

WORKPLACE SAFETY

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SITE METHOD

A Framework for Strengthening Safety Culture

By Nathaniel Winkelmann



“YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE for developing, implementing and overseeing the organization’s safety culture.” These words are a familiar phrase in job postings for safety professionals at every level. Unfortunately, most of these jobs do not come with a road map for how success should be achieved or measured. This can be a difficult and seemingly insurmountable task for a safety professional in an organization that is not focused on making money through safety services. While there may not be an established and universally accepted method to implement safety culture change within an organization, this article provides a method for achieving positive workplace safety culture change that can be adapted for use by anyone.

What Is Safety Culture?

An organization’s safety culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, attitudes and practices that prioritize safety as a paramount concern in all aspects of the organization’s operations. According to Griffin and Curcuruto (2016), a positive safety culture actively fosters an environment where workers feel empowered to speak up about safety concerns, encourages workers to actively participate in safety initiatives, and ensures continuous improvement toward safety excellence through the active recognition and mitigation of hazards throughout the organization. These elements create a foundation of trust and cooperation among workers and organizational leadership, leading to increased safety performance and reduced incident rates. Overall, safety culture is not merely the absence of incidents or injuries in the workplace but instead represents the organic proactive commitment to safeguarding the well-being of all employees involved in an organization’s activities.

What Affects an Organization’s Safety Culture?

An organization’s safety culture is influenced by various factors that shape attitudes, behaviors and practices regarding safety in the workplace. According to Stemn et al. (2019), factors such as leadership practices, worker involvement, training and technology can influence an organization’s safety culture. Hofmann et al. (2017) emphasize the role of leadership in shaping an organization’s safety culture in that leaders who demonstrate genuine concern for safety, provide resources for safety initiatives and hold themselves accountable for safety outcomes set the tone for the entire workforce. While numerous factors influence an organization’s safety culture, leadership commitment and safety communication have consistently been most influential (Gümüş et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2021).

Why Would an Organization Change Its Safety Culture?

In today’s dynamic business environment, organizations face pressure from various sources to prioritize safety culture

as a cornerstone of operations instead of the traditional mindset of safety being another task on the to-do list. While initially the thought of investing resources in promoting safety culture may seem counterintuitive to a business’s bottom line, Chen and Chen (2014) show that a positive safety culture has many benefits, such as enhancing worker morale, improving worker performance, minimizing risk and fostering innovation. By investing in a positive safety culture, organizations can create a safer and more productive and sustainable work environment that benefits both workers and the bottom line.

How Can an Organization Effectively Change Its Safety Culture?

Changing an organization’s safety culture requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of organizational behavior, leadership, communication and systems. While research has identified various influencing factors and barriers to transforming an organization’s safety culture, there are no universally accepted or singularly prescribed methods for safety professionals to follow as a definitive guide to change an organization’s safety culture (Hofmann et al., 2017). Rather, successful strategies often involve a combination of approaches tailored to the specific context, values and challenges of each organization.

The SITE Method

The standards, instruments, training and enforcement (SITE) method offers an approach for improving an organization’s safety culture by addressing the key components necessary to achieve lasting and effective change. At its core, this method is designed to work irrespective of an organization’s industry or history. While certain elements of the SITE method such as training and enforcement may appear familiar and are commonly found within traditional safety programs, this method integrates these components into a cohesive, systematic approach. This integration not only ensures alignment with organizational goals but also provides a structured pathway for achieving measurable and sustainable improvements throughout an organization’s safety culture. By formalizing these elements into a unified framework, the SITE method builds the foundation to bridge the gap between theory and practical application in safety culture excellence.

This method begins with setting clear, robust standards that delineate acceptable rules, guidelines and safety practices for the organization to utilize as a road map and benchmark for success. These standards not only mitigate workplace risks but also provide a compass for workers and leaders in navigating safety-related situations. Once standards are in place, the focus shifts to equipping workers with the instruments needed to achieve the established standards. Instruments include any physical materials, tools, procedures and other necessary resources. The next step involves providing workers with the knowledge and skills needed to properly utilize these instruments to achieve the established standards. The final step is enforcement, which ensures compliance with the provided training on the use of instruments needed to achieve the established standards. Overall, the SITE method ensures that all members of the organization are equipped with the instruments, knowledge and enforcement mechanisms necessary to achieve and uphold organizational standards.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The standards, instruments, training and enforcement (SITE) method serves as a way of changing an organization’s safety culture regardless of size, history or industry.
- While safety professionals are often tasked with improving safety culture, they are rarely given clear guidance. This method offers a structured, measurable road map for sustainable change.
- The article details how each component of the SITE method contributes to building a proactive, accountable and collaborative safety culture that aligns with organizational goals.

Standards: Establishing a Foundation for Safety Excellence

Standards serve as the cornerstone of any safety culture by providing a set of rules, guidelines and metrics that define acceptable practices and behaviors within an organization. A standard is defined as something established by authority, custom or general consent as a model or example. Standards exist in every aspect of life and come in various forms, such as those found in government laws, company policies, board game rule books and manufacturing criteria for PPE. With these standards, organizations can assess operations against a known benchmark while ensuring the safety of workers and products being sold in the market. A clear example of a workplace safety standard is found in 29 CFR 1926.502(b)(14), which mandates that “guardrail systems used on ramps and runways shall be erected along each unprotected side or edge.” This standard sets a definitive safety requirement, providing a measurable benchmark for safeguarding workers in hazardous environments. Notably, the standard specifies the what, when and where of protecting workers from unprotected sides and edges but does not prescribe how the protection should be implemented, allowing flexibility in its execution while maintaining the intended safety outcomes.

When establishing standards for an organization, it is imperative that the creation of any individual standard involves the use of available data, complies with all legal requirements and achieves an established end state. One of the most difficult aspects of identifying and creating standards for an organization is the understanding that standard operating procedures are not standards; instead, they are a set of steps designed to ensure that a process is carried out in a specific manner to meet the desired end state. Put simply, standard operating procedures are used to meet an established standard. Standards, as used in the SITE method, specifically establish the desired end-state criterion for a given process, the desired conditions for a worksite and the benchmarks against which success and compliance are measured. In other words, standards define what “right” looks like, providing a clear and measurable goal while serving as the foundation upon which the SITE steps are built and assessed.

Standards generally should be designed following the specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related (SMART) format described by Doran (1981). This format is used to ensure that the desired outcome is well defined and achievable within a specified time frame. By using the SMART format to create standards, organizations can establish clear expectations, promote accountability and improve overall efficiency. Specific standards define exactly what is required, leaving no room for interpretation. Measurable criteria allow for the tracking of progress and determination of compliance. Ensuring that standards are assignable clarifies who is responsible for implementation and maintenance, which fosters ownership and accountability. Realistic standards ensure that the standards are practical and achievable within the organization’s abilities, resources and constraints. Finally, standards with time-based expectations clearly define the time requirements, specifying intervals such as “always,” “weekly” or “annually.” Adopting the SMART format enables organizations to create robust, actionable standards that drive consistent performance and align with strategic objectives.

Effective standards must be clearly written and easily accessible. A clearly written standard ensures that the intent, requirements and expectations can be understood by anyone,

regardless of role or background. Standards that are clear and unambiguous use straightforward language, avoid technical jargon where possible and provide examples or illustrations when helpful. For example, a standard that states “wear appropriate safety gear when necessary” lacks clarity and fails to provide an unambiguous guideline for PPE use. This standard does not specify the type of gear required or the situations in which the PPE must be used. In contrast, a more effective standard would state, “Workers must wear ANSI cut level A-4 gloves whenever handling glass.” This version clearly defines who is required to wear PPE, the specific circumstances in which the PPE must be worn and the exact type of PPE needed in this situation.

In addition to clarity, it is equally critical that standards are accessible to all stakeholders within the organization. Standards should be readily available in formats that workers can easily reference, whether through physical handbooks, digital platforms or workplace postings. An inaccessible standard, no matter how well written, fails to serve its purpose because it does not communicate the standard expected. Research by Feda et al. (2010) underscores the critical role that well-written and accessible standards play in reducing workplace incidents. By ensuring that standards are both comprehensible and available, organizations empower their teams by fostering a culture of accountability and excellence.

Overall, standards are the foundation of a strong safety culture, providing the framework for defining acceptable practices and conditions necessary for safeguarding both workers and operations. When designed effectively, standards not only establish clear expectations but also provide the essential foundation for acquiring appropriate instruments, developing training programs and implementing effective enforcement measures. By prioritizing clarity, accessibility and thoughtful design, organizations can establish robust standards that enhance safety, foster a culture of excellence and support long-term success.

Instruments: Equipping Workers for Success

The second step of the SITE method, instruments, encompasses all the resources necessary to meet the organization’s established standards and objectives. This can include physical materials, tools, equipment, procedures and personnel. Providing these instruments is critical to ensuring that standards are achieved. Without the proper instruments in place, achieving the desired outcomes becomes impossible, as workers lack the necessary support to perform their tasks effectively and consistently. As highlighted by Reason (1998), safety-related incidents involving human factors often stem from omissions in processes, inadequate tools and equipment, insufficient staffing or unsuitable working conditions. By identifying and ensuring the availability of these essential instruments, organizations can bridge the gap between expectations and execution, ultimately fostering the success of their safety culture.

Identifying and selecting the instruments necessary to meet the established standards requires a systematic approach to ensure alignment with organizational goals and operational needs. A safety professional should begin this process by thoroughly analyzing the specific standard requirements, considering the tasks workers must perform to achieve compliance and the challenges they may face. This analysis should guide the identification of physical materials, tools, equipment, personnel, workspaces and procedures essential for the standard to be achieved. This process often

leads to the development of standard operating procedures, standardized tool lists and resource allocation plans.

Common off-the-shelf instruments may not always fully align with an organization's operational environment, workforce dynamics or industry-specific challenges. Customization ensures that the tools, equipment, and procedures provided not only comply with established standards but also serve a practical and effective purpose within the unique context of the individual workplace. This customization might include safely modifying equipment to suit specific tasks, developing procedures for a particular workflow or allocating resources to areas where they are most impactful. By tailoring instruments to fit their specific environment, organizations can optimize efficiency, reduce barriers to implementation, strengthen the alignment between resources and organizational objectives and create a safer workplace. By methodically evaluating and aligning these instruments with the established standards, organizations can create an infrastructure that not only supports the consistent achievement of the established standards but also enhances efficiency, safety and performance.

Training: Empowering Workers With Knowledge & Skills

The third step of the SITE method, training, focuses on effectively communicating to workers how to use the provided instruments to meet established standards. Training serves as the critical channel for structured communication, ensuring that workers understand both the tools at their disposal and the expectations they are required to meet. Without clear and comprehensive training, workers may lack the knowledge to properly utilize the instruments or fully grasp the standards by which their performance will be evaluated.

To maximize effectiveness, training should be tailored to audience demographics, ensuring that content and delivery methods resonate with the individual participants (Loosemore & Malouf, 2018). Interactive and participatory training methods are particularly effective, as they foster active learning and skill development, outperforming traditional noninteractive approaches such as lectures or passive online videos (Baeppler et al., 2014; Lovreglio et al., 2020). Emphasizing hands-on practice and active participation further enhances retention and understanding, enabling workers to better apply what they have learned in real-world scenarios (Burke et al., 2005). By prioritizing engagement and practical application, organizations can develop training programs that not only communicate essential information but also empower workers to contribute effectively to the safety culture.

In addition to tailoring training for the target audience, it is crucial to customize training to reflect the specific conditions workers will encounter, instruments they will utilize and established standards they are expected to uphold. Training programs must align with the actual work environment to ensure that workers can consistently meet organizational objectives. Generic training such as off-the-shelf online modules or one-size-fits-all programs often fall short of achieving the desired outcomes (Nævestad et al., 2018). In contrast, tailored training

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has been significantly more effective in promoting workplace safety and achieving compliance with safety objectives (Jeelani et al., 2016). By prioritizing tailored training, organizations can deliver more effective training that directly addresses their unique operational needs.

Fundamentally, training is the linchpin that allows workers to succeed by communicating the connection between established standards and provided instruments. By tailoring training programs and incorporating interactive and participatory methods, organizations can foster deeper engagement and understanding among workers. This

approach not only enhances the effectiveness of the training but also supports the development of a robust safety culture where workers feel empowered and confident in their roles. A well-designed training program is more than another item on the to-do list; it is an investment in the workforce that drives consistent compliance, reduces risks and strengthens the overall organizational safety culture.

Enforcement: Promoting Accountability & Compliance

The final step in the SITE method, enforcement, ensures that workers are using the provided instruments in the intended manner set forth in training. By holding individuals accountable for their actions and promoting a culture of safety ownership at every level, organizations can reinforce the importance of adhering to safety standards and create a sense of collective responsibility for workplace safety. When organizations fail to enforce safety standards and practices, performance can suffer detrimental consequences that can affect the organization's safety, reputation, trust and profitability (Niu & Liu, 2022).

Traditional workplace safety enforcement activities often rely on internal control measures, such as audits and disciplinary actions, to identify and address deficiencies. These measures play a critical role in maintaining a robust safety culture by ensuring that deviations from these established standards are promptly recognized and corrected. Research by Brahmasrene and Smith (2009) demonstrates that organizations actively employing audits and disciplinary actions as enforcement mechanisms experience significant reductions in recordable and lost-time incidents. However, organizations must fully commit to implementing these measures with purpose and accountability to be effective. Failure to fully commit the necessary time and resources to prevent incidents from occurring undermines the impact of these internal control measures and the overall organizational safety culture.

Failure to enforce safety standards inevitably leads to the erosion and eventual collapse of an organization's safety culture. Effective enforcement is not only a procedural necessity but a foundational commitment to fostering a safe and accountable workplace. Organizations must prioritize meaningful and impactful enforcement activities over symbolic gestures that lack substance. However, enforcing safety standards often comes with challenges, as leaders are frequently subjected to competing pressures such as production demands and budget constraints, which can undermine their commitment to safety excellence (Grill & Nielsen, 2019). To mitigate these risks, it is crucial to prepare leaders to recognize and address



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these influencing factors proactively. This preparation should include strategies and support systems that enable leaders to balance organizational priorities without compromising safety standards, which ensures that safety remains a nonnegotiable element of their leadership role.

In addition, effective enforcement thrives on open communication, where workers feel empowered to voice their concerns and provide input in the standards, instruments, training and enforcement activities that directly affect their safety. Shen et al. (2017) highlight that enforcement is significantly more effective when workers are encouraged to share their insights, which promotes a collaborative effort toward improving safety outcomes. Similarly, Raines (2011) found that active worker involvement has a positive impact on workplace safety culture, which fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for safety. By engaging workers in the development, enforcement and refinement of safety practices, organizations can create a more collaborative and proactive approach to mitigating risks and ensuring compliance. This participatory approach not only improves safety measures but also reinforces a culture of trust and accountability across the organization.

While disciplinary action by leadership plays a crucial role in fostering and sustaining a positive workplace safety culture, it is essential that these actions are administered in an open, honest, fair, and consistent manner to maintain trust and accountability. Dekker and Breakey (2016) emphasize the importance of cultivating a just culture where enforcement activities focus on restorative justice rather than solely on punitive measures. This approach seeks to restore the status of the individual involved, mend relationships and address the underlying causes of the failure to meet the standard instead of solely punishing the individual for the failure. By prioritizing fairness and healing instead of punishment and revenge, organizations can reinforce their safety culture standards while promoting learning, understanding and continuous improvement.

Overall, enforcement is the cornerstone of sustaining a strong safety culture, as it ensures the organization's accountability and compliance in the use of the provided instruments and training necessary to achieve the established standards. By committing to meaningful enforcement actions based on fairness, collaboration and strategic alignment, organizations can prevent safety initiatives from becoming symbolic and shallow. By embracing a participatory approach that values worker input and adopts the principles of restorative justice, organizations can create a balanced and resilient safety culture that empowers workers, builds trust and drives safety excellence across all levels of the organization.

Implementing the SITE Method

In this example, an organization attempted to implement a forklift inspection form into daily forklift use in the facility.

While it is common for organizations to use an inspection form and tell operators to complete the inspection daily, this style of implementation without standards, instruments, training or enforcement may ultimately lead to the inspections not being completed as intended. Instead, the organization chose to use the SITE method, ensuring that all aspects necessary for the successful implementation and continuance of the use of forklift inspection forms remain part of the daily process.

When implementing the method, it is important to always begin with establishing the standards, regardless of the size of the change being implemented. In this example, the organization used the SMART format to establish this standard: "All forklift operators must complete a forklift inspection using the organizational standard forklift inspection form prior to first use of the forklift by that operator each shift." This standard was specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time bound, allowing for an unambiguous understanding of the standard requirement.

With the standard established, the organization moved on to the next step of identifying and providing all necessary instruments to ensure that the forklift inspection form can be completed to standard. The organization identified three key requirements: a forklift inspection form, a designated method for employees to access the form and a system for submitting completed forms. To meet these needs, the organization created a digital forklift inspection form and ensured that forms were readily available and automatically tracked upon completion. Operators could easily access the form by scanning QR codes affixed to each forklift and, once complete, the form was sent to a tracking system for the supervisor to review.

Once all necessary instruments are in place, the next step is to develop and deliver training to ensure the effective use in meeting the established standard. In this example, the organization designed interactive, hands-on training sessions that emphasized both the purpose of the forklift inspection form and the steps for accessing and completing it. During the training, supervisors explained the importance of the inspection process and guided each forklift operator through a practice session, allowing them to complete a mock inspection using the form. This participatory approach ensured that operators fully understood the process and its significance and also provided leaders the opportunity to verify the operator's understanding and competency.

With training completed, the final step of the SITE method is to enforce proper use of the instruments as outlined in the training to meet the established standard. In this example, supervisors ensured compliance by reviewing the submitted forklift inspection forms daily. If a supervisor observed an operator failing to complete the form, they addressed the issue promptly by reminding the operator of the requirement and, if necessary, providing

additional training. This reinforcement helped ensure that the operator understands both the process and its importance while ensuring that the operator complies with the standard.

In this example, the organization effectively implemented a forklift inspection form by applying the SITE method, ensuring that all components of the initiative were thoroughly addressed. By starting with a clear, SMART-formatted standard, the organization established a solid foundation for compliance. Accessible digital inspection forms delivered via QR codes and integrated with automated submission systems eliminated potential barriers and provided all tools necessary for success. Hands-on training emphasized the inspection form's importance while giving operators practical, guided experience in completing the form to standard. Lastly, daily supervisor reviews and consistent enforcement ensured that the inspection process was embedded into daily operations. This comprehensive approach demonstrates how the SITE method can transform a simple procedure into a sustainable, effective practice ingrained in the organization's safety culture.

Conclusion

The SITE method provides a framework for creating and enhancing an organization's safety culture by addressing key components essential for effective risk management and incident prevention. By focusing on standards, instruments, training and enforcement, organizations can establish a robust foundation for safety excellence, regardless of size, history or industry. Implementing this method involves establishing clear safety standards grounded in industry best practices and regulatory requirements, utilizing data-driven approaches to ensure relevance and adaptability. Equipping workers with the necessary instruments and providing comprehensive training helps them adhere to safety standards, fostering a culture of continuous learning and development. Finally, enforcing safety protocols and promoting accountability ensures compliance and reinforces the importance of safety throughout the organization. Overall, by embracing this systematic approach to safety culture enhancement, organizations can cultivate a workplace environment that prioritizes safety, protects workers and promotes sustainable organizational success. **PSJ**

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Cite this article

Winkelmann, N.E. (2025, July). SITE method: A framework for strengthening safety culture. *Professional Safety*, 70(7), 32-37.