CULTURE VS. CLIMATE

BRINGING CULTURE AND CLIMATE TOGETHER TO IMPROVE SAFETY PERFORMANCE

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For many years, we have heard people talk about the impact of organizational “culture” or “climate” on safety. All of us who have worked in more than one organization recognize that there are intrinsic differences among organizations in how people interact and the values that are reflected in their work. In every organization, there are “right ways” to do things—organizational norms of behavior. Because these characteristics influence the way things get done in an organization, it is reasonable to assume they have an impact on safety. But few people interested in improving safety fully understand how culture influences safety and how to make changes in culture.

To begin, it is helpful to understand that culture and climate, although often used synonymously, are different.

By culture, we mean the shared values and beliefs of an organization—commonly described as “the way we do things here.” The culture also can be thought of as the shared norms for behavior in the organization, often motivated by unstated assumptions. Culture is sometimes described as the “unwritten rules” of the organization.

Climate, on the other hand, describes the prevailing influences on a particular area of functioning (such as safety) at a point in time. Climate should be discussed in the context of being the climate for something: safety, quality, service, etc. It reflects employee perceptions about what gets rewarded, supported and expected in a particular setting.

Thus, culture is something that is more deeply embedded and long term, taking longer to change and influencing organizational performance across many areas of functioning. Climate, on the other hand, changes faster and more immediately reflects the attention of leadership.
CLIMATE CHANGE

With these definitions in mind, it is a mistake to think about an organization’s "safety culture" or "quality culture." The organization (or one of its subunits) has one underlying culture, and that culture has characteristics that may be more or less supportive of safety, quality, productivity or any other performance target. Thus, a more useful formulation than talking about the safety culture is to ask whether an organization’s culture is supportive of safety.

Climate is more readily changed than culture. As specific events occur that influence the organization, the climate for safety (or for any other factor) changes. The most striking example is the impact on safety climate immediately following a serious injury or fatality. Most of the time, such an event triggers a strengthening of the safety climate. However, this change often does not last over the long term.

The reason climate change is difficult to sustain is that climate and culture influence one another. Culture is like a heavy magnet, and its stability tends to pull climate, like a lighter piece of metal, back into alignment. Thus, if the culture has characteristics that do not support strong safety performance, the short-term strengthening of safety climate will not last. Over time, the safety climate tends to return to the way it was, in a state of equilibrium with the cultural characteristics of the organization.

Climate can, however, also influence culture. If culture is the magnet and climate a piece of metal attracted to the magnet, we can affect the magnet itself by anchoring the metal and providing enough metal mass to overcome the inertia of the magnet. If we make enough change in climate, support it for the long term and anchor it with sustaining mechanisms, equilibrium will be re-established through the shifting of the culture.

HOW IT WORKS IN THE REAL WORLD

What does the interaction between climate and culture look like in practice? Consider the hypothetical case of a site in the immediate aftermath of a fatality resulting from a lockout failure. At this location, the procedure called for a supervisor to verify the lockout before work began. The site had a very experienced work force with low turnover, and took great pride in being a leader in productivity within its division. To avoid delaying the work, the facility had developed the shortcut of proceeding with locked-out work even if a supervisor was not immediately available to do the check.

A fatality occurred because the wrong equipment was locked out, and the equipment being worked on remained energized. This incident had a profound effect on everyone at the site. Because of the prevalence of long-time employees, the victim of this event was well-known to all and people experienced a very personal sense of loss. In response, the site focused on safety. They retrained everyone on appropriate lockout procedures and put up new signs warning about the hazards of energized equipment. The supervisors reminded everyone that they should be called to review all lockout work, and an additional requirement was added that a second worker also review the lockout before work began.

What we see in this case is the typical response to a major incident — a response that has a focus on climate but does not address the culture. We see renewed priority given to the exposure reduction processes and safety receiving a lot of attention. All of this is good, but incomplete.

An important part of the reason that this fatality occurred can be found in the culture of the organization. The people at this site were never unconcerned about safety, and did not set out to ignore safety procedures. However, the culture was characterized by some important assumptions that worked against safety in subtle ways. Being the best in the division was important to personnel at the site, and they believed that being the best meant doing what they needed to do to maximize productivity. There was also an assumption that workers knew their jobs very well — after all, they were highly experienced and successful — so that having process steps checked by supervisors was not seen to have much value.

In this organization, it is predictable that the changes made in the aftermath of the incident will not be sustained. The changes focus on the climate, and the culture is inconsistent with the safety-focused climate. Over time, as situations arise that cause people to want to push up productivity, and as supervisor (and co-worker) checks of lockout preparations repeatedly find no problem, the shortcut that had developed will return.

A necessary additional response in this organization would be to pursue further steps to solidify the climate change and help it to influence culture. For example, to improve the sustainability of the climate change, measures of adherence to the key procedures should be adopted and reported. The site should then adopt additional approaches to focus specifically on culture. The leadership at this site should be consciously identifying and practicing leadership behaviors that change people’s underlying assumptions about the organization’s values and goals.

Leaders could, for example, emphasize the value of double-checking critical procedures, and talk about how this enhanced effort has prevented problems (both in safety and in other performance areas). They should communicate that their definition of being the best in their division is a reflection of a broad range of performance measures, well beyond just productivity. It is noteworthy that the changes to make the culture more safety-supporting are likely to involve acting and communicating about issues well beyond safety itself.

LEADING WITH SAFETY

Understanding and managing both climate and culture is critical to achieving and maintaining excellence in safety performance. The leaders in any organization should understand the organization’s cultural characteristics and the extent to which those characteristics support the organization’s current goals. The behavior of leaders is an important influence on culture. Through the examples they set, the messages they send and the consequences they provide, leaders influence the behaviors of others, as well as their beliefs about what is acceptable and what is valuable to the organization. Strong safety leaders understand these factors and use culture to help drive safety performance, rather than being slaves to the unwanted manifestations of culture.

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