Inspiring Safety Culture: Moving to Next-Level Leadership & Actions

By Robert Pater

You have heard lots of talk about safety culture. But should you be interested in this? Do you recognize that things are not all they could be? That actions and loss control are suboptimal in a cut-throat, competitive world where weak performance can lead to being chomped into someone else’s meal? And isn’t “culture” just the way things are and cannot really be changed?

Yes. Maybe. Yes. And definitely, no.

Safety culture is a surround system, like the air we breathe, invisible but omnipresent. It is what really goes on in an organization that no one talks about but everyone knows. What people really believe, what is expected, although perhaps not expressed. What you must do to get rewarded, approved or promoted. How to avoid getting into trouble. What will get the attention of the powers that be or of line workers, as well as what consistently slips between the cracks. What people default toward when they are tired, distracted, stressed or busy versus what they espouse when the skies are clear and the weather is calm. What people do when they know no one is watching—or just do not care. You know, the real stuff, where actions taken and words spoken collide.

It is especially critical to develop high-level safety culture in a business world where many are working with minimal supervision and where some operate in the field effectively on their own. Command and control no longer work (if they ever did) in thinly supervised environments.

Benefits of a strong safety culture include:

• Losses are honed down from missed work or presenteeism (being at work in body but less so in mind). Every organization also has some people not working to high level due to chronic pain from injury (related to increasing workloads, aging, lack of adequate training, etc). Strong safety culture has the potential to prevent acute and cumulative trauma injury-generated pain and thereby result in better work performance as well as in more relieved workers.

• Workers, supervisors and managers are receptive and open to the change.

Safety has a positive reputation associated with being interesting and truly helpful.

• Retention of key workers is heightened, as fewer drop out due to injury or reaction to perceptions that their employer does not care about them.

• Customer service improves. Service is a people-product; those with higher morale and less distracting pain are more likely to provide better service.

• Employee engagement soars. Involvement is both an indicator of an organization’s health and simultaneously results in greater buy-in to safety and other company policies.

• Absenteeism lowers from both injuries and take-this-job-and-shove-it anger or pushback.

• Peer-to-peer support rises.

• Trust in leadership heightens; management credibility rises.

• The company’s community and business reputation becomes more polished.

• Work-life satisfaction becomes the norm rather than the exception.

So how can you better realize these benefits? Through a strategic approach of step change.

Next-Level Performance

After examining the safety performance of his Fortune 500 global manufacturing and service company, a senior vice president of manufacturing contended, “Ninety percent of the things we have done to improve safety are positive. But to get another 1% improvement now, it is about us, our people and our culture.”

If you are a leader geared to going beyond philosophy toward making real change happen, it is important to first clarify what you want. I suggest that potentially desired worker behaviors might include (it is best if you customize this to your own company):

• Employees welcome that they are in control of their own actions and the ensuing results—not over-blaming the company, the world, their equipment, supervisor or anyone else for things that occur to them. Of course, these external forces affect everyone. But the objective here is for each of us to internally know we personally have significant control over our own actions and reactions. We are each ultimately the safety director of our own lives.

• Use best tools for a given task. People often put more pressure on themselves than others put on them. I have seen workers not use best tools potentially within their reach, not because they were “dumb” or “ornery” but because they expected themselves to work quicker and harder than even their company wanted. Best work happens when people plan their tasks in advance, scan for, select, then most effectively use best tools and personal skills to accomplish that job.

• Adjust to changing environments and demands.

• Employ training they received. Of course, this is more likely to happen when training is practical, kinesthetic and usable and has workers believe training has the potential to make significant improvements for them.

• Report, early and often, budding problems, near-hits and incidents of any level.

• Reports provide first-alert intelligence warnings and, thereby, are an opportunity to nip issues in the bud.

• Apply what they know to a variety of tasks. People think in terms of principles, so, for example, they apply best ways of lifting to all tasks at work and at home, not just to lifting a box off the pallet as they were specifically shown.

• See the “unseen,” small forces that could possibly build up over time into real problems. And “static” situations (like holding weights that might otherwise be suspended, maintaining the same position for extended periods) invisibly but surely generate detrimental shearing and other forces, leading to potential injury. Like hypertension, what you cannot see can still harm you.

• Mentally work through and plan ahead. Thinking cumulatively is one critical key to preventing soft-tissue injuries.

• Consider and ideally embrace changes that can support safety rather than resist them just because they are new or different. Make modifications in their actions toward greater effectiveness.

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• Actively participate in and support safety in some tangible manner, even if this requires little time.
• Have high expectations of themselves and of their own safe performance.

Consequently, it is important for strategic leaders to think through what they specifically expect of managers and supervisors. These might include:
• Know company policies and procedures, realizing these apply to everyone, not just to line staff.
• Model safe performance. Be positive and express thanks when caught doing something unsafe or not in line with company policies and procedures.
• Believe in and talk positively and personally about safety benefits, beyond just statistical benefits to the company, going beyond mere lip service.
• Engage others’ interest and involvement in safety.
• Listen to workers. Keep an eye out for disgruntlement or resistance, then unearth concerns rather than try to squelch negativity.
• Show interest in and enthusiasm for others’ personal and professional goals.
• Have high expectations of themselves and of others, in a realistic and can-do manner.
• Be proactive and do not wait for reports of problems. Stay one step ahead of others on the safety awareness curve. Be open to finding and trial—running new and creative solutions to longstanding problems.

Four Safety Cultures

We have seen many safety cultures during our 25+ years of worldwide work. These cultures are not homogenous even within the same company, just as the ocean has many warm pockets and cooler currents, often near one another.

For example, we have found that no matter how strong an overall corporate safety culture, it always contains weaker areas. Conversely, within any organization that is not doing well, there are usually silver linings of high performance where one or more leaders get strong results.

When looking at any general cultural descriptions, remember the following:
• These are constructs designed to be helpful in identifying where you currently stand.

• No company fits neatly within one stage of culture. Rather, most organizations can have some elements of many levels, even all four. I have found that usually a company mostly fits within a given stage.

Although every company is unique, experience shows mapping these four safety cultures can provide perspective and key criteria for moving to the next level of effectiveness.

Our experience is predominantly with private-sector, larger companies. I have less exposure to public-sector/government or small businesses. I leave it to you to decide how applicable this information is to these other organizations.

Frustration and dissatisfaction can serve as natural energizers for companies trying something new to attempt to move to another level. But in many instances, companies remain stuck when leadership is weak or ineffective. There are many ways to break through such logjams, but these often require outside assistance; this is the beyond the scope of this article. [If you are interested in some ideas, see two of my previous Compass articles, “Leveraging Executive Safety Leadership” (2006) and “Ergonomic Leadership: 13 Strategies for Energizing Higher Level Performance” (2007).]

These four cultures reflect on a company’s overall culture, going beyond employee safety and health. By changing safety culture, you can positively impact total company culture as well.

Level 1: “Forced” Safety Culture

The distinguishing thrust of this culture is safety is “done to” workers by management or designated safety representatives of management. If you are familiar with Thomas Gordon’s four stages of learning, this would be categorized as an “unconscious incompetent” culture. In martial arts terms, this is a white belt level of safety culture.

Here, the approach toward safety is less than positive. Safety tends to be seen as an obstacle to doing business. Performance is weak as measured by any trailing indicators such as incidence rate, lost workdays and total costs. Emphasis is on enforcement, getting workers to do what they are told, “whipping them into shape.” Internally, this culture expects compliance with policies and procedures and is quick to punish those who do not do what they are told.

Similarly, focus is on external compliance. As such, safety reps are often seen as corporate shields or as the safety “police.” Surprise inspections are common—seeking to catch people doing something wrong, then punish them. The legal department is often highly involved in safety.

This culture is clearly past-oriented, trying to solve problems after they emerge. Managers frequently speak about safety as a “firefight.” Much emphasis is placed on issues that appear fixable rather than on most at-risk exposures. For example, although there may be few incidences of carpal tunnel syndrome and many slips, trips and falls, the former may get the greatest attention.

Engineering fixes are prized; skill or behavioral interventions are limited. This culture is not adapt at helping workers positively change their actions. Safety programming is minimal, it is often simply “paper programs” (e.g., postings on billboards, signs).

Motivation is usually command, demand and punishment, carrot and stick, bribes and threats. Not surprisingly, employee relations in general are weak or contentious. Workers do not think of their employer as being concerned about them. Employees talk about the “good old days” or count the days until their leave or retire. Involvement/employee engagement is low.

Training is pegged at the lowest common denominator—what “has” to be done and no more. Generic short videos or legally required safety talks are commonly thought of as the major component of safety training.

Workers are blamed for having accidents. Managers often refer to injuries as “stupid.” Executives are basically uninvolved in safety, turn a blind eye and expect the safety staff to handle this totally with minimal upper level active support. Supervisors give short shrift to safety.

Level 2: “Protective” Safety Culture

In this culture, safety is “done for” workers. It is management-driven. Think of this as a paternal culture—it could be either “stern” safety parenting or alternately “benevolent,” “concerned” or “interested.” Psychologists would speak about this culture as having an external locus of control.

Performance is average. In terms of my experience as a martial arts instructor,
this would be a blue belt level of culture. Lots of effort, more attention shown, beginning to see some success, yet still not very efficient or effective.

It is heartening that in this culture leadership understands and acknowledges that safety is important and impacts the bottom line. Emphasis is on minimizing costs as well as on compliance with appropriate regulating agencies.

While forced cultures do not value safety at all, protective cultures typically consider safety “number one.” But when push comes to shove, production pressures dominate—and everyone understands this, whether they outwardly acknowledge this message.

Another hallmark of this culture is its short-term focus—it seeks to immediately improve, making an impact on this or next quarter. As such, this culture is prone to purchasing quick fixes that promise turnaround results with no effort and minimal cost. Therefore, as one might expect, this culture does not do well with cumulative trauma injury prevention in large part because leaders and others do not think cumulatively. But they are better at dealing with single-source and more immediate acute injuries.

Protective cultures place a large focus on what I call “Level 1 accountability.” Managers do not necessarily see themselves as accountable for safety results. There is also a thrust toward personal responsibility, generally of employees only. The finger of blame tends to point outward toward workers. When injuries occur, this culture’s common default response is to generate a greater number and even more explicit policies and procedures.

Safety still tends to be backloaded and to focus on treating symptoms or post-injury cleanup rather than on significant prevention efforts. I recall speaking with the EHS director of a worldwide transportation company, explaining my perception that his organization was limited in its prevention efforts. He asked for evidence. I replied by asking how many SH&E professionals were on staff versus claims management staff. The latter outnumbered the former by 7 to 1. While dedicated and highly trained, he had been too close to the situation to see the forest for the trees—something any of us can be prone to.

Managers expect to get positive employee reception to their safety efforts and are often perplexed when they are skeptical or uninvolved. Focus can be on “idiot-proofing” safety, predominantly retooling and design fixes to make it impossible to not comply with safety rules or practices. In addition, there may be the beginnings of behavioral stirrings, with employees monitored externally. Accident investigations are top-down, the province of salaried staff. Motivation is usually of the carrot-and-stick kind, with the carrot based on incentives. Managers assume that safety performance hinges on employee motivation. These types of cultures are big purchasers of safety bingo and other external motivational products.

Employee morale is a step up from a forced culture. The predominant theme is, “This is not a bad place to work.” But employees’ perspective, like that of their leaders, tends to be short-term, with strong focus on “living for the weekend.”

Training is often Internet- or computer-based, often highly repetitive, sometimes including games. Leaders opt to provide training they see as easy to deliver and inexpensive rather than to provide interventions that truly transfer or develop critical and higher-level skills.

For example, in partial preparation for presenting a safety leadership seminar for senior management of a global company, I participated in the Internet-based hand safety training provided to all employees. Management thought this training was best-in-class. The module focused mostly on awareness and was well done, but it included generic advice such as “use good body mechanics” and “pay attention,” with no specifics or skills on how to accomplish either. Both are indeed critical to actually preventing hand injuries while working.

Overall, this protective culture is a step up from forced. It often comes about where smart leaders become frustrated with the lack of results of lower-level safety performance and actions. Or when they accept the seed of a potentially more effective approach. Or when they are acquired by another company that has a more advanced safety culture.

Level 3: “Involved” Safety Culture

At this stage, safety is “done with” company staff. In martial arts terms, this level would be akin to being a brown belt. Better attitude, definitely improved and more efficient results. Performance on any measurement scale is above average.

Safety is viewed as an opportunity, intrinsically important to overall productivity and quality performance. There is increased involvement on all levels, from executives to managers to supervisors to line workers. Employee concerns begin to surface.

Executives and managers arrange to receive safety leadership training seminars. Supervisors may receive initial supervisory safety training. In fact, this culture is characterized by executives and workers being onboard about safety, with gaps or disconnects mostly among many mid-managers and supervisors.

The general tone is to offer safety to workers rather than thrusting it on them. Workers report that they believe management is sincerely concerned with safety. Managers put significant time and resources (budget) into safety improvements and they expect strong results.

Employee morale says “this is a good place to work.” Focus goes beyond just monitoring behaviors externally or pushing compliance with policies and procedures toward helping workers make better decisions and apply what they have learned to their work.

Managers want employees to report near-hits and sometimes have reward systems to reinforce this. Note that this culture still has elements of “done for them” and external rewards, much like protective cultures.

Recognizing best practices and procedures is emphasized, with awards given to individuals and sites that show good results (usually measured by trailing indicators). Motivation is more positive and 24/7/365 off-the-job safety is discussed as important. Some companies begin to look at strategies for controlling fatigue and stress, which, in contrast, are often taboo topics in forced or protective cultures.

Training goes beyond motivation, emphasizing problem solving and developing needed skills for safety.

Someone once said that a weakness is an overdone strength. In line with this, the elevated success of this culture (compared to forced or protective) is also a danger. Leaders, professionals and workers recognize that their results are good and can become overly self-impressed, self-congratulatory or self-satisfied.

Ironically, managers in these cultures frequently express concerns about worker continued on page 10
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complacency, often not seeing how they lead the way in this area. I have seen where performance can be limited by “getting a shoulder injury from patting yourself on the back.” Also, what got them to the party can become taboo. There can be underlying pressures to not criticize a good thing. Where this pressure occurs, prevention suffers, as potential early warning signals go unreported or unheeded.

This culture is often characterized by an “ain’t invented here” (AIH) mindset; if we did not do it ourselves and our way, it has no value and we are not interested. While it is always important to customize any program, tool or training to a company’s specific needs, an AIH bias can block efforts to consider and evaluate interventions that might help boost this culture to a higher level of performance.

Involved cultures typically do a good job of picking off the low-hanging fruit. But after seeing an upsurge in safety results, this culture can settle into a safety performance plateau.

Level 4: “Integral” Safety Culture

Here, safety is done by workers for themselves. When I first earned a black belt in martial arts, my instructor took me aside and said, “Your learning is now your own.” Similarly integral is a black belt culture, with internal safety locus of control. In other words, safety attitudes and actions are the province of individual employees and managers. People are motivated by safety and identify with it. Motivation is mostly internal—from the inside out. People act safely for themselves, not because they are mostly concerned with being monitored, disciplined, praised or incented—even when they know no one is watching.

Because safety is viewed as having intrinsic value, there is minimal management use of external incentives to “buy” desired behaviors. Rewards tend to be oriented toward recognition rather than prizes.

Statistical performance tends to be global-class and is continually watched. But real focus is less on trailing indicators than on garnering everyone’s participation in some way. This culture has graduated from self-congratulation; it does not take its success for granted—gains can always slip back. Although outsiders may admire them, integral culture senior managers and key safety people are not sidetracked, commonly employing statements such as, “We are not there yet.”

They know they must continue positive safety efforts to avert slipping down, akin to Lao Tzu’s contention, “Things that are not growing are dying.” Like a great athlete, they know what they can do but also realize that being too proud sets them up to fall. They realize that high performance comes from daily practice and application of safe principles.

In this self-regulating culture, safety is accepted to have par importance with quality, productivity and morale. Leaders realize emphasizing one critical element (e.g., production) at the expense of another (e.g., safety) is shortsighted and will soon backfire.

This is certainly not a perfect culture. I have never seen a company, even those acknowledged as world-class, that does not have areas in which it can improve. But people do begin to think and act cumulatively.

In this culture, the perception of safety is more than an important obligation. Safety tends to be viewed as energizing, exciting, interesting, practical and useful at work and at home. While still covering skills needed to avert accidents, safety has higher aspirations, definitely going beyond just injury-prevention toward living a high-quality life.

Workers feel valued in an integral culture. The perception is, as stated by Alaska Tanker Co. CEO Anil Mathur, “The individual who does the job is the expert.” Workers have strong input into which new safety initiatives to bring in and which to jettison.

Integral tends to be a no-fault culture. Accident investigations focus on future prevention rather than on blaming workers. While there are always mixed messages in any organization, this culture seeks to unearth, then reduce them. Leaders are developed on all levels to be problem-recognizers, solvers and change catalysts. There is a conscious effort to select and train employees to, in turn, train their peers, to coach and reinforce new skills and actions.

Managers see their role as clearing the path of obstacles that might otherwise snag or block the way to higher performance, facilitating needed resources for everyone to act safely, with as few mixed messages and unnecessary stressors as possible. Leaders provide budget, direc-
interventions, perhaps bring in select outside assistance, communicate higher expectations to others, etc.

• Third, new results occur, culturally and then statistically.

This article is just the tip of the cultural iceberg. My objective is to help leaders change how they think. Even if no one reports to you, you have the opportunity to shape your culture by the way you plan, communicate and influence, up and down and sideways throughout your organization.

You need not do this alone. Share this or other relevant articles with critical action leaders. Find a way to energize them with in-person experiences (e.g., conferences, presentation, benchmarking). I have seen key leaders begin by saying, “We do not have the time or the resources to make any changes,” then become excited about new possibilities. They then find the time, the resources and scheduling to bring in new ways. Any plans that have been made can be remade—but this occurs only when leaders strongly believe there is a good reason to do so.

We have worked with many organizations that illustrate each culture and wanted to move up. Although it would be inappropriate to specifically identify companies who exemplify the four safety cultures, all of these perceptions are gleaned from exposures to hundreds of companies.

Begin by identifying the overall level of your culture. Then, using the characteristics of the next-highest culture as a guide, plan a campaign to incorporate the next culture’s key elements of desired culture.

No article can fix all problems. And, as noted, while cultures have common threads, each company is unique. I hope you can use some of this information to point the way. Reading, of course, may be a good first step, but it does not in itself actuate tangible cultural boosts.

The good news is that significant positive change is happening in companies throughout the world, even as you read this. I have seen this and have had the privilege of being part of real and significant improvements in safety culture, actions and performance. You can realize all of these with the right strategy and with strong, honest, determined leadership.

The Ergonomist as a Business Management Asset

By Cynthia Roth, COHN

How many times do you think your accounting staff, human resources director, president or CEO, CFO or COO have uttered the words, “This is the cost of doing business.” Or is it? Are the costs that drive down your profits, create rework, increase the costs of waste removal, reduce your productivity, increase quality issues and create employee dissatisfaction and turnover really the costs of doing business? Or is it a lack of education and understanding that these costs are manageable or even avoidable?

Are these costs, in reality, something that could be addressed and not be the usual costs of doing business? Suppose you are a director on a board for a large corporation. During a board meeting, the presenter discusses the millions of dollars spent in workers’ compensation and disability costs, the tremendous losses on the part of the company financially and the failing stock prices. How would you react? Would you feel the need to get some additional information to assist the company and to educate yourself on how to prevent the stream of losses and costs?

Management can use some direction in response to the question ending the last paragraph. As an SH&E professional, ergonomics may be part of your responsibilities if not integrated into your job description. In either case, you play a role in providing management and the board with an understanding of the cost benefits that can be achieved through ergonomics. Good news travels up the corporate ladder rapidly in a company excited about a large new product sale, a new product coming to market or the next best widget. However, when the news is not so good, filters are in place to keep those in power from understanding the real truths until sometimes it is too late.

Ergonomics & Economics

To fully understand how ergonomics can benefit any business, we must understand knowledge management, intellectual and human capital and some other economic buzzwords used today that apply to ergonomics for cost justification.

Let us begin with an explanation of economics, one old, one new. We first must define economics because we are talking dollars and sense.

Economics is the social science that studies the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services in terms of the tradeoffs between competing alternatives as observed through measurable quantities such as input, price and output. The field of economics comprises several potentially irreconcilable theories about systems of production and distribution, but as a general rule, economists study human behavior and welfare as a relationship between ends socially required and scarce means, which have alternative uses (Robbins, 1935).

In the late 20th century, areas of study that produced change in economic thinking were risk-based rather than price-based models. The study of risk has been influential, which views variations in price over time as more important than actual price. This particularly applies to financial economics where risk-return tradeoffs are the crucial decisions to be made.

Ergonomics addresses the risk-return tradeoffs. As ergonomics engineering consultants, we mitigate the risk by engineering out the problem. By removing the risk, we end the potential for additional costs and labor problems, and can manage and control the expenditure of the solution.

Risk such as insurance coverage can be transferred. With this method, you pay the insurance company to assume the risk, but you still pay. Would you be happy to spend $10,000 on a solution to prevent a $100,000 back injury? Would you spend $400,000 on a capital improvement, an assembly line, to prevent a recall of insurmountable dollars?

Knowledge Management

Let’s move on to knowledge management and understand where this fits into the picture. Let’s also tie it into ergonomics and risk return. Knowledge management is defined as a business activity with two primary aspects:

1) Treating the knowledge component of business activities as an explicit concern of business reflected in strategy, continued on page 12