

SAFETY CULTURE

Ideas & Advice From the Safety Trenches

By M.B. Sutherland

The term *safety culture* has been on the minds of OSH professionals for many years. Whether you are a fan of the DuPont Bradley Curve (2018), a method designed to benchmark progress toward an ideal safety culture, or simply measuring worker compliance levels, it all comes down to reducing injuries and keeping people safer.

Both methods identify stages of growth within a company culture (Figure 1).

The lowest level on the DuPont Bradley Curve is a reactive culture that is entirely reliant on a safety manager who makes changes only after an incident, OSHA citation or new regulation. Workers in this environment tend to resist compliance and the work environment is generally negative with high stress for both workers and safety managers.

Slightly better is a dependent culture with good training and clear safety rules. This workplace may have a more positive environment because fewer people are getting hurt, but the stress can be high, as workers are complying because they feel they have to, not because they want to. This culture is still less than ideal as it puts the safety manager in the role of the safety cop who has to check on workers to make sure they are working safely.

Even better is an independent culture. This workplace is proactive, with employees who have internalized safety rules, truly understand why these rules are important and know that their efforts will be recognized. This culture still has room for improvement as its members tend to have an every-worker-for-him/herself mentality. So, workers who see someone being unsafe may feel it is none of their business.

The gold standard in safety is an interdependent culture. These employees are proactive and engaged. They take pride in their work and safety record, and they do not hesitate to look out for each other and remind fellow workers if they see them cutting safety corners.

For the past 3 years, the author's company has interviewed and spent time with safety managers in various industries to ask what actions they take to get to that gold standard of having a fully matured and ever-improving safety culture. Their answers can be divided into four phases: safety training, increasing compliance, worker engagement and cultivating safety minions.

Phase 1: Safety Training

All companies train workers in safety protocols. But the way a company does it

from day one and throughout a worker's career can move the culture from Phase 1 to Phase 4.

In-Classroom Formal Training

There is nothing wrong with the tried-and-true practice of sitting everyone down in front of a slide deck, unless that is all you do. Training decks are a useful tool, provided they are interspersed with hands-on exercises and even safety games and competitions in the classroom to reinforce the lessons.

Hands-on exercises might include asking a volunteer to stand in as a specific type of worker, such as a welder. The class is then tasked with dressing the person in the appropriate PPE for safety. The lesson ends with a discussion of what the worker might have missed, whether everything is being worn properly and why it is important.

Always explain the why in safety. We are all human and no one likes to do something just because the boss said to. Workers will more likely follow the

rules if they understand the good reasons behind them.

No matter how you train, use one-on-one check-ins after class to ask people what they learned and what they thought was the most important take-away. OSH professionals can also use post-training quizzes to measure whether workers understood and retained the safety lessons.


Everyday Training & Reminders

We have all crammed for a test and forgotten everything the next day. That is why safety training should never be a one-and-done activity. Take advantage of every reminder opportunity to make learning an ongoing part of the job.

Safety Pop Quiz

Turn the information flow around by letting workers know they might get a pop quiz at any time. One safety manager liked to walk the facility and randomly ask workers to recite at least

FIGURE 1 METHODS TO IDENTIFY CULTURAL STAGES

DuPont Bradley Curve	Worker compliance level	Injury rates
Phase 1: Reactive Relies entirely on safety managers who make changes only after an incident, OSHA citation or new regulation.	Level 1: Noncompliant "I won't do it" • Negative environment • High stress	Fall as you proceed through the phases/levels 
Phase 2: Dependent Fewer people are getting hurt, but stress can be high, as workers are complying because they feel they have to, not because they want to.	Level 2: Compliant "I must do it" • Neutral environment • High stress	
Phase 3: Independent Culture still has room for improvement as its members tend to have an every-worker-for-him/herself mentality.	Level 3: Committed and engaged "I want to do it" • Positive environment • Lower stress	
Phase 4: Interdependent Employees take pride in their work and safety record, and they do not hesitate to look out for each other and remind fellow workers if they see them cutting safety corners.		

five of the 10 safety protocols. He kept it fun rather than oppressive by reminding workers of the correct answer if they got it wrong and rewarding them with a prize such as a T-shirt or a gift card if they got it right.

Rotating Posted Reminders

Make safety posters more effective by frequently replacing and rotating them when possible. Permanent signs such as “Safety glasses required beyond this point” tend to fade into the background when workers see them every day. But adding eye-catching paper posters that change monthly help workers see and remember the lessons. Look for free safety posters online to maximize the rotation possibilities.

Microlearning

Sometimes called burst training, microlearning videos reinforce the safety lessons employees hear in the classroom. Ranging from as short as 30 seconds to no longer than 5 minutes, these videos can be shown during toolbox talks, on a loop in break areas, or you can even send



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them to workers’ phones to watch before their shift begins.

Free Training Resources

Keep the company’s training library up to date with free online training resources from trusted safety professionals or directly from OSHA (www.osha.gov/video). The author’s company provides additional resources such as free posters for the worksite (<http://bit.ly/2w4Xna3>), and training slide decks and videos (<http://bit.ly/37ZZpFG>).

Mentorship

Statistics show that newer workers tend to get hurt most. At the same time, companies must be concerned with the aging workforce and all the issues that come along with it. But OSH profession-

als can turn this situation into a win-win and take advantage of the years of experience of workers nearing retirement by assigning them a new employee to mentor. Ask veterans to show new workers how to apply their training as they complete their first project. It is good for safety, gives veterans a break from the routine and eliminates redoing work that may have been completed incorrectly without a guiding hand.

Phase 2: Increasing Compliance

Even when employees have been well-trained and are exposed to regular safety messages during their workday, there will still be a few workers who cannot seem to follow the rules. While many safety managers handle this through enforcing regulations and issuing penalties,

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this does not help the company culture mature into an ideal interdependent state. However, you can increase compliance with a more positive approach.

Safety Recognition

Rewarding workers for lack of incidents is considered a nonstarter for many, if not most, workplaces. Instead, you can reward people for promoting safety. Try picking a day to hand out small rewards for those who are fully decked out in the proper PPE. Prizes can be as simple as camouflage safety glasses or hard hat stickers. Some programs reward workers for speaking up if they identify a safety issue or for sharing ideas with their manager that they believe will make their workplace safer. Others go the extra mile with elaborate safety recognition programs such as quarterly safety dinners. To pull out all the stops, hold yearly safety fairs complete with refreshments and educational games. Whether making it last an evening, a whole month or throughout the year, letting people know that their efforts to work safely are appreciated can give a significant boost to the culture.

Avoiding Blame

If workers know the company's reaction to learning that someone is being unsafe is to send that individual back to training, they will be more willing to bring it up. If they know a coworker will be written up or fired, it might be a different story. This is the root of the "brother's/sister's keeper" philosophy (GellerAC4P Inc, 2020). Fun reward programs can be effective in keeping people engaged and motivated. But there is no substitute for an atmosphere that nurtures rather than blames.

Phase 3: Employee Engagement & Empowerment

People are much more likely to do a job well when they feel empowered. Employers can help workers get a better feeling of buy-in with a few small policy changes.

Shrink Safety Meetings

Since not everyone is an extrovert, shrinking safety meetings into groups of no more than five to 10 people pays off in the form of more participation from workers on the front lines of the program. Smaller groups can help people be more comfortable speaking up if they have ideas or concerns.

Let Workers Wear-Test PPE

Starting a wear-testing program can have a significant impact on compliance and can be relatively simple to implement. Just select a handful of workers to try the PPE options being considered and have them provide feedback. Workers feel ownership and this process helps identify the best options to keep employees comfortable and happy. It also offers another positive way to address noncompliance. A safety manager who adopted this technique said that if he sees a wear-tester without the proper PPE, he can ask, "Why aren't you wearing that glove you picked out?"

Everyday Empowerment

Giving workers decision-making power in their everyday jobs is a central part of building a quality safety culture. Many safety managers accomplish this with some version of a take-five policy. Three of the most common are:

- 1) Five-minute halt and double-check: Allows workers to call a halt to production if they notice a hazard. It allows the team to ensure that everyone has covered all the safety protocols before starting or continuing a job.
- 2) Five-minute rest: Particularly helpful for an aging workforce, this policy encourages people to take a couple of minutes to catch their breath or make sure all the bases are covered if they are feeling rushed or fatigued.
- 3) Five-minute share: Many safety managers take time out of their daily toolbox talks to let workers share work-stop stories, or incidents that could have happened but did not because someone was empowered to speak up. It is a great way to encourage everyone else to take action in the future.

Phase 4: Cultivating Safety Minions

Most companies have some workers on the job who are waiting to be tapped as safety leaders. These are the people who can act as the safety manager's eyes, ears and surrogate voice of encouragement to others on the work site.

Where to Find Them

If unsure where to begin, cultivate new leaders by getting to know them in a one-on-one setting. Arrange a weekly lunch or break time with each worker or at least with those who show promise.

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If one-on-one meetings are not feasible due to the size of the staff or time constraints, try expanding the safety committee and rotating membership. It may be surprising to see who steps up when open participation is announced. One manager in the oil and gas industry announced that workers looking for a promotion had to demonstrate that they had done something to improve safety outside of their immediate work area. He quickly found that all of the smaller safety committees became full and that there was a waiting list for participation in the fire brigade.

Managers dealing with employees who resist new (or any) PPE have had success recruiting workers with a positive attitude to show and tell others about the benefits of the PPE they wear (e.g., "My hands stay dry"; "I don't have little cuts or bruises"). Hearing it from peers is often a more effective way to convince people without coming down hard on them.

We Are All in This Together

In an interview, Carl Heinlein, senior safety consultant for American Contractors Insurance Group Inc., noted, "I try not to use the term safety culture anymore because it comes down to company culture. It comes down to what your company stands for and what its values are" (Magid Glove, 2017).

It can be tempting to think of safety culture as a management-only enterprise. But small things that involve all employees such as lively training, reminders, rewards, communication and empowerment are the building blocks to a positive atmosphere that people want to participate in. That is because there is nothing quite like knowing someone cares about workers' safety to make them take better care of themselves and everyone around them. **PSJ**

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