A CULTURE THAT CARES

Connecting Safety Climate to Safety Management Systems

By Jonathon Anna

The sentiment that management does not care about safety often echoes among workers across industries. For safety-conscious leaders, this unsettling phrase clashes with their belief that they prioritize employee well-being.

Being told that management does not care about safety is a strong indicator of the safety climate (Yule et al., 2007), but should the safety climate be of concern to management if they are taking the correct actions to keep employees safe? Safety climate is an important factor for influencing safe outcomes, and safety management systems should be designed to nurture a positive safety climate through leadership and engagement.

Safety climate is the set of perceptions and expectations that workers have regarding safety in their organization (Cooper & Phillips, 2004). A set of perceptions are naturally developed by individuals, but perceptions are commonly formed among social groups, such as within the workplace. Social groups develop their own sets of acceptable or expected behaviors. Humans are naturally social creatures and adapt to be accepted within a group by adopting the prevailing group perceptions. These prevailing group perceptions that emerge within the workplace form the organization's culture, which encompasses the broader, enduring values and expectations that guide behavior. Within that culture, the term "safety climate" refers specifically to how safety is currently perceived and prioritized by the workforce—a distinct, more immediate indicator of safety-related attitudes and beliefs.

An organization may have the best intentions and believe that their commitment to workplace safety is strong, but the safety climate is determined by what is perceived by the workforce. "Perception equals reality" is a common phrase; it can be argued that perception is more important than reality for its impact on the safety climate. When an action is taken by the organization, the workforce interprets not only what was done, but why. Whether seen as truly caring, compliance-driven, or performative, the perceived motivations shape the impact of the action on the safety climate (Fruhen et al., 2022).

It is possible for an organization to take an action designed to improve safety that elicits a positive perception from some work groups and causes a negative perception from other work groups. This difference in perception highlights that even the most sincere effort to improve safety can backfire if the workforce misreads the intent. With this understanding, the importance of safety climate becomes clear. It is not enough for leadership to take action; leadership must consider how their actions are perceived, or they risk having their actions be dismissed rather than embraced. If organizations aim to improve outcomes, they must shape the safety climate, because perception is not just reality, it is the driver of behavior.

The relevance of safety climate lies in its demonstrated impact on safety performance, making it a critical factor in organizational safety outcomes. Safety climate theory, first introduced by Dov Zohar in 1980, theorizes that safety climate directly affects safety performance by influencing individuals to perform safe behaviors (Zohar, 1980). Employees who work in a strong, positive safety climate will be motivated to participate in safety activities, comply with safety policies and procedures, and avoid unsafe acts. Safety performance encompasses measurable outcomes such as incident rates and immeasurable outcomes such as the presence of safe behaviors, safe working conditions and safety processes.

The correlation between safety climate and safety performance has been thoroughly studied by researchers. One meta-analysis reviewed 162 studies and concluded that the literature provides evidence of safety climate directly impacting safety performance (Syed-Yahya et al., 2022). Broad empirical support exists for the view that improvements in safety climate are linked to better safety outcomes. Employees who believe that safety is important are motivated to work safely and set the expectation for the entire workforce that only safe work is acceptable. Knowing that a positive safety climate can positively impact the safety performance of the organization, it is also important to understand which factors influence employees' perception regarding the safety climate.

Impacts on Safety Climate

The workplace is a complicated web of policies, procedures and social interactions. A supervisor is expected to balance production demands, ensure quality products or services, meet financial expectations, follow human resource policies, mediate social conflicts, and keep employees safe. Often, these are competing interests and supervisors are asked to prioritize based on business needs. These supervisor decisions are perceived by the workforce as management's commitment to safety.

Perceived management commitment to safety is an antecedent to a strong safety climate. Research has shown that safety leadership is strongly correlated to safety climate and that safety climate mediates the effects of safety leadership and safety performance (Wu et al., 2008). The perception of actions taken by supervisors directly impacts the safety climate because it is believed that the leaders represent the business interests of the organization. For this reason, the relationship between work groups and their direct supervisors is pivotal for managing the safety climate. Direct supervisors must be aware of how the actions they take impact the safety climate. Safety climate theory posits that employees perceive management's commitment to safety as patterns of actions that can be categorized as relative priority, alignment between espousals and enactments, and internal consistency (Zohar, 2010).

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Relative priority is the importance a manager places on safety when compared to other business priorities such as production or finance. It is easy for management to treat safety as a high priority when there are no other competing interests. The most impactful decisions are made when prioritizing safety may negatively affect other aspects of business; if a manager decides to prioritize safety, the workforce understands that safety is important to the organization, and that decision has a positive influence on the safety climate. If the manager makes the decision to favor production or finance, however, then the workforce perceives that business interests are more important than safety, and the safety climate is negatively affected.

The phrase "alignment between espousals and enactments" refers to how the workforce perceives actions taken by management versus the organization's stated values and policies. If an organization tells its workforce that safety is a priority, the workforce expects management to take action to back it up. The organization must commit time, money and resources to safety. A set of policies and procedures must be developed and strictly followed and enforced. Roles and responsibilities regarding safety to which managers will be held accountable must be clearly communicated.

A common method for aligning espousals and enactments is the implementation of a safety management system. Studies have shown that common elements of safety management systems are closely aligned with management actions that are positively perceived as demonstrating commitment to safety. Research has shown that employees positively perceive commitment to safety when managers recognize employees for safe behavior, act on safety suggestions, respond quickly to safety concerns, take part in safety inspections, communicate safety topics to the workforce and provide safety training (Gyekye, 2005). These actions communicate to the workforce that safety is important and thus improve the safety climate. Failing to back up safety commitments with visible action undermines credibility and negatively impacts safety climate.

Internal consistency is the application of management's commitment to safety in all situations. To show commitment to safety, the actions taken by management should remain logically consistent. If a policy is developed that contains exceptions or logical gaps, it is an indicator to the workforce that the organization only prioritizes safety when it is easy to do so. Some logical gaps include allowing contractors to follow less stringent safety policies when performing a task, or designating areas where employees do not need to wear fall protection or follow confined space procedures to reduce costs. Less obvious examples can have the same impact as well. Consistently demonstrating that safety is a priority in all situations has a positive impact on the safety climate.

The safety climate will improve once employees believe that management is taking actions because they genuinely care about employee safety and health. The safety leadership of the direct supervisors is most impactful on the safety climate of the workforce because this group is the most visible representative of the organization's priorities. Their actions, communication style and consistency in applying safety practices are interpreted as direct reflections of the top organizational leaders' true priorities.

The workforce views actions taken by their direct supervisors and then infers reasons for why they believe the action was taken. Fruhen et al. (2022) proposed a framework that categorizes how employees attribute a supervisor's commitment to safety. These attributions fall into three categories: affective, normative and calculative. In affective attributions, the leader is seen as genuinely caring, and they are perceived to be driven by care and concern for others. In normative attributions, the leader is seen as acting out of ethical duty or in response to company policy. These leaders are thought to be driven by obligation or rules. In calculative attributions, the leader is seen as motivated by meeting safety metrics or reducing costs and driven by business interests or compliance.

Fruhen et al. (2022) evaluated the impact of actions taken by leaders with differing perceived attributions for commitment to safety. Self-reported safety participation and compliance rates were used as performance indicators. It was found that employees only report higher levels of compliance and participation for leaders that are perceived to be driven by affective safety commitment. In addition, calculative leaders have a negative impact on the safety participation and compliance of their employees (Fruhen et al., 2022). By understanding how a safety climate is formed and how the actions of the organization and direct supervisors affect the safety climate, a safety management system can be designed to implement procedures aimed at improving the safety climate.

Connection to Safety Management Systems

Organizations often adopt safety management systems such as ISO 45001, ANSI Z10 or OSHA voluntary protection programs to structure their safety activities and improve safety performance. Safety management systems rely on the concept of the plan-do-check-act cycle, also known as the Deming cycle, to provide a structured framework for integrating safety into all aspects of organizational operations and promote both compliance and continuous improvement. Safety management system plan-do-check-act cycles recommend that organizations:

- **Plan.** Identify risks, set objectives and define procedures.
- **Do.** Implement the procedures and controls.
- **Check.** Monitor, audit and measure performance.
- **Act.** Take corrective actions and make system-level improvements based on evaluation results.

By formalizing safety practices and assigning accountability across all levels of the organization, safety management systems support alignment between espoused safety values and actual behaviors, indirectly driving a key factor in shaping safety climate. For example, ISO 45001 requires in clause 5 that "Top management shall demonstrate leadership and commitment with respect to the OH&S management system" (ISO, 2018). While safety management systems such as ISO 45001 emphasize leadership commitment and worker participation—both of which influence safety climate—they do not explicitly frame safety climate as a measurable outcome or central driver of safety performance. As a result, improvements to safety climate are often incidental rather than intentional. Safety management systems should incorporate mechanisms specifically aimed at cultivating a positive safety climate rather than relying on the indirect results of the safety management system.

The continuous improvement processes of safety management systems drives organizations to proactively address hazards and reduce risks to an acceptable

level, but it is difficult to prove that eliminating a specific hazard would prevent a specific injury. Humans adapt to the hazards within their workplace and find methods of performing work without being injured. The most likely benefit of proactively reducing risks is demonstrating the commitment to safety and engaging employees. Research suggests that safety management systems improve performance indirectly by improving employee engagement within the workplace (Wachter & Yorio, 2014). An effective safety management system encourages employee participation in safety programs, improves employee compliance with safety procedures, and encourages employees to become cognitively and emotionally engaged with safety. Engaged employees are less likely to experience an injury and are more capable of adapting to the hazards in their work environment.

Safety management systems are not designed to anticipate every hazard or variable that a frontline employee may experience. Safety management systems should be designed to empower employees and provide them with the flexibility to adjust in real time. Safety professionals who design, implement or administer safety management systems must understand that safety management systems only provide performance improvement indirectly by improving the safety climate. A strong safety climate influences the employees to act safely and manage the risks of every situation with which they are presented. Safety management systems should be designed to improve the safety climate through leadership, management commitment to safety and continuous improvement processes. Safety management systems should place the safety climate directly in the scope of their control and include checking mechanisms to monitor the workplace safety climate.

Recommended Practices

The following is a list of recommended practices that can be adapted into any safety management system. This list should be viewed as a guideline and not a recipe. Safety professionals should aim to design their safety management system to improve the safety climate. Not every recommended practice fits into the culture of every organization, but the concepts of engaging employees and improving safety climate are demonstrated and can be used to design similar changes.

Metrics

Total recordable incident rate and days away, restricted, or transferred are metrics that must be tracked for regulatory compliance. Focusing on these metrics can negatively impact the safety climate because it may be perceived as a calculative attribution for why safety is important per Fruhen et al. (2022). This approach may discourage accurate reporting of incidents and employees may feel that they are being blamed for being injured and negatively impacting a metric. Focusing on these metrics may also foster the perception that safety issues are only addressed if an injury occurs. Try to only post these metrics if regulators dictate it.

Discussions about these metrics should focus on the well-being of employees that were injured and the positive steps that were taken to ensure that the injury cannot reoccur. It is also recommended that metrics demonstrating positive and proactive safety improvements or gap closure be frequently posted, broadly communicated and regularly discussed. Examples include safety inspection data showing the correction of unsafe conditions, risk management data showing task specific improvements, or data that demonstrates a quick response to employees' safety concerns.

In addition to these traditional uses of metrics, the safety management system should prescribe a method for setting objectives and targets for safety climate. Safety climate metrics should be tracked and monitored regularly as part of the continuous improvement cycle. Examples of safety climate metrics include perceived management commitment, perceived attribution types for management's commitment to safety, or perceived consistency between espousals of commitment to safety and actions toward safety. Only proactive metrics should be used to evaluate management's performance because they are designed to positively impact safety climate.

Frontline Supervisor Training

Safety-specific training should be the top priority for all newly hired frontline supervisors. All frontline supervisors should receive frequent and continuous safety-specific training. Training should include education on how employees attribute safety commitment and how to foster affective perceptions through language, visibility and follow-through. Training should also clearly identify the safety-specific roles and responsibilities of frontline supervisors and reaffirm management's commitment that safety is only for the well-being of the employees. Training should also focus on teaching supervisors how to best utilize the tools within a safety management system that are designed to engage the employees. Lastly, training should include how to effectively communicate the importance of safety to the workforce.

Safety Inspections

The safety management system should include a frequent safety inspection program. Safety inspections are positively perceived by employees as demonstrating a commitment to safety (Gyekye, 2005). All members of management should regularly participate in conducting safety inspections of the work areas. The purpose of the inspections should be to proactively identify and control hazards identified within the work area. The inspections should be viewed as proactive and positive and should not be used punitively. Encourage frontline employees to participate in these inspections and seek out their feedback.

Communication

The communication process should be designed so that every employee can easily receive all safety communications. These communications are designed to proactively educate the workforce on safety policies, safe work practices and potential hazard exposures. A feedback loop regarding safety climate should also be established. The results from the safety climate surveys should be transparently shared and widely broadcast.

Response to Safety Concerns

The safety management system should include a process for quickly responding to a safety concern. When a concern is escalated by an employee, management must commit to responding to the concern with the same intensity that is traditionally given in response to an injury. The employee assists in selecting the appropriate controls for addressing the concern and management should seek feedback from the employee once the controls have been implemented to confirm that the concern has been addressed.

Employee Involvement

Safety management systems should be designed to empower employees to offer input on their own safety processes. Members of the workforce should have co-ownership of the safety procedures

and should be encouraged to participate on safety committees. Collaborate with frontline workers to develop action plans based on safety climate surveys to ensure that their perceptions are acknowledged and addressed. Employees should have input on selecting or creating training materials. Employees should also participate in the hazard identification and control process and the development of safe work procedures. The system should be designed to encourage pre- and post-task debriefs and provide stop-work authority to every employee. Involve employees in the design reviews for new equipment and empower them

Hiring Practices Adjustment

Systematically incorporate safety into the hiring process for frontline leaders and operations managers. When hiring members of a management team, priority should be given to candidates who demonstrate that their commitment to safety arises from genuine care about employee health and well-being. Avoid candidates who commit to safety only because of company policy or the company's monetary interests.

Safety Recognition

When developing the safety management system, include a process for recognizing and rewarding employees who recommend a safety improvement or identify a potentially unsafe condition. When employees recognize that management acknowledges these actions, it strengthens their belief that safety is genuinely valued by leadership. Recognition programs must be carefully crafted to avoid rewards based on lagging indicators, as this would negatively impact the safety climate. The focus should be on positive contributions to the safety climate. This alignment promotes a strong safety climate by clearly signaling what behaviors and values are prioritized within the organization. A study by Sparer et al. (2016) demonstrated that implementing a safety recognition program led to improvements in safety climate.

Upper Management Participation

Those in the highest levels of the organization should demonstrate their commitment to safety by directly participating in the safety process. Participating in safety committees, attending safety inspections and driving the safety management system shows frontline employees that safety is important to business leaders and worth the time spent on proactively improving the workplace with employees' best interest in mind.

Policy Statements Updates

Policy statements should reflect the company's commitment to proactively improving workplace safety and demonstrate that management cares for the well-being of its employees. The commitment to regulatory compliance should be deemphasized in policy statements. Regulatory compliance is an implied requirement and a basic expectation. A strong emphasis of regulatory compliance in the policy statement demonstrates to employees that management is committed to safety because of legal obligations and not because employee well-being is top of mind. While it is necessary to include regulatory compliance in the company policy statement, the primary concern should be employee well-being. Metrics or the reduction of safety-related costs should also never be included in a policy statement, since this demonstrates that monetary interests outweigh the importance of employee safety.

Conclusion

When workers believe that management does not care about safety, it is a strong indicator that change is needed. The belief that management does not care about safety shows that there is a weakness in the safety management system, which negatively impacts safety performance. The safety management system should include practices aimed at improving safety leadership and demonstrating management's commitment to safety with the goal of improving the safety climate. Convincing the workforce that management cares about safety may truly be the most impactful change that an organization can make. **PSJ**

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