

# 10 CONSIDERATIONS FOR UPGRADING SAFETY CULTURE

By Robert Pater

If you've decided that staying the course of your safety culture isn't good enough, this article is dedicated to you. Are you tired of accepting the familiar dissatisfaction of a status that's just not *simpati-quo*?

**Maybe frustrated,** despite sincere efforts, from still getting the same-old less-than-OK safety results? Have you witnessed erosion toward complacency, or worse, envisioned safety attention and performance potentially pulled toward a whirlpool and want to (finally) break out to a safe harbor? Or, for other reasons (e.g., new CEO, preparing for a potential company sale/merger), you're firmly determined to upgrade your safety culture. What do you do?

Consider that the ultimate power of leadership is the ability to change the future. Here's to further upping your leadership power by better deflecting the steady state of less-than-acceptable affairs, angling up future safety performance and culture. Not repeating variations of the same-old things and hoping for different results. As leadership guru Peter Drucker remarked, "If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old."

## Some (Not-So-Obvious) Groundings

First, recognize that no one can tell you what to do in a generic seminar or article because every organization is different, with a different history that forms different company culture mindsets with unique responses and expectations.

Second, while careful planning is indeed essential, accept that cleaving too hard or rigidly to any preset plan is the antithesis of mindful leadership, potentially resulting in being blindsided by unanticipated reactions or events. No one knows for certain how others will respond to a change, so planning too many future moves in advance wastes energy. Sports champions know this. For example, a top tennis player has a strategic match approach but may not try to preplan what to do after the opponent's anticipated fourth return volley. As Yogi Berra once remarked, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future." And, if you prefer wisdom from the pugilistic arts, Mike Tyson contended, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." Even with stringently thinking things through in advance, leadership—and life—is about figuring it out as you go, watching for what transpires and making needed course adjustments. The same applies to change: try to not become mired in safety cultural analysis paralysis.

Third, recognize that there will always be a price. Every change has downsides as it always involves losing something, which can be stressful, even when it is just letting go of dysfunctional actions or people (such as a longstanding "living legend" supervisor who is a consistent safety naysayer).

Bear in mind—and I suggest reminding others—that overly cleaving to heritage or tradition can become an anchor that prevents the ship from sailing toward better shores. Understand that some will grieve the loss, no matter what it is or how much better the new direction may be.

Fourth, culture is never homogeneous even within the same organization, varying across business units, departments, shifts and more.

Fifth, the energy of change often moves in up and down waves, with crests and troughs. As the University of Central Florida physics department (2016) describes, "Energy travels with a pulse or wave." Or as NASA (2010) explains, "Mechanical waves and electromagnetic waves are two important ways that energy is transported in the world around us."

Leadership is about marshaling and directing energies to accomplish tasks. According to NASA (2010), "Energy, a measure of the ability to do work, comes in many forms and can transform from one type to another." Traversing the peaks and valleys of change is high-level leadership physics, navigating through the ups and downs of the voyage of the leader-hero.

Advancing organizational safety culture rarely follows a rising diagonal line and is not for the meek. But it can lead to moving to the higher realms of safety and overall performance and be positively life-changing for many. With this ultimate goal, remember that posing the right questions combined with maintaining scrupulous honesty, leading to best plans, then making watchful organizational modifications can help you elevate safety culture from its current stasis toward an apotheosis.

## 10 Key Considerations for Elevating Safety Culture

The vice president of manufacturing at a Fortune 100 company privately told me that "90% of the things we have done to improve safety are positive. But to get another 1% improvement now, it's about us, our people and our culture." With that in mind, here are 10 questions to consider toward uplifting your culture. Note that these considerations are not intended to be an exhaustive list. But in my experience, they can be critical for sparking, kindling and steadying strong safety cultural improvement.

**1 Are you developing a balanced view of the current lay of the safety land?** Culture has been defined in various ways by others as they see it. Recognize that no one (including me) has the ultimate or final say here. I think of safety culture as a microcosm of overall organizational culture consisting of a visible and invisible surround system of

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a. expectations, approaches and methods that people default to when approaching unexpected challenges, especially when stressed or distracted, and what people do even when they know they're not being observed; b. people prioritizing directing their attention and commitment; c. what people believe they need to do to stay out of trouble with superiors and peers; and d. what no one may talk about but everyone knows.

This is just my view of safety culture; there's no final or right definition. I highly recommend that you help architect your own future by first determining what you mean by safety culture, involving others within your company in this process. Then, find an agreed-upon way to determine your present safety cultural level. This both sets a starting perspective point and can simultaneously help gel general agreement of where you are and wish to be headed.

There are many ways to do this. I first wrote about my perceived four levels of safety culture in 2008 (Pater, 2008b). But choose whatever approach makes sense to you. I suggest engaging a multilevel team to do this, being sure to include those who aren't fully "positive players."

Catalog the strengths and limitations of how safety is actually perceived and performed in your company. You don't necessarily need to bring in a premade assessment tool (if you do, note that not all assessments are equal; select one that dovetails with what's important to your organization).

Frank discussions can help greatly, especially ones where there is sincere interest in determining what is really going on—without defensiveness—and where others feel safe revealing their true beliefs and reactions. The very act of asking is simultaneously a culture-revealing and culture-changing process. But it also implies a tacit contract that leadership will try to do something to improve, rather than simply collecting data for its own sake (which can carry an underlying message of being more interested in accruing information than taking corrective actions).

Some questions to consider:

- How do we define "safety"? Is it just the absence of disabling injuries or the presence of . . . what?
- What is our pattern of actions? What do we consistently practice doing the most?
- Are we practicing what we really wish to become?
- Where are the gaps?
- What mixed messages are we sending around safety?
- Do we make it as easy as feasible for people to do their work safely?
- Do we make it as easy and nonjudgmental as possible for people to report incidents and close calls?
- To what degree do we diminish, humiliate or even more stringently punish people for having an incident?
- What are we actually rewarding or reinforcing when it comes to safe or unsafe performance?

Don't just stick to these examples; be sure to generate your own questions.

## 2 Do you spot trends and communicate what you find out in a timely manner?

With the messaging that, in reality, your actual culture:

- is in a state of flux, can and will change,
- is unlikely to fit neatly into any one safety culture slot or level, no matter which scheme you apply, and
- undoubtedly varies (often quite a lot) between sites and even among work shifts within the same unit. For example, graveyard shifts often differ greatly from day shifts in many ways.

Monitoring momentum may be even more important than slotting your culture as a snapshot in time. Ask whether the safety culture is trending up, down or sideways/on a plateau compared to last year, 2 years ago or longer, and try to find out why. Discerning trending patterns can provide a uniquely helpful perspective on the journey. For example, a safety culture where the mode (number most often chosen) cultural placement is now a 6 on a 10-point scale but was a 4 a couple of years ago is likely doing better than another culture that currently rates a 7 but was previously an 8 and a 9 before that. Here, a 6 that's trending up is likely doing better than a 7 trending down.

Of course, don't stop at just numbering a cultural level. If now a 6, next questions might be, "What makes it as high as a 6?" and "What should we consider doing to move to a 7?"

Widely asking for input and broadly communicating results in a timely manner signals intent to upgrade safety culture and performance, which can be a powerful belief changer.

## 3 Do you aim at stepping up change one level at a time versus seeking to broad-jump levels? I understand impatience to see results.

It is tempting to want to go straight to the highest level without "passing go" but still collecting all safety rewards. But I have also seen time and again that the lengthier the step, the more likely a strain or a fall, whereas step-by-step change is less stressful and easier to sustain. Alternately, think "modifications" rather than "abandoning and totally rebuilding."

Note that moving step-by-step does not mean doing so in slow motion, just climbing sure-footedly (akin to enlisting three-point contact). It is ultimately an issue of noticing, then modulating any anxiety or impatience to see instant improvements.

To move up stepwise, consider asking questions such as:

- What are the characteristics of the next higher level of safety culture from where we are that we don't do or have?
- Which ones do we consider incorporating?
- Can we determine a site or business unit (that is interested in trying this) to pilot some of our proposed changes?

## 4 Are you steadfastly building greater trust?

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great." As Karly St. Aubin and I wrote, "the permissible exposure limit of distrust is exceedingly low in any company that aspires to global-class safety" (St. Aubin & Pater, 2021a, p. 20). Trust, like a tree's buried roots, is not always directly visible but is critical for growth. The roots not only anchor the tree during times of external stresses, but

also draw critical nutrients to then be transferred throughout the organism. For a tree to grow taller, the deeper and more spread its roots of trust must be.

- Do leaders prioritize trust building? Bear in mind how a new tool, procedure, promotion or training may affect safety and trust. Trust is based on perception of both intent (“Is this leader concerned about us and do they sincerely want to help?”) and competence (“Does this leader make positive changes happen that elevate my safety, well-being and piece-of-mind?”).

How can safety trust be strengthened? By overcoming resistance from senior leadership, middle managers and line workers? Not giving into the Taylorism pull to micromanage or ongoingly surveil workers (which sends a message of distrust)?

Obviously, there is a lot to this and, again, no instant answers and beyond the scope of this article. It is important to recognize that, like demolishing and rebuilding a structure, trust can be significantly weakened or taken down quickly but is almost exclusively built up over time, with consistent words and actions. Also, many will often hold onto suspicion of even well-intentioned new actions when they have experienced what they believe to be a history of untrustworthy ones.

- Consider to what degree, if any, safety in the company has been built on implied or actual expressions of fear or punishment. Also, if leadership is ready to change, how can they best acknowledge and demonstrate that they “see the light” and want to go in another direction?

- Are certain injuries assumed by default to be faked or attributed to off-work sources or to employees being weak-willed? Or are these injuries questioned in a way that conveys distrust in the filer’s intent?

- Are you asking more and telling less? Anil Mathur has indicated that when he was CEO and president of a global oil tanker company, one of the company’s most important metrics for monitoring safety culture was the quality of safety conversations, that is, how much workers (compared to the leader) spoke during safety meetings.

- Do your company’s leaders draw out safety objections, concerns and dissatisfactions without defensiveness, not giving in to making excuses for each surfaced issue or problem? Defensiveness can send messages that leadership does not want to hear worker concerns or complaints, that leadership is “already doing the best that they can,” or “If you don’t like it, you can go somewhere else.” In all cases, defensiveness never displays actual confidence and tends to shut down feedback that leaders need to hear to craft corrective actions. For example, belittling people who get hurt because they’re “stupid” or with any other put-down will almost magically reduce important-to-know incidence reports.

- Similarly, do leaders acknowledge employees’ concerns as valid and that they may have good reason for them, and not discount their suspicions or reticence as “their problem”?

- To what degree is know-it-all-ism and never-wrong-ism in fashion in your company? Do leaders acknowledge that they are neither all-knowing nor

always correct? That they sometimes make missteps? Do they practice tolerance for different learning, communication styles and neurodivergence?

- Is the default to seek out and reply versus ignore or gloss over? Does leadership employ a nip-it-in-the-bud approach? Rather than avoiding, or worse, squelching resistors, does leadership seek out those at lowest volume levels rather than just waiting for them to come to the leaders? Some such unhappy people may provide meaningful information to help in planning. Further, leaders can reduce pushback by inviting disgruntled workers to get angry reactions off their chests in a safe manner, at the best time.

- Is it the cultural baseline to reduce blaming anywhere it is related to safety (e.g., in incident investigations, with accident repeaters)?

#### **5 Are you enlisting simultaneous leverage?**

Upgrading culture entails strengthening multiple elements. You can artfully accomplish more than one objective at the same time and without becoming frantic, not splitting attention in a piecemeal manner, as long as your objectives compatibly overlap. For example, if your plan for elevating culture includes people making safer decisions and actions, along with higher-level engagement, better retaining current staff, and performing work efficiently, challenge yourself and ask how a proposed new action, method or tool will simultaneously affect each of these interactive objectives. Be sure to avoid potentially conflicting objectives, such as trying to increase more exacting and complex safety procedures and heightening quick compliance to procedures at the same time.

#### **6 Are you structuring in a “scissors approach”?**

Think of the differences between riding a bicycle versus a unicycle; the bicycle’s extra wheel both propels and stabilizes movement. A scissors approach affects a safety culture simultaneously from both top-down (i.e., from higher management levels) and bottom-up (i.e., from the grassroots, such as spreading involvement, encouraging safety committees to do more, selecting and training and authorizing line workers as internal safety catalysts and structuring in others). A scissors approach can make significant improvements in safety culture and performance in many companies that had previously defaulted to only or mostly trying to change safety from the C-suite down, where well-intentioned messaging can often become diluted, given short shrift as impractical or even denatured (for more, see Pater, 2023).

#### **7 Do your plans include energizing, not just convincing others by broadcasting information, ideas or directives?**

Whatever or wherever you decide to move toward, plan for energizing change; don’t just think “ideas.” Changing beliefs—essential for upgrading safety culture—can never be solely based on convincing others what to think, perceive or do. Energy is the carrier wave of change. Becoming interested, excited, discovering something that you think will truly make your life work better, being part of a positive movement toward higher-level living—these are all critical for igniting change, breaking through plateaus. Some companies have

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done a great job of enlisting friendly competition, such as challenging two sites to each develop next-level solutions to a common safety problem.

Simultaneously look to reduce the power of repulsion, including rooting out mixed messages such as inconsistencies in policies, promotional or contractor requirements, or simultaneous attract-repel pressures such as “take the time to work safely but get this done faster.”

**8 Are you focused on internalizing better safety performance and culture rather than mandating it?** Higher-level safety cultures aim toward internalizing new methods and approaches in such a way that people will default to them even when they know no one else is closely observing them. Enlist an alternate view of safety that helps leadership determine how to build a safety approach that moves from “they should” or “they must” to “they want to,” where people self-convince due to their innate desires for safety, self-control and assurance to adopt safer decisions and actions for themselves. Where personal motivation encourages, rather than conflicts with safe performance of all activities, at work and at home.

These are possible when safety is offered with proven personal benefits to their lives (e.g., hobbies, sports, family) that go beyond preventing bad things from happening that they don’t really believe will occur to them. Where they believe it might help them live their lives better, get done what’s truly important to them. Where they ultimately incorporate safety because they want to, not because they’re dictated to. It is the magnetic power of attraction, offering a range of possible answers to “How will this help me?” that go beyond motivations that are more organizationally than personally oriented (see Pater, 2022, which discusses research on choice confirmation).

**9 Are you making it easy for others to change?** Less can turn out to be more in this case. In general, I have found that the more I ask people to do something differently, the less likely they will do it. Conversely, we have a catchphrase: small changes can make large differences. Plan for safety performance and cultural changes to be ingested in bite-sized, easy-to-understand-and-do pieces. This also spurs the sense of accomplishment and of being successful, which is a highly powerful internal motivator. For example, while we believe that there are many important elements in personal soft-tissue safety (e.g., fitness, nutrition, sleep quality), we have found that to break through resistance to being expected to make many large lifestyle changes, it is essential to demonstrate—and allow them to discover—how extremely slight, almost effortless changes in attention or alignment can immediately result in dramatic improvements in applied strength and balance and in reduced tension and strain for almost any individual. This can become a gateway to greater consideration and acceptance of more safely directing attention, making safer decisions and other effects.

**10 Are you encouraging tangible self-reinforcement, as opposed to once-in-a-blue-moon external reminders?** Physical and cultural energy levels depend in part on how

often waves of reinforcement occur. According to the University of Central Florida physics department (2016), “The energy of the wave depends on both the amplitude and the frequency.” Applied to cultural change, are your cultural change efforts sufficiently frequent rather than sporadically hit-or-miss?

How can we help people better remind themselves to derive self-satisfaction from realizing what they’ve now been better able to do? Perhaps focusing on their own improved self-control or how they have now tangibly helped others live and work safer and more effectively? Self-reinforcement can be a key to upgrading each individual’s personal safety culture.

## Consider-It Culture

While there is no definitive blueprint for elevating safety culture, intention and principles are important. But how these are put into place will make the ultimate difference in whether and how improvements occur and how they are (or aren’t) sustained.

I have seen that safety culture is ultimately a compendium of beliefs and actions, structurally supported and compatibly maintained. I have repeatedly been struck by how some organizations, guided by wise and determined leadership, have stepped up their safety culture from less-than-middling to global-class in a relatively brief time. It is certainly not effortless but can become easier as positive momentum breeds successes. If others can accomplish this, so can you. **PSJ**

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#### Cite this article



Pater, R. (2023, Sept.). 10 considerations for upgrading safety culture. *Professional Safety*, 68(9), 16-21.



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