

Creating and Sustaining Safety Culture Excellence

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Introduction

Organizations on the path towards excellence in any operational category must examine and plan to leverage their culture. Does the culture work with or against the plan? What will the culture support and what will it resist? Cultures do not resist change. They do, however, resist forced change. Forced change isn't always bad, though.

Cultures are a combination of shared values, beliefs, characteristics, capabilities, reinforcing stories, and behaviors that shape what and why people do what they do. To some organizations, culture was never an external element of their safety program; it was always an integral component. Others look at culture only when a point of diminished returns was experienced with previous effort. Cultures are the most effective sustainability tool an organization has; it works hard to maintain the status quo. Or, if involved and leveraged effectively, it will develop ownership and reinforce the desired direction of change, forced or otherwise.

Excellence in performance is only obtained through highly functioning cultures. Cultures can be leveraged to obtain significant results, but only if there is a clear understanding of the starting point, the destination, and the overall executable strategy. Leadership must realize they are not only responsible for the culture of the organization, but also how it is managed, to drive breakthrough performance. Culture can be a barrier or an opportunity. How you look at it isn't necessarily the answer; how you manage it is.

Strategies and self-implementable tactics are shared in this paper to provide individuals, regardless of industry and cultural maturity, with an overview on how to create and sustain a culture focused on safety excellence.

The Eight Realities of Culture Change

“Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed; the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day.” – Frances Hesselbein

Debating what defines a culture is pointless. Discussing how to change it is valuable. With each New Year, conferences and publications allow the opportunity for perpetuating the debate on what culture is and how best to change it. Some approaches recommend top-down, while others insist on a grassroots approach. Some demand revolution; others promote evolution.

With these healthy discussions continuing year after year, and based on the author’s extensive global experience developing and sustaining excellence in performance and culture, the following eight points outlined in Figure 1 have become increasingly clear and are important to establish a baseline in this paper:

1. No two cultures are the same.
2. What excellence looks like is often different, culture by culture.
3. What is a transformational opportunity or measurement indicator for one culture may be a pointless effort or metric for another.
4. It is ineffective to try to emulate another group of individuals with different histories of success and failures, leadership and followership styles, capabilities and characteristics. You must utilize your unique capabilities and determine how they can best be leveraged to expand on your personal best.
5. There must be a practical, implementable, and repeatable strategy to drive and measure change. Most projects do not fail because of flawed theory; they fail in execution.
6. The strategy cannot be developed exclusively by the safety leadership. It must be developed in collaboration with operations executives to ensure it is complimentary and integrated into operational strategy, rather than a competing force on the resources and attention of the workforce.
7. Failing less is NOT a safety strategy. ¹
8. There is a difference between safety culture success and safety culture excellence.

Figure 1. Truisms of Safety Culture Change

These eight points have become, in this author’s opinion, truisms of safety culture change. When predefined methodologies are developed without considering the characteristics or capabilities of the culture, unnecessary resistance is created. Regardless of how or where the change begins, culture change happens best when led from within. Better practices identified during benchmarking trips and the right external subject matter expertise can almost always provide new ways of thinking. However, if the change journey is exclusively led externally, the sense of accomplishment is compromised.

Identifying the starting and ending points, strategy, and execution tactics require input from internal stakeholders for the vital element of ownership to be created. Passionate ownership could be argued as the root cause of performance excellence. Yet, it is difficult to create this sense of ownership with the average abstract goals and strategies used to achieve “safety excellence”.

It Begins with Goal Clarity

“Of all the things I’ve done, the most vital is coordinating those who work with me and aiming their efforts at a certain goal.” – Walt Disney

What does excellence look like in culture and performance? Setting off on any journey without a clear understanding of what the end point would look like is an exercise in futility, at best. For many, “excellence” is incorrectly defined, leading to a misalignment in activities and effort, which potentially destroys trust and credibility with leadership.

Is the goal to fail less, or to achieve something? When the goals in safety are defined by reducing the incident rates, the effort is focused on the organization on failing less, sending the message, “Alright everyone, let’s work harder this year to fail less than last year!” According to the research of Amabile and Kramer², proactively creating the perception and reality of progress is one of the most effective motivators in a work setting. The obscurity of showing progress towards failing less when it is unclear if luck or purposeful intent contributed to it, is never as effective as defining and visibly demonstrating achievement of something.

Excellence is the ability to demonstrate sustainable success. Success in safety is more than the absence of incidents. A successful outcome in safety means the right precautions were taken and risks controlled. The late Hall of Fame basketball player and coach, John Wooden, said success is, “A peace of mind which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming.” I believe excellence is the ability to do what you have proven as the right things to produce the most desirable outcomes repeatedly, and which have demonstrated sustainability with the current level of performance.

To correctly define the goal, begin with answering these following six questions outlined in Figure 2:

Question	Answer
1. What would excellence in safety look like?	
2. What would we see people doing?	
3. What would we hear people saying?	
4. What desirable beliefs would exist about the organization and culture?	What Would These Individuals Believe?
	• Executive
	• Manager
	• Supervisor
	• Employee
	• Contractor
	• Customer
5. What do people need to do (individual accountability) to make the beliefs and the outcomes a reality?	Define Desirable Behaviors of These Levels
	• Executives
	• Managers
	• Supervisors
	• Employees
6. What leading indicator measurements would designate we are staying on, or deviating off, course?	

Figure 2. Questions to define and determine a transformational goal for safety excellence.

Once the goal has been established, it is common to desire to begin marketing and begin to change efforts to expedite the ROI. Beginning on this journey without determining your starting point, however, is not only ineffective and inefficient; it can be career-limiting. Finding a focus and making it as simple as possible can make all the difference.

Steve Jobs once stated, “That’s been one of my mantras – focus and simplicity. Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.” To help make thinking clear, it is vital that the existing culture is assessed to identify the focus that would transform the organization.

Where Are We Right Now?

“History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are.” – David C. McCullough

What is the starting point? What one thing could we focus on that would provide us with the greatest return? Why are we the way we are? The first principle in navigation is to determine the starting point. Should more attention be placed on addressing weaknesses, building on strengths, or starting or stopping something? What are the existing perceptions in the organization, and are they accurate? What one thing, if focused on, would generate the most momentum and provide the earliest significant results?

Identifying the starting point is often ignored due to the overwhelming desire to vision the goal and start on a path to accomplishing it. More projects fail in the beginning than they do in the end. Failing to identify the most effective and efficient starting point not only wastes resources, but also delays visible progress towards the goals.

Leaders are responsible for the culture, performance, and beliefs within the organization. Are these elements understood and being managed, or are the leaders being managed by them? New tools and techniques are being made available every year. After personally leading hundreds of safety culture assessment projects, the average tools deployed are listed in Figure 3.

Average Safety Culture Assessment Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformational Pareto Analysis of Incident/Injury Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of Safety Management Systems (e.g. Structure, Involvement, Programs, Training, Reactive/Proactive Initiatives, Measurements, History of Success/Failures, etc.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception Survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group and Individual Interviews with Employees at all levels, contractors, vendors, community personnel, and occasionally regulatory personnel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations of Work Area and Activity

Figure 3. Common Safety Culture Assessment Tools.

Deploying these tools requires a focus as well, which is outlined in Figure 4.

Determining Where to Start?
1. What are the desirable and undesirable perceptions?
2. What are the behaviors that produce desirable and undesirable results?
3. What are the stories that are told within the culture, and who has the loudest and most influential voice?
4. What is the culture capable of accomplishing very well? What is it great at?
5. What would people support and what would they resist? Why?
6. Is the goal clear?
7. What is the current level of involvement in safety and what is this involvement focused on?
8. Are the expectations of performance AND results clear?
9. What has worked well to drive transformational performance in the past and what has led to failure?
10. Who are the most influential individuals, regardless of level in your organization? How do you get them on board?

11. What are people currently focusing more attention on than anything else to keep themselves risk-free?
12. Are your current measurements descriptive or prescriptive?
13. What is planned, operationally, in the next couple of years that might support or work against you?
14. If applicable, what is the current level of support or resistance from Union officials?

Figure 4. Sample questions to determine the starting point.

Once an assessment of the culture has been accomplished, not only should the leader understand the answers to the questions in Figure 4, but also realize transformational opportunities as well. These opportunities should be prioritized to be accomplished over the coming years. If external assistance is leveraged to capture this starting point, ensure the path strategies are documented in a fashion that facilitates internally-led efforts.

Creating a culture of safety excellence often results from a sense of accomplishment, leading to recognition that further change is not only possible, but desired. However, these efforts by themselves are not a strategy. Initiatives that promote and recognize improvement need to be demonstrated as executing against an established and believable strategy.

Establishing a Practical Transformational Safety Strategy

“Change is not a destination, just as hope is not a strategy.” – Rudy Giuliani

Identifying the one or two hard-hitting focus areas is easy for the prepared and experienced leader. It is more difficult to create the strategy to implement, market plans to sell others on the vision and expectations, develop tactics to ward-off competing priorities, measure progress along the path, and capture the hearts and minds of others.

Knowing what the end result would look like is not a strategy. Planning change and/or new programs is also not a strategy, at least not by itself. An effective strategy outlines what individuals will do, proactively and reactively, to accomplish the desirable goals. Imagine an organization that has recently developed a product or service that will soon be introduced to the marketplace. It is highly likely that executives will align in objectives, a marketing strategy (positioning, branding, etc.) will be developed, and plans to dominate the market will be created. Excitement for the potential future will be communicated and shared with enthusiasm. If safety is such a priority and value for most companies, why is not approached with the same focus, interest, and zeal?

Twenty elements have been found to comprise a transformational strategy for achieving safety excellence. After working with hundreds of global clients, ProAct Safety has found that many of the best safety-performing companies in their industry, on average, only effectively address eight of the twenty vital elements of strategy.

Conclusion

Sir Winston Churchill opined, “We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us.” It may be argued that culture is the final leverage point for change and new performance, but we must never forget culture cannot be a root cause. Cultures, like perceptions in surveys, exist because of previous or anticipated experiences.

Experience has shaped others’ shared thinking and behavior. This, in turn, shapes others as they experience the way (and why) things are accomplished. Cultures may be the ultimate leverage opportunity for a new strategy, but leveraging without seeking an understanding into what influenced it in the first place is not only ineffective, but wasteful.

An element preached to this author in US Army Military training was the fluidity of strategy. It is commonly known that while strategies are important and are typically successful, they are only effective up until the point of contact with the enemy. Often in strategy, the enemy is time, competitive priorities, and changes in market conditions. If a leader is surprised by an event, the strategy was not complete, expectations were not clear, and accountability was not proactively managed.

Achieving excellence can only be experienced when there is a clear strategy, vetted against the existing realities of business and culture. Sustaining the results is less strategy and more maintaining discomfort with the status quo. The fundamental key to excellence lies in the ability of leaders to maintain a sense of insatiable curiosity about the results they receive.

Look deep into why the results were achieved. What motivates performance? Was performance intrinsically or extrinsically prompted? Did individuals perform because they have to or because they want to? Are employees working to fail less or achieve success?

Bibliography

¹ Mathis, T.L. “Failing Less is NOT a Safety Strategy,” *IndustryWeek*, January 2012.

² Amabile, T.M. and Kramer, S.J. “What Really Motivates Workers: Understanding the power of progress.” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2010.