

# What is a safety culture and how do we develop one?

by David Asker Brown

*“The safety culture of an organisation reflects individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and behaviour patterns. These determine the commitment, style and proficiency of health and safety compliance. Organisations with a positive safety culture have communications founded on mutual trust, shared perceptions of the importance of safety and confidence in the efficacy of preventive measures.”* ACSNI Study Group on Human Factors. Third report: Organising for safety. Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations (1993) reprinted 1998, ISBN 0717608654

Developing an Occupational Health & Safety Manual gives employers and staff a framework for communicating and acting in a safe, responsible manner. It is intended to show the **‘organisation and arrangements’** for safe and healthy working. The only place to start your communication is in writing. This serves two purposes, firstly, the business isn't dependant on any one person to 'part' with their knowledge so that other staff members can understand how to work safely. Secondly, if there is a need to produce your Company OH&S Policies, then the Manual is a very clear written record of what they are and how those principles have been communicated Having an effective OHS System balances the responsibility between you and your staff. After all, it has to start with the individual, and that means having all of your staff sign an undertaking that they will follow your policies and work safely.

The policy manual should cover the common activities for an industrial or professional company.

Occupational Health and Safety Standards	Disciplinary Action & Dismissal	Asbestos	Drug & Alcohol	E-mail and Internet Access usage	Equal Employment Opportunity
Fire & Evacuation	First Aid	Hazardous Substances	Incident Reporting	Bullying and Harassment	Manual Handling
Mobile Phone	Privacy-Company Privacy	Privacy-Employee Privacy	Rehabilitation	Risk Management	Smoke Free Workplace
Social Functions	Stress & Fatigue	Sun Protection	Environmental Policy	Forklift	Personal Protective Equipment
Ladders	Working away from base	Noise	Lasers	Ergonomics	Company cars

Many companies talk about ‘safety culture’ when referring to the inclination of their employees to comply with rules or act safely or unsafely. However the culture and style of management is even more important, for example, there might be a natural, unconscious bias for production at the

expenditure of safety, or a tendency to focus on the short-term and being highly reactive as opposed to pro-active. Symptoms of poor cultural factors include routine procedural violations, because the procedures have been poorly drafted, or the importance of following them has not been properly briefed. The Safety Policy is intended to include safe methods of working and to ensure that management decisions do not put production or cost before safety. By audit and inspection it is possible to gather evidence about an employer's culture, although this requires interviewing a representative sample of people from all levels.

### **Key aspects of an effective culture:**

**Management commitment** produces higher levels of motivation and concern for health and safety throughout the organisation. It is indicated by the proportion of resources (time, money, people) and support allocated to health and safety management and by the status given to health and safety versus production, cost etc. The active involvement of senior management in the health and safety system is very important.

**Visible management:** Managers need to be seen to lead by example when it comes to health and safety. Good managers appear regularly on the 'shop floor', talk about health and safety and visibly demonstrate their commitment by their actions – such as stopping production to resolve issues. It is important that management is perceived as sincerely committed to safety. If not, employees will generally assume that they are expected to put commercial interests first, and safety initiatives or programmes will be undermined by cynicism.

**Good communications between all levels of employee:** in a positive culture questions about health and safety should be part of everyday work conversations. Management should listen actively to what they are being told by employees, and take what they hear seriously.

There is some level of agreement on what is considered to be ideal safety management practices. Mearns et al., (2003) highlight some general themes found within literature have emerged, for example:

### **Management commitment to safety, including:**

- Prioritization of safety over production
- Maintaining a high profile for safety in meetings
- Personal attendance of managers at safety meetings and on walk-about
- Face-to-face meetings with employees that feature safety as a topic
- Job descriptions that include safety contracts
- Pervasive channels of formal and informal communication and
- Regular communication between management, supervisors and the workforce.
- Involvement of employees
- Empowerment
- Delegation of responsibility for safety
- Encouraging commitment to the organization.

For those wanting to develop their own understanding of safety culture, I recommend reading Leadership In Safety Management by James R. Thomen ISBN 0-471-53326-2. This details the

techniques used at E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. Inc. which has a truly impressive record over the 32 years that the author worked for them.