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8 Cultural Imperatives for Workplace Safety

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Culture is a big word. It's an all-encompassing concept that has broad reach and impact throughout the organization. Too often, safety leaders mistakenly believe it has little to do with their sphere of influence and leave it to the Human Resources department. That can prove to be a costly mistake.

Every leader should feel responsible for shaping the overall culture in their organization, as part of their duties. Safety leaders should especially welcome the opportunity, given the critical role culture plays in creating and maintaining a safe workplace.

Research finds that a handful of factors have substantial impact on creating a safe work environment, and all of them relate to the overall culture of the company. More important, the number of safety incidents within an organization will likely relate to how employees feel about those factors, according to a Towers Watson-ISR study.

Defining a Culture that Promotes Safety

Culture boils down to employees' opinions about the policies, procedures and practices that affect them in the workplace. These *opinions* reflect issues related to their individual job empowerment, as well as both personal and process safety.

Personal safety issues focus on preventing injuries such as slips, struck-by incidents, and strains. They place a heavy emphasis on the use of hard hats, steel toe shoes, and other personal protective equipment. Process safety issues focus on the prevention of unintentional releases of potentially dangerous materials. They are defined by the design and engineering of facilities, maintenance of equipment, effective alarms, effective control points, procedures, and training.

These tools of the safety trade are well understood by both leaders and employees. But savvy safety leaders understand what research from the Towers

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Watson-ISR Safety Works Report has confirmed: There is a statistically strong relationship between employees' opinions about workplace culture and actual safety outcomes – the number of accidents, days away from work, total recorded safety incidents, and workday interruptions.

These findings demonstrate that companies can reduce safety incidents by focusing on specific aspects of organizational culture. The chart in Figure 1 reveals the cultural elements that can be indirect influencers of safety outcomes. Double to quadruple variances in safety results correspond to how employees scored these cultural elements.

Cultural Differentiators: What Specific Employee Opinions Matter?

Towers Watson-ISR has identified eight cultural drivers of workplace safety that deliver the greatest return on safety investment. Let's take a look at them in order of the differential of impact when employees perceived them to be valued and executed well within their company's culture.

Communication

How employees perceive the quality and quantity of communication in the company is the clear winner as the most impactful

Figure 1

Towers Watson-ISR Safety Works Report

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driver in creating a culture of safety. In workplaces where employees gave high scores to the following six factors, safety incidents occurred *four times* less often than in workplaces where employees assigned low scores to these factors.

- The company keeps me informed about matters affecting me.

- The information I need to do my job is readily available.

- I have a clear idea of what's expected of me at work.

- I'm sufficiently informed about company values.

- I receive adequate information about company plans.

- I understand how my division's objectives fit into corporate goals.

Senior Management

When senior leaders demonstrate visible support of safety and operational excellence through their commitments and actions, employees take notice. In workplaces where employees have confidence in the decisions made by management, and they believe leaders are providing a clear sense of direction, safety issues are reduced *more than three and a half times* the rate of organizations where senior leadership takes a more hands-off approach or doesn't inspire employee confidence with their actions.

Teamwork

Where teamwork is encouraged and coworkers are willing to help each other, even if it means doing something outside their normal routine, safety outcomes are *more than three times better* than in workplaces where cooperation between groups, divisions or business units isn't scored highly by employees. Teamwork provides mutual monitoring to ensure safety protocols are followed, and supports employees when work demands exacerbate the likelihood of mistakes or accidents. Ineffective work groups are not only less productive and efficient, but they are also less safe.

Workload

Workload plays an important role in safety outcomes. Heavy workloads hinder safety performance, but this effect can be buffered when strong teamwork takes hold. It's not surprising to find teamwork and workload sharing identical survey results. Safety leaders would be well-served to regularly monitor capacity levels and employees' opinions on the following factors.

- Priorities don't change so frequently that I have trouble getting my work done.

- There is usually sufficient staff to handle the workload and I'm satisfied with my workload.

- The demands of my job do not seriously interfere with my private life.

Supervision

It's no surprise that how employees feel about their direct supervisor heavily influences their engagement levels on the job. Research has also discovered that the traits of good leadership – or lack of it – impact workers' safe work performance.

Employees with the fewest safety incidents believe they are working for managers who communicate effectively, listen to employees' suggestions, and place the emphasis on the quality of work rather than the quantity. When workers give their companies high scores in the broad category of "not sacrificing the quality of products to meet deadlines or to cut costs," we also find workplaces with excellent safety records.

How supervisors approach specific safety factors contributes to the organization's ability to keep safety incidents to a minimum as well. High employee opinion scores on the following five factors were found to significantly reduce reported incidents by a little less than a *factor of three.*

- Safety rules are carefully observed, even if it means work is slowed down.

- I would be supported or positively recognized if I shut down an unsafe work condition.

> "*Employees with the fewest safety incidents believe they are working for managers who communicate effectively...*"

- Corrective action is taken when unsafe work conditions are reported.

- My supervisor demonstrates concern for personal safety.

- The company provides adequate safety training.

Involvement

Trusting employees and encouraging them to solve problems heightens their sense of accountability and enhances their motivation to take ownership of projects – reducing the likelihood of safety issues. To improve safety by *two and a half times*, safety leaders must be vigilant about keeping an open line of communication and ensuring that employees feel they have a voice in the workplace.

- I am encouraged to come up with innovative solutions to work-related problems.

- Leaders in my work group trust the judgment of people at my level.

- Effort is made to get the opinions and thoughts of employees.

- My supervisor involves me in planning the work of my group, decisions that affect our work, and gives me regular feedback on my performance.

Individual Impact

Beyond involvement, individual impact is about empowerment. Empowered employees clearly understanding the importance of their individual job to the organization's success and how their group's goals specifically align to the company's overall strategy. Numerous research studies from Gallup have discovered that aligning employees to the broader corporate vision generates a number of benefits, including improving employee engagement levels and increasing opportunities for improvement and innovation, as well as *reducing reported incidents by more than half*.

Don't hesitate to give employees the knowledge and tools to make decisions. Employees who have clearly defined roles and who are updated regarding matters affecting them, understand their place within their team and organization and are more likely to make well-informed decisions in the face of safety threats.

Respect & Well-Being

Cultures that emphasize employee well-being and production quality (rather than just bottom-line numbers) are more likely to make safety a top priority. Management must communicate and demonstrate a set of principles that support and enhance the well-being of its workforce. Workplaces with high scores in this driver benefit from having *half the number of safety issues* than workplaces where leaders are less attentive to these employee concerns.

- I'm treated with dignity, respect and fairness.
- The company cares about the health and well-being of employees.
- I feel management supports equal opportunity.
- The benefits are as good/better than those of other organizations and fit my needs.

Taking Action to Improve Safety Performance

Focused efforts on these eight cultural drivers can lead to improved safety performance. Research validates that workplaces that made improvements in these key areas of organizational culture had fewer safety incidents.

Start by getting buy-in and support from senior leadership, and then implement your plans for improving these cultural elements through local safety leaders. Seek assistance from Human Resources if coaching or training is required to help safety managers get comfortable with new teambuilding or communication skills. In the continuing quest to improve safety in the workplace, efforts should be made to optimize every opportunity for improvement. ■

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