

Safety Culture from the Safety Professional's Perspective

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Introduction

Safety culture is the latest hot topic in the area of safety management, and many organizations struggle to identify and quantify this all-important topic. Many experts agree on the importance of safety culture in determining an organization's success or failure related to traditional safety results, yet there is no apparent consensus on how to describe the culture of an organization (Guldenmund 2000).

Safety culture has been defined as a subset of organizational culture. It is thought to affect the attitudes and safety-related behaviors of the members of an organization (Cooper 2000). Although there have been numerous researchers who have addressed various dimensional structures of safety culture and the effects it can have on safety performance, there has been little research on the conditions that produce a positive safety culture (DeJoy et al. 2004).

Zohar (1980) defined safety climate as the coherent set of perceptions and expectations that employees have regarding safety in their organization. Safety climate is a specific form of organizational climate, which describes individual perceptions of the value of safety in the work environment (Neal et al. 2000). Cox and Flin (1998) indicated that the safety culture in an organization is expressed through the behavior and attitude of employees.

These perceptions often incorporate dimensions, such as management's support and commitment to safety, employees' commitment and participation in the safety process, hazard identification and correction, training, and communications. The most common approach to measuring these key factors is to survey the employees to determine the strength of their perceptions/beliefs along each dimension.

According to Erickson (2008), more companies are analyzing corporate culture as a means of increasing safety performance. Many such interventions focus primarily on leadership. Leadership may be an integral part of communicating corporate culture. Unless

basic assumptions and values are orientated to employees as valuable resources, leadership is essentially useless (Bennis 1989, O'Toole 1996).

There is an abundance of research examining the relationship between leadership and safety. The majority of that research has been focused on lower-level supervisors and managers (O'Dea and Flin 2003). Very little research has been published on the role of safety professionals have in influencing the safety culture of organizations in which they are employed. Safety professionals classically assist in the development and monitoring of safety processes, communications, and policy compliance (Cooper 1998). There is some research (Wu et al. 2008, Wu et al. 2010, Wu et al. 2007) that has found that safety professionals have a significant impact on safety culture. However, this research has been conducted in the telecommunications industry in Taiwan; it is unclear whether similar results would obtain in the U.S.

About the Study

This pilot research is intended to further explore the potential impact that safety professionals have on the safety culture of their organization. The exploratory research is intended to document the understanding that safety professionals have (or lack) related to the impact of safety culture on organizational safety performance.

A sample of safety professionals will be surveyed for their perceptions of their organization's safety culture. The anonymous survey will be presented using an online delivery (such as Survey monkey) approach prior to March 2012. The data will be compiled and analyzed for presentation at the 2012 ASSE Professional Development Conference (PDC) in Denver in June.

This data-driven presentation will present the results of this unique research. Most research in the area of safety culture and safety climate has been focused on the perceptions of production (hourly) and supervisory employees. As noted above, we have found scant research conducted to identify the influence that safety professionals have related to their organization's safety culture and safety climate.

Safety professionals are often the individuals tasked with identifying, changing, and promoting their organization's safety culture. Their perceptions and understanding of safety culture and the potential value this factor brings to their organization likely plays a major role in the success or failure of those efforts.

Survey Methods

A safety perception survey comprised of 32 items related to safety culture was developed to identify the perceptions and understanding that safety and health professionals hold related to organizational safety culture. That survey was reviewed by a panel of experienced safety and health professionals to ensure content validity.

The survey was transcribed into Survey Monkey for easy distribution to an audience of safety and health professionals. For this pilot study, the Vermont Safety Listserv (VLS) was selected, due to its size and diversity of membership. There are over 1500 individuals approved to participate in listserv discussions. The VLS has been active for over 15 years, has members from a variety of industries located around the world.

The blind survey was distributed to members of the VLS on February 19, 2012. A second distribution will be made on March 5, 2012, in an effort to secure a reasonable sample of the VLS members.

The results will be analyzed using the SPSS statistical computing software. The data will be subjected to a Varimax Factor Analysis to explore factor loading. Cronbach's alphas will be estimated to determine internal reliability of key factors identified in the factor analysis.

Results

There are no results to report as of the due date for the proceedings papers. The survey was distributed to the VLS on February 19, 2012. The results will be presented at ASSE's PDC in Denver on June 4, 2012.

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