriously can have disastrous consequences for an organization." (Schein, 1999, p. 187)

In terms of safety, this represents a paradigm shift. Instead of working exclusively on fixing physical conditions and preventing operator error, there is additional effort put towards understanding and influencing the beliefs and norms (i.e., the culture) of the group. (Simon and Carillo, 1998)

There are a number of proven methodologies for improving safety culture. One approach engages senior management as leaders of culture change. (Simon, 2005) This is the most conventional method since the hierarchical infrastructure is already in place.

Another approach is to develop partnerships between local management and front-line employees. (Liss and Wagner, 2004) This is a powerful method because it engages multiple levels of the organization and recruits active participation from the employees who are most at risk and who, through minute-by-minute behavior, have the most impact on safety performance.

A third approach is to recruit front-line employees to lead safety culture change, with active support from management. (Simon, 2000) This is perhaps the most powerful method for changing safety culture because it empowers grassroots leaders to influence their peers as well as management. It can be the most difficult of the three methods, especially in organizations that are unused to empowering front-line employee work teams.

The above approaches differ in terms of who is driving the process and what kind of infrastructure is set up to maintain the process. However, all rely on a common set of principles:

- Culture tends to be invisible. In order to understand and work with it, it must be made visible.
- Culture change takes a long time. You can't buy it or rush it. Performance improvements can take place in the short-term, but sustainable change takes years.
- Culture change is the responsibility of organizational leadership. Management must be actively involved, even if the change efforts are being driven by front-line employees.
- Culture change efforts are more successful when they are focused on specific elements of the culture, such as particular norms or beliefs.
- Culture change is sometimes more successful when implemented on the department or facility level, rather than company-wide.

Conclusion

"Culture" is too often used as a buzz-word, a vague term that refers to something important but is of little use to practical people solving practical problems. Organizational culture does have an impact on safety performance. By understanding what culture is, including some of its specific elements, safety professionals can develop processes to create sustainable improvement in safety performance. Good safety practices can become "the way we do it around here."

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