Turn up the bass!

An exploration into corporate safety culture

In this inaugural piece (from a series of extracts that will run throughout 2015) ANDREW SHARMAN explores corporate safety culture and provides an arsenal to build a solid, sustainable culture of safety

What is culture and why does it matter to safety professionals? The answer to why it matters is simple; culture heavily influences an individual's behaviour by setting group norms. Answering the first question is a little more difficult. In 1952, a list of 164 definitions of "culture" was created, yet more than six decades later, opinions are still divided on what the term means.

Ultimately, in a workplace setting, "culture" concerns the collective grouping of the organisation in a particular way of thinking and acting, in order to meet its prescribed objectives. This sense of strategic programming often simplifies culture as: "The way we do things around here." Although this idea is simple to understand, it feels rather vague ...

Perhaps a more meaningful definition of culture is: "The system of information that codes the manner in which the people, in an organised group, interact with their social and physical environment, where the frame of reference is the set of

follow, and the material objects they create."

So, culture is the way we do things; guided by the values that we hold dear and regulated by the methods and practices accepted in the workplace.

Definitions of safety culture are myriad. There may even be as many, if not more than those on the "culture" list. Most contemporary definitions appear to be based on the one generated by the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations following the Chernobyl disaster, so this is a good place to begin:

"The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety programmes."

While safety culture is acknowledged as an important concept, its content and consequence have enjoyed little consensus of opinion over the last few decades, and an absence of models that specify relationships between culture, safety management and safety performance persist. Dialogue around safety culture has emerged as a popular theme in contemporary scholarship, usually as an answer to accident causation, and as the silver bullet for performance improvement.

In modern times, the term is typically connected with the prevention of accidents, and it enjoys centre stage as an approach to driving sustained performance improvement. Safety culture as a concept is not without conflict, however. Despite its popularity and many attempts at its definition, the term remains an abstract concept.

Fortunately some definitions are used more frequently – by both researchers and practitioners – than others. Here are some of the most popular ones:

"The set of assumptions and associated practices, which permit beliefs about danger and safety to be constructed;"

"The embodiment of a set of principles, which loosely define what an organisation is like in terms of health and safety," and;

rules, regulations, mores and methods of interaction within the group."

Edgar Schein, former professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has spent his career studying culture in the workplace. Accordingly, his definition may bring value to our discussion: "Culture is a pattern of shared tacit assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems, of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems."

From a psycho-social perspective, culture is defined as the: "... values that group members share, the norms they

"The attitudes, beliefs and perceptions shared by natural groups as defining norms and values that determine how they act and react in relation to risks and risk control systems."

Although the term safety culture is now widely used and defined, it holds a relatively young pedigree. Following the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion on April 26, 1986, the International Atomic

Energy Agency identified that the "poor safety culture" at the plant was the primary cause of the accident.

Subsequently, many other major accident investigations, including those looking at the Piper Alpha oil platform, the Kings Cross train station, the NASA Challenger space shuttle and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, have pinpointed safety culture as a key contributory factor. It may be that the concept of safety culture has evolved as a direct response to such events.

But, hang on, instead of tying ourselves in knots trying to define the term here, why not choose a preferred definition and move forward. I see safety culture as a product of three interrelated aspects:

- Psychological (individual and group attitudes, perceptions and values);
- Behavioural (safety-related actions and behaviours), and;
- Situational (policies, procedures, organisational structures and management systems).

Looking from this perspective, we can see that safety culture is the effect of how the formal and informal aspects of an organisation's daily life influences safety in either a positive or negative way.

This influence is generated on two levels by:
- Setting the values and norms as well as the underlying beliefs and convictions, through which workers deal with, or disregard, risks; and
- Influencing the conventions for safe or unsafe behaviour, interaction and communication.

Safety culture is not only similar to organisational culture, but, indeed, an inextricable part of it; actively influencing attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of individuals with regard to workplace

safety. Remove the word safety (and any reference to it) and you can see that we're talking about the same thing with which we began this article.

It might just be worth a quick diversion to briefly touch on an aspect we have come to refer to as "climate". Organisational climate, especially related to workplace safety, has been the subject of much study over the last three decades. Several writers have proposed its use as a robust leading indicator for workplace safety. Interestingly, the term safety climate appears to be used as a synonym for safety culture, despite some argument that they are completely separate entities.

Often, the desired state of corporate culture (whether related to safety, or more generically) is presented in a series of vision, mission, policy and value statements; however, these statements and the actual practice may not match. Why? Well, because in simple terms, we don't create a culture in an organisation; it is already there.

We can develop that culture, refine it, enhance it, or even attempt to change it, but we don't create a completely new one. Blindly overlaying aspiration across your existing culture is like laying a carpet over a wooden floor. The wood still exists: the boards still squeak as you walk over them and the woodworms and mites are still busy deep within the grain.

Really understanding your corporate culture and its nuances is vital. Purchasing an off-the-shelf audit, management system or behavioural safety programme just won't cut it. Yet some organisations continue to gleefully forge ahead on this route, essentially inflicting a programme or system upon themselves that just doesn't fit congruently with "the way they do things".

Most of the main theoretical models of safety culture appear to have been adapted and enlarged from Edgar Schein's model, which advocates that there are three components that make up and influence culture:

Organisational Artefacts: These are readily observable in the workplace and can

include a particularly prevalent architectural or furniture style; dress code; artwork; symbols or graphics; communication styles and media; rituals, ceremonies or established events. Typically, artefacts can be recognised by people, internal and external to the culture or organisation. While tangible and easy to spot, the meaning of organisational artefacts is harder to decipher or interpret.

Shared Basic Assumptions: These are the source of the organisational values and artefacts and form the essence of culture. They are the deeply embedded, taken-for-granted behaviours, which are typically carried out unconsciously. These assumptions are so well engrained in the organisational dynamic that they are difficult to identify and observe – even from within the corporation.

- Safety systems and procedures;
- Work pressures and scheduling;
- Employee training and competence;
- Genuine and consistent management of safety;
- Clear communication;
- Employee engagement and involvement;
- Responsibility, and;
- Regulatory compliance.

So now we know that we need to consider the artefacts, values and assumptions of our organisation and that there are ten key factors for us to work on if we are to build a solid, sustainable culture of safety, but how should we move forward?

You could start by considering the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (otherwise known as a SWOT analysis) for action against those ten factors listed above. Then, narrow your focus to the key areas that will really make a difference, and you have a framework for action.

Next, turn down the volume on the aspects of the old culture that you wish to change and turn up the bass on the new. Take every opportunity to reinforce the new assumptions, values and artefacts. Be an apostle. Recruit disciples. Keep your foot on the gas – remember the journey from accidents to zero never ends. **❙ SHEQ**

> *"Many major accident investigations have pinpointed safety culture as a key contributory factor."*

Espoused Values: These are not necessarily directly observable, but can be distilled from watching how people behave. The espoused values are essentially how the workers, at all levels, choose to represent the organisation, both to themselves and to others. They may lie within the organisation's stated beliefs, principles and mindsets or be expressed in official philosophies, public statements or rules. They may also form part of a vision of the future, of what individuals or the organisation hope to become; for example, the popular maxims of "safety first" and "zero accidents".

Now you may be starting to wonder how you can influence the culture in your organisation, positively, towards safety. In order to build a framework to do this, I've studied the literature for you with the aim of identifying the main factors that influence an organisation's safety culture. While there appears to be no overall agreement on the most important elements, common themes and patterns do exist in the research.

Here are the top ten:
- Management commitment;
- Risk perception and management;