

# Safety culture: The ultimate goal



Investing in safety management yields many rewards

## Professor Patrick Hudson

**S**afety management systems can make a big difference to any business. The benefits of taking a systematic approach to safety are obvious: the hazards of the business are known, understood and demonstrably controlled.

However, the possession of a safety management system, no matter how thorough and systematic it may be, is not sufficient to guarantee sustained safety performance.

To proceed further it is necessary to develop organisational cultures that support higher processes such as “thinking the unthinkable” and being intrinsically motivated to be safe, even

when there seems no obvious reason to do this. What is needed is a safety culture that supports the management system and allows it to flourish.

The bad news is that creating a healthy safety culture and keeping it alive requires effort. The good news is that less effort is required in smaller organisations, and safety cultures are worthwhile, both in terms of lives and profits.

**Safety for profit:** There is considerable evidence that the most safety-minded companies are also amongst the most profitable.

Safety cultures are characterised by good communication between management and the rest of the company. This not only enhances

safety, but can elevate morale and in some cases, productivity. As communication failures are always identified as a source of problems for organisations, having a definitive focus for improving communication can only result in improved performance at all levels.

The other main reason why safety cultures make money lies in the fact that, if one has the safety enhancement that an effective safety culture can provide, then one can devote resources more effectively and take (profitable) risks that others dare not run.

What costs money is not safety, but bad safety management. Once the management of an organisation realises that safety is financially rewarding and that the costs incurred have to be seen as investments with a positive return, the road to a full safety culture is open.

**What is a safety culture?** Every organisation has some common characteristics we call its "culture". These characteristics have often become invisible to those inside, but may be startling to outsiders coming from a different culture. The notion of an organisational culture is difficult to define. I take a very general approach and see the organisational culture as, roughly: "Who and what we are, what we find important, and how we go

about doing things round here".

In one sense, safety always has a place in an organisation's culture, which can then be referred to as the safety culture, but it is only past a certain stage of development that an organisation can be said to take safety sufficiently seriously to be labelled as a safety culture.

## " What costs money is not safety but bad safety management. "

**From worst to best:** Organisations can be distinguished along a line from pathological to generative:

- **Pathological:** The organisation cares less about safety than about not being caught.
- **Reactive:** The organisation looks for fixes to accidents and incidents after they happen.
- **Calculative:** The organisation has systems in place to manage hazards, however the system is applied mechanically. Staff and management follow the procedures but do not necessarily

believe those procedures are critically important to their jobs or the operation.

- **Proactive:** The organisation has systems in place to manage hazards and staff and management have begun to acquire beliefs that safety is genuinely worthwhile.
- **Generative:** Safety behaviour is fully integrated into everything the organisation does. The value system associated with safety and safe working is fully internalised as beliefs, almost to the point of invisibility.

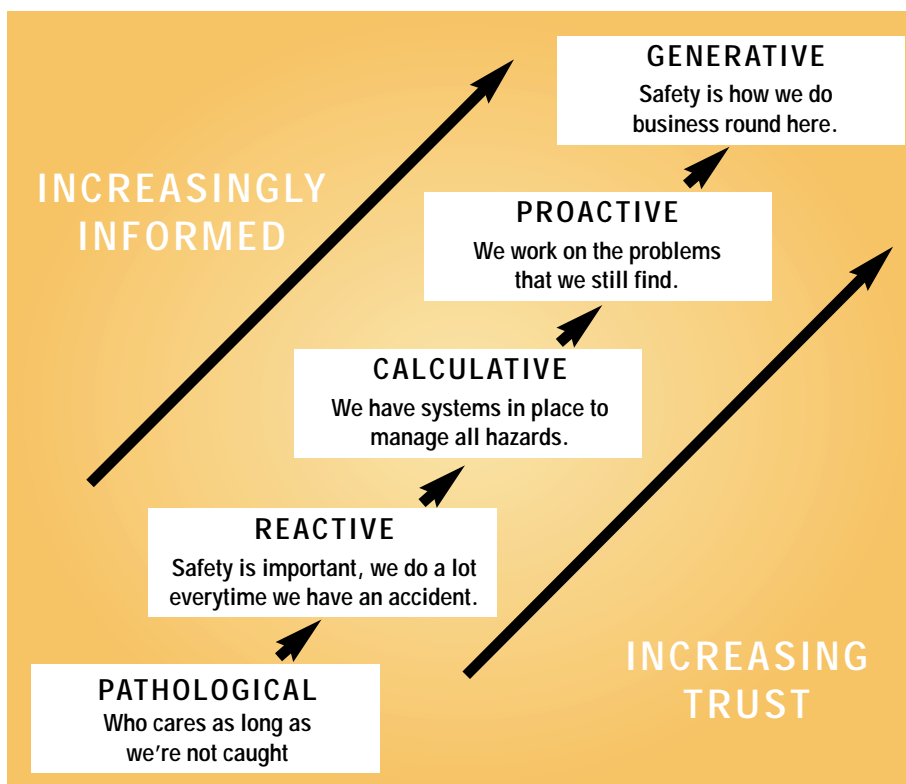
A safety culture can only be considered seriously in the later stages of this evolutionary line. Prior to that, up to and including the calculative stage, the term safety culture is best reserved to "describe formal and superficial structures" rather than an integral part of the overall culture, pervading how the organisation goes about its work. In the early stages, top management believes accidents to be caused by stupidity, inattention and, even, wilfulness on the part of their employees. Many messages may flow from on high, but the majority still reflect the organisation's primary production goals, often with "and be safe" tacked on at the end.

A true safety culture is one that transcends the calculative level. Even so, it is at this stage that the foundations are laid for acquiring beliefs that safety is worthwhile in its own right.

By constructing deliberate procedures, an organisation can force itself into taking safety seriously. At this stage the values are not yet fully internalised, the methods are still new and individual beliefs generally lag behind corporate intentions. However, a safety culture can only arise when the necessary technical steps and procedures are already in place and in operation.

An organisation needs to implement a managed change process so it can develop along the line towards the generative or true safety cultures. The next culture defines where we want to go to, the change model determines how we get there. (See "Change, for safety's sake", page 31.)

A cultural change is drastic and never takes place overnight. If a safety champion leaves, there is often no-one to take up the fight and the crucial top-down impetus is lost. But even without a personnel change there are two threats to the successful transition to a higher level of safety culture. One is success, the other failure.



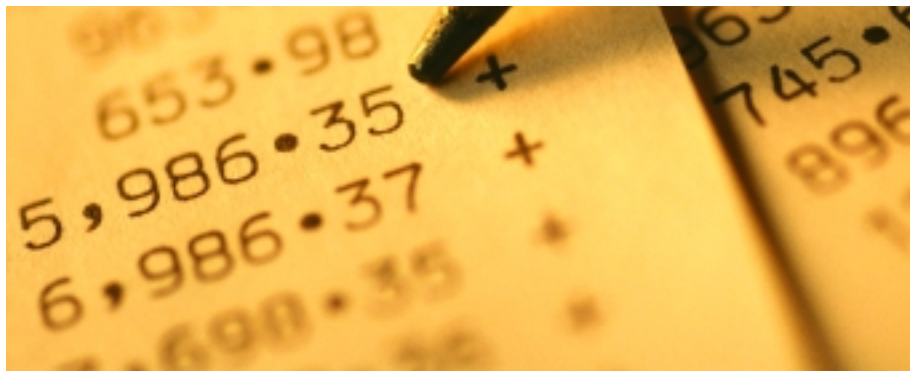
It's a long way to the top: The evolution of a safety culture.

In the case of success, effective processes, tools and systems may be dropped, because the problem is perceived to have gone away. In the case of failure, old-fashioned approaches may be retrieved on the grounds that they worked before. But in both of these cases, the new, and often fragile, beliefs and practices may not have become sufficiently internalised to survive changes at the top.

Management has to be truly committed to the maintenance of an advanced culture in the face of success and/or failure, and such commitment is rare.

**Change is hard:** One final underlying reason why cultural change often fails to succeed is that the new situation is unknown to the participants. If this is added to existing beliefs, such as the belief that the current situation is as good as it gets, then there is little real need to change and failure is almost certain. If these failures are at the level of the workforce, then strong management commitment may save the day. If the problems lie with management, then there is little hope because they will enforce the old situation, which feels most comfortable, on the most proactive of workforces.

A colleague has likened this to learning a new golf swing by changing the grip and the stance. At first the new position is uncomfortable. However, to improve your swing you



have to trust the pro, do the work and be patient. (One advantage of this metaphor is that managers often play golf and can transfer their experience of learning a new swing to learning to manage an advancing culture. Change agents are like golf professionals: they can help develop a person's game, but they can't play it for them.)

**Not too difficult:** Given the financial inducements, why don't organisations try and develop the most advanced forms of safety culture? The answer seems to be contained in the type of culture the organisation has at the time.

Pathological organisations just don't care. Reactive organisations think that there is nothing better and anyone who claims better performance is probably lying. They do what they feel is as good as can be done. Calculative

organisations are hard to move because they are comfortable, even if they know that improvement is possible. Large organisations will inevitably be heavily calculative unless active steps are taken to counter that tendency.

Small organisations are more likely to be able to develop past the calculative stage and become generative. The greatest single barrier to success for smaller organisations however, is the belief that it is too difficult. On the contrary, in the long term, it is more difficult, and dangerous, not to.

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## Change, for safety's sake

The following model was developed for managing successful change within organisations. Its strength comes from the fact that it is intended to change both the individuals and the organisations they constitute, and realises that changing one without the other is impossible. The model puts together the requirements for change of individual beliefs that are so crucial in cultural development. It can apply to safety, but it can also apply to any other desirable development in an organisation. It gives substance to the oft-heard cries for workforce involvement and shows where and why such involvement is crucial, especially in the later stages of evolution towards a full safety culture:

### Awareness

- Awareness: Knowledge of a better alternative than the current state.
- Creation of need: Active desire to achieve the new state.
- Making the outcome believable: Believing that the state is sensible for those involved.
- Making the outcome achievable: Making the process of achieving the new state credible for those involved.
- Information about successes: Provision of information about others

who have succeeded.

- Personal vision: Definition by those involved of what they expect the change to be.

### Planning

- Plan construction: All people involved in the change create their own action plan.
- Measurement points: Indicators of success in the process are defined.
- Commitment: Staff and management sign up to the plan.

### Action

- Do: Start implementing action plans.
- Review: Progress is reviewed with concentration upon successful outcomes.
- Correct: Plan is modified where necessary.

### Maintenance

- Review: Management reviews change process at regular (and defined in advance) intervals.
- Outcome: Checks to see whether new values and beliefs have become second nature.