

## Becoming a Safety Culture Kumu

*Timeless lessons from Hawaiian culture are relevant to your organization's safety culture, too.*

By [Robert Pater](#) | Feb 01, 2007

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**MANY** professionals seek the holy grail of upgrading their Safety "culture." But just what is culture, and how can you strengthen it?

Organizational culture is a surround system, like the air we breathe, comprised of often-invisible elements of what really goes on that most know about but few speak. You know, what's under the radar and slips between the cracks vs. what gets attention, who is a leader in name only and who actually makes things happen--and much more.

Elevating Safety Culture can have a mysterious feel. Arguably, culture critically underpins daily functioning. But despite myriad books and seminars on this topic, "culture change" is rarely tangible enough to make a substantial difference in corporate actions.

Let's get perspective from a true cultural expert. When last in Kauai, the westernmost accessible Hawaiian island, I had the privilege of spending time with Kehaulani Kekua, a *kumu* ("koo-moo" = master teacher) of Hawaiian traditions. When you watch her *halau* (school)'s hula, it is powerful, serious, energized--worlds apart from the for-show, commercial kind.

What does Kehaulani ([www.kaieie.org](http://www.kaieie.org)) practice that we can apply to stimulating higher-level Safety culture?

- *Continuity with the past.* Kehaulani goes beyond telling stories--important in itself. She humorously offers anecdotes about past *kumus*' challenges seen and met. These stories simultaneously anchor principles of high-level performance, rather than merely mandating rules. In addition to creating a sense of vertical community from previous times, these stories provide food for thought to those facing similar problems.

Do you maintain a line of continuity through past Safety success stories?

- *Ceremonies are participative and meaningful.* There's no just going through words or halfhearted motions. Full attention is expected and given when performing energized greetings and closings, in chanting, dance, and when studying plant and animal life. Her thought is, the power of culture dissipates when contact is only partial, when the leader is split between saying one thing while thinking elsewhere. As Kehaulani says, "Words must come out with *mana* (spirit, energy)."

Do you expect the same "presence" of yourself as a leader?

- *She emphasizes learning and development.* A living culture has to be a growing one, not focused only on past methods. Kehaulani says her mission is to inspire growth--in others, in nature, in culture--to keep their eyes on what's important. She suggests, for example, that members begin chanting sessions by asking for growth for themselves.

Are you focused on your own continuous leadership growth and development?

- *She's a designated keeper for a growing culture.* Kehaulani sees herself as a cultural steward, and she meets at least quarterly with other *kumus*. Like language, a living culture--whether Hawaiian or Safety--is perpetually evolving. As Lao Tsu wrote, "That which is not growing is dying."

Does your organization designate people to gather regularly to preserve the positive aspects of safety culture and encourage compatible safety changes? Are they open to new ways of attaining desired results?

- *Time is allocated to surface--and work through--problems.* Working closely with others can sometimes fray communications. Kehaulani invites all *halau* members to meet monthly to expressly elicit and heal problems that might be stumbling blocks to strong community.

Do you regularly spend time recognizing budding problems and work them out at the lowest level possible?

- *Receptivity to outside ideas is present.* Kehaulani demonstrates interest in others' compatible teachings.

Do you go beyond an "ain't been invented here" mindset?

- *She's dedicated to creating well-prepared experts of her students,* who are not just rule followers but leaders in their own right who can, in their turn, further the culture.

Are you doing a strong job of preparing/building others as Safety leaders and expecting them to act as such?

- *She emphasizes connection--*between words and deeds; between daily practice and home actions; between physical, mental, and spiritual well-being; between leader and students; between our external environment and internal reactions. Kehaulani reminds others to look below the surface, that *hula* is not just hand movements and costumes, that there is a hidden meaning (*kauona*) to all things. To remember details matter, to see those things that "cannot be seen."

Do you help elevate connection between others' home and work lives? Do you show them better ways to monitor their own safe behaviors?

Not just the realm of the exotic, strengthening Safety culture can lead to significant upgrades in communications, values, and daily actions on everyone's part. This can improve motivation, effectiveness, and injury prevention at work and at home, whether it is an island in the middle of the ocean or surrounded by waves of competitive pressures.

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