

Safety culture assessment

It is generally accepted that if you can't measure something, then you can't manage it, therefore it is important for leaders to understand safety culture measurement options. There is considerable debate about the extent to which safety culture can be measured. Safety culture is an abstract concept, which is not directly observable and therefore difficult to measure. In practice we do not directly measure the culture; we assess indicators of the culture and use these indicators to make inferences about the culture. It is therefore more appropriate to use the term assessment rather than measurement.

Employee perception surveys (e.g. self-completion questionnaires) are often used to assess safety culture (see sheet 8 on perception surveys). These surveys can appear to be measuring safety culture precisely, as they produce numerical values and statistical results. In reality, these surveys are assessing employees' perceptions of the culture. Employee perceptions are prone to a number of biases and only tap into one aspect of the culture. Many survey items require employees to make judgements about others (e.g. "managers in this organisation are concerned about my personal safety"). The extent to which an employee is going to agree with this statement will depend on their expectations of the degree of concern managers should show about their personal safety. It is very possible that employees from two organisations with very different cultures could respond equally positively to that statement. Even though surveys have limitations, they can provide useful information, as long as the results are interpreted correctly.

It is generally recommended that a multi-method approach is used to assess safety culture, in order to produce a comprehensive picture (see sheet 9 on comprehensive assessment). Typically, this will involve assessing employee perceptions, reviewing safety system documents, and conducting

workplace observations. Employee perceptions can be captured via questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. It is important to use tools that are valid, to ensure they are actually assessing safety culture. It is often useful to combine questionnaires with either interviews or focus groups, as this helps with interpreting the questionnaire results. A systematic review of safety system documents can provide insight into the stated values of the organisation. These documents outline the key safety responsibilities for managers, supervisors, and employees. These reviews can highlight inconsistencies between stated values and practical arrangements. For example, an organisation may state that safety is a line responsibility, yet the document review shows that the vast majority of safety activities are performed by the safety department, with little involvement of line managers. Worksite observations can provide insight into the culture in action. It is possible to observe the extent to which employees comply with safety rules and deal with problems they encounter. By observing meetings it is possible to gain insight into the way safety is considered and how important decisions are made.

These three approaches view safety culture from a different perspective and therefore provide a more comprehensive assessment of the culture. Some of the results from the three approaches will be consistent with each other, while other results will be in conflict. When two results are in conflict, then it will be necessary to conduct further investigation to understand why there were conflicting results. For example, it is possible that employees may report a high degree of compliance with rules and procedures in the questionnaire, yet workplace observations may find numerous rule violations. Follow-up interviews may reveal that employees considered the observed rule violations as 'minor infractions' and not violations. Integrating the results of the

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three safety culture assessment perspectives requires some expertise. Even if an organisation decides to assess their culture from only one perspective, it will still require some expertise in interpreting the results. It is important not to accept the results at face value.



Organisations should adopt a systematic approach to safety culture assessment. There are five broad phases to conducting an assessment (see figure above). In phase 1, organisations need to create an assessment team. This team should include representatives from key stakeholders, such as employees, supervisors, managers and contract managers. This team will need some education about how to conduct a safety culture assessment, even if they are using an external provider. In phase 2, the assessment team will need to decide on how to conduct the assessment, including what tools to use, the scope of the assessment and the resources required. Phase 3, is the data collection phase. This may involve surveying employees, conducting interviews, reviewing documents, and conducting observations. Phase 4, involves interpreting the data from phase 3. It is possible, that the results may raise further questions which require clarification, thus requiring additional data collection. The result of phase 4 should be a rich picture of the strengths and weaknesses identified. Phase 5, involves using the results to create an improvement plan, as the purpose of

assessment is improvement. The improvement plan should build on the strengths identified and address any weaknesses.

More recently, there have been efforts to develop continuous safety culture indicators or metrics (see sheet 10 on metrics). These indicators do not provide a rich picture of the culture, but rather a general sense of the health of the culture. These indicators are not designed to replace safety culture assessments, but to provide information about the culture in-between assessments. Typically, these metrics capture the output or result of the culture. They focus on the quality of safety activities rather than the quantity. For example, instead of counting the number of safety observations conducted by employees, the metrics track the change in the quality of these observations. The breath of culture can be captured by using a number of independent metrics. Since all the metrics are assessed on the same scale, organisations can track the change in culture over time via one number. This will enable senior management teams to get an early warning if the culture is degrading and to receive timely feedback on the extent of which interventions designed to promote a positive culture are working.

Key Points:

- It is critical for leaders to have an accurate picture of the safety culture by conducting regular assessments.
- It is not possible to precisely measure safety culture; therefore it is more appropriate to describe the process as a safety culture assessment exercise.
- It is important to use valid tools and to assess safety culture from different perspectives.
- Organisations should adopt a systematic five phase process to safety culture assessment.