The power of perceptions
They will make or break your safety efforts
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Everything you do to reduce human error — and thus losses — depends on perceptions of your organization's culture. It's that simple.

Culture is the key. Or said another way, perception of culture (which cements your culture) is what makes or breaks safety. The success or failure of any element of your safety and health process hinges on how it is perceived.

Management — through its vision, honest real values, systems of measurement and reward and daily decisions — lays the foundation for organizational culture. In that culture, various safety and health-related processes and procedures attempt to operate. Their intent is to control losses. Some are overall (system-wide) — for example, whether people are held accountable for performance. Some are specific — for example, how a supervisor's training is selected.

Out of sync
The field of safety largely ignored the concept of culture for decades. Management attempted to improve culture through changing styles of leadership, employee participation, and other strategies, but EHS professionals were not in sync, tending to change their approaches very little.

Pros kept using the same tools, the same tried-and-true elements in their safety programs they had always relied on. Fixed and structured safety programs typically consisted of the usual things: meetings, inspections, accident investigation, job safety analyses (JSAs), etc. These staples were long considered the essence a safety program. In fact, OSHA published voluntary guidelines in the 1980s (in lieu of requirements) suggesting all companies follow these set practices. California enacted an injury and illness prevention law requiring companies to follow traditional elements of a safety program — at least in writing.

Safety regulators and many safety professionals simply were not on the same page as leading researchers in organizational performance. OSHA and much of the EHS profession continued to hammer away at traditional safety program elements — more training, more meetings, more inspections, more rules. But several researchers began to suggest totally different answers to solving safety problems. Most of their findings concluded that there are no essential elements — what works in one organization may not work in another. Each organization must determine for itself what will work. There are no magic pills.

The deciding factor
The answer is clear: culture determines what interventions will succeed or fail in an organization.

Certain cultures, in fact, hold safety to be fundamental and integral to all facets of operation.

Other cultures make it clear safety is unimportant to the task at hand — getting product out the door and turning a profit. In this culture, almost any safety intervention is bound to fail. Meetings will be hollow and boring, JSAs perceived only as paperwork exercises, and so on.

In a participative culture, the organization says to the worker, "We want and need your help." Some cultures urge creativity and innovation; others stifle it. Some cultures tap employees for ideas and help; some force employees to leave their brains at home.

Building blocks

Factors that shape an organization's culture include:

- Decisions: Does the organization spend its available money on people? On safety? Or are these ignored for other priorities?
- Measures: Is safety measured as tightly as production? What is measured tightly is what is important to management.
- Rewards: Is there a larger reward for productivity than for safety? This indicates management's true priorities.
- Teamwork: Is it fostered? Or is it "them versus us"? In safety, is it "police versus policed"?
- History: What are the organization's traditions? Has the company downsized? Is the company profitable? Too much? Too little?
- Heroes: Who are the corporate heroes — and why?
- The safety system: Is it intended to save lives or to comply with regulations?
- Supervisors: Are they required to perform safety tasks daily? This says safety is a true value.
- Managers: Do the big bosses wander around and talk to people?
- Engagement: Is using your brain allowed on the work floor?

These are only a few of the many ingredients that stir up a culture. Please note it's more important to understand what your culture is than to understand why it is that way.

And after you come to understand your culture, the next step is to analyze how your culture translates into day-to-day operations — including its impact on safety and health attitudes and behaviors. That's where perceptions enter the picture. Survey and compare the perceptions of employees, supervisors and managers about your culture, for that's how you'll understand the impact of your organization's culture on your loss control and injury prevention efforts.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Dr. Dan Petersen, CSP, P.E., has a BS in industrial engineering, an MS in industrial psychology, and a Ph.D. in organizational behavior and management. Dan's latest book, "Measurement of Safety Performance," has recently been published by the American Society of Safety Engineers. For more info, visit www.asse.org.