

Clarifying terms and misunderstandings

The purpose of this sheet is to clarify common terms, misconceptions and misunderstandings about safety culture. The complex nature of safety culture means that it can be difficult to clearly explain the construct to non-experts. There seem to be as many explanations of safety culture as there are alleged experts. This has resulted in a lot of confusion about safety culture. In addition there are many related and overlapping concepts, such as organizational culture, safety climate, and process safety culture. These terms are explained in the table below.

Safety culture terms

Term	Explanation
<i>Organizational culture</i>	Organizational culture has been defined as “the shared values, attitudes and beliefs of members of an organization that interact with an organization’s system and structures to produce behavioral norms” ⁱ
<i>Safety climate</i>	Safety culture and safety climate are often used interchangeably even though they are distinct concepts. The term safety climate was developed by Dov Zohar before safety culture. Safety climate only relates to employee perceptions about safety. Safety climate is typically viewed as a component of safety culture. It captures the perceived relative priority placed on safety by management ⁱⁱ .
<i>Process safety culture</i>	The term process safety culture refers to cultural factors that influence process safety. Since the term ‘safety culture’ originated from a disaster and refers to fundamental values about risk and safety, it incorporates ‘process safety culture’.
<i>Blame culture</i>	This term is often used to describe a negative culture where those directly involved in an incident are unfairly blamed or scapegoated. This type of culture reduces learning as employees hide incidents for fear of punishment. Some safety professionals argue for a ‘No blame’ culture, but a fair a just culture is more appropriate, as blame is appropriate in some instances.

There are a wide range of misconceptions about safety culture. These misconceptions can be highlighted by listing what safety culture is not.

Safety culture is not:

- limited to frontline employee attitudes,
- only concerned with employee safety behaviour or behavioural safety programs,
- equal to low injury rates,
- the sum of employee questionnaire responses,
- unimportant,
- the solution to all health and safety problems,
- an alternative to sound engineering controls and safety management practices.

A frequent misconception about safety culture is that it is limited to frontline employee attitudes and behaviour. This view of safety culture may be a result of the fact that safety culture is often assessed by surveying employees using questionnaires. Also many companies are interested in safety culture because the majority of their injuries are a result of noncompliance with safety rules. This view of safety culture tends to result in organizations focusing on changing frontline behaviour through training or rule enforcement. These interventions tend to have limited impact on the underlying culture, as safety culture is much broader. Safety culture is a reflection of the true values and priorities of the organization, which is driven by management values, priorities and actions. Employee surveys are used to obtain insight into their perception of the priority management place on safety. If an organization has a poor safety culture, it is a management or leadership issue not an employee attitude issue. The interventions therefore need to target managers and supervisors rather than frontline employees. There is evidence that these interventions are effective at changing employee perceptionsⁱⁱⁱ and injury rates^{iv}.

A related misconception is that safety culture is an occupational safety issue and is not related to major hazard risk. This misconception has resulted in the creation of a new term ‘process safety culture’ to make the distinction from this common misuse of the term

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safety culture. It is important to remember that the term safety culture was first used as a causal factor in the Chernobyl disaster. Safety culture has always been concerned with major hazard risk and was adopted by occupational safety experts more recently. While an organization's safety culture influences occupational injury risk (see sheet 4 on outcomes), it is a more critical factor in managing major hazard risk. If there is a need to make a distinction, then it is better to use safety culture for major hazards and safety climate for occupational injuries, as safety climate has mainly been linked to occupational injury. It is important to understand the breath of safety culture as often various stakeholders (e.g. regulators) have different understandings of the term safety culture.

In line with the occupational safety view of safety culture, another common misunderstanding is that organizations with good occupational injury statistics have a good safety culture. While this may be the case, it is also possible that the organization has a poor safety culture overall, as they focus all their safety efforts on occupational injury rather than major hazard risks. For example an organization could have good occupational injury statistics, while at the same time not undertaking required maintenance, which increases risk of a major event. The absence of occupational injuries provides little information about an organization's safety culture. It is therefore important not to equate the absence of injury with a good safety culture. Instead organizations should use the assessment tools available to assess their safety culture (see sheet 7 on assessment).

The abstract nature of safety culture is used by some to dismiss its relevance to safety or view it as less important than engineering or technical safety strategies. A positive safety culture is critical for effective hazard management, as it determines the effectiveness of the engineering interventions and safety management systems. It is clear from even a superficial review of any recent disaster that there were good technical solutions available to prevent the disaster from occurring, but they were not in place due to cultural issues. Good engineering is not a substitute

for a positive safety culture, as they are both essential for effective hazard management. Just because something is abstract and difficult to understand does not make it unimportant. For example love is also an abstract construct that people struggle to understand, but the world would be a lonely place without love.

In contrast to misconceptions about the limitations of safety culture, there are also many who overestimate its importance. Sometimes safety culture is viewed as the silver bullet to resolve all safety challenges quickly and easily. Sadly this is unrealistic and safety culture improvement is part of a larger safety improvement process. Safety culture improvement is a complex process which takes time (see sheet 3 on improvement). Often safety culture improvement involves the allocation of significant resources to improve safety systems and processes. One of the key ways to increase employee perceptions of management commitment to safety is to resolve long standing safety concerns. So safety culture is not a substitute for effective safety management systems, as the two are intertwined. It is not possible to have one without the other.

Key Points:

- Safety culture is one of the most misunderstood safety constructs.
- Safety culture is a critical for effective hazard management and is equally important as engineering and system safety solutions.
- These misunderstandings can result in the implementation of poor interventions.

ⁱ Uttal, B. The corporate culture vultures. *Fortune*. 1983, Vol. Oct. 17, pp. 66–72.

ⁱⁱ Zohar, D. Safety Climate in industrial organizations: theoretical and applied Implications. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. (1980), Vols. 65,, pp. 96 - 102.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mullen, J. & Kelloway, E. K., (2009). Safety leadership: A longitudinal study of the effects of transformational leadership on safety outcomes. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 20, 253-272.

^{iv} Zohar, D. & Luria, G. A Multilevel Model of Safety Climate: Cross-level Relationships between Organization and Group-level Climates. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. (2005), Vol. 90, pp. 616-628