Safety culture
A state of mind

Getting safety culture right is a powerful leadership tool to improve business productivity, quality, engagement, and financial performance. But what exactly do we mean when we say 'safety culture'? Hamish Brown explains.

The Government's objective to reduce workplace serious harm accidents and deaths by 25 percent by 2020 provides a much-needed focus, but conservatively means another 400 employees won't go home to their families alive, and 36,000 will be seriously injured between now and then.

The term 'safety culture' has received a lot of press recently. The Pike River Royal Commission discussed it in their report; the Independent Task Force on Health and Safety criticised New Zealand's workplace safety culture, and said it was "not fit for purpose"; and the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum, representing about 140 chief executives, recently called for the "need to create a stronger safety culture".

What exactly do we mean when we say 'safety culture'? We've heard descriptions ranging from "The way we do things around here" and "People's mind-set", to "Something largely intangible". And often when confronted with having to explain safety culture, practitioners will resort to descriptions detailing the importance of pre-testing safety devices and the oversight of systems.
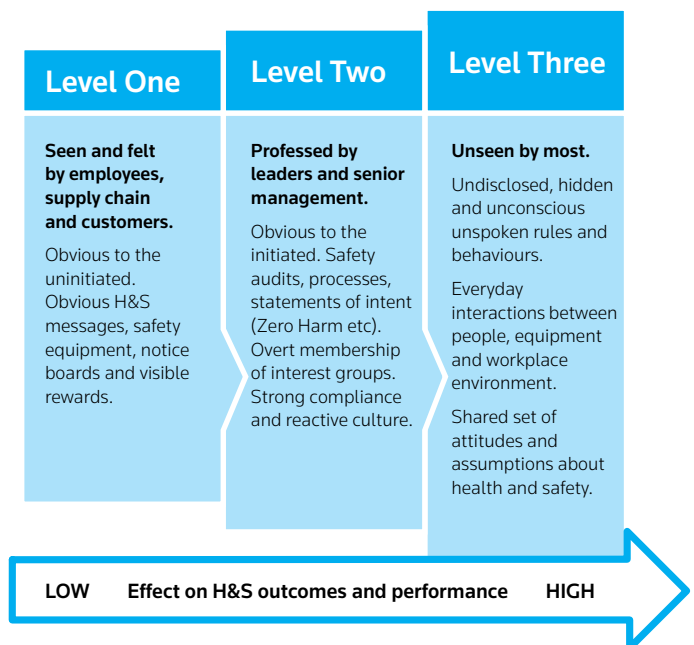
Having a common definition for safety culture would be useful, but the critical questions are: "Why does a particular safety culture exist? What impact is it likely to have on health and safety outcomes and employee performance" and "How do you build a mature safety culture?" The answers require more than guesswork.

Knowing why rather than what

Safety culture is about people, not so much about what they do, but rather why they do it. A useful analogy is the difference between knowing that someone has driven through a red traffic light and actually knowing *why* they have. Knowing they have crashed a red light provides little else in the way of information. Similarly, knowing an employee has ignored a safety hazard provides little in the way of addition information. However, understanding *why* they have behaved in such a manner will, at the very least, tell us whether they are likely to repeat that action.

Like it or not, every enterprise already has a safety culture, and a few initial questions will start to uncover its nature:
- Is your H&S manager a member of the leadership team?
- Are safety processes skipped when pressure builds?
- Do identified safety improvements have to wait for next year's budget?
- Do senior managers role-model positive safety behaviours?

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
Seen and felt by employees, supply chain and customers.	**Professed by leaders and senior management.**	**Unseen by most.**
Obvious to the uninitiated. Obvious H&S messages, safety equipment, notice boards and visible rewards.	Obvious to the initiated. Safety audits, processes, statements of intent (Zero Harm etc). Overt membership of interest groups. Strong compliance and reactive culture.	Undisclosed, hidden and unconscious unspoken rules and behaviours. Everyday interactions between people, equipment and workplace environment. Shared set of attitudes and assumptions about health and safety.

LOW   Effect on H&S outcomes and performance   HIGH

- Is safety culture measured?
- What is most important, profit or the health and safety of employees?

We recently visited a large manufacturing business. They were proud of their health and safety systems. They had posters and held meetings extolling the importance of a safe workplace. They invested heavily in personal and plant safety equipment. They regularly audited systems and processes. Employees had to wear high visibility jackets, and stay within yellow safety markings when crossing the busy despatch yard.

Unfortunately, it was common for managers in a hurry to just skip across the yard without doing either. The unspoken message that undid much of the good health and safety work was that anyone really important and busy didn't have time to put on a visibility vest or stay in a prescribed route, and that safety was just about employee compliance.

The difficult aspect of safety culture is that it exists at three levels (see above). Levels One and Two are easy to see, easy to measure with tick-the-box audits, and relatively easy to change. It's Level Three that requires deep understanding and expertise.

It is true that a well-thought-out set of policies, better legislation,

harsher penalties, and more inspectors should cover the needs of effective health and safety, but like road rules they can only influence to a certain extent how people will actually behave.

Likely new responsibilities (see side bar) may help to ensure that senior management take a more strategic look at health and safety, but it is sad that in many New Zealand businesses health and safety is looked on as a compliance cost and something to be delegated and avoided.

Current attitudes towards health and safety in New Zealand are a large part of the reason why a New Zealand employee is six times more likely to be killed or seriously injured at work compared to their UK counterparts. Given the expertise of New Zealand management and leadership, it would be fair to assume that if they did turn their skills and attention towards effective health and safety, then our appalling statistics would rapidly improve.

Unfortunately, as well as health and safety being decidedly 'unsexy', most senior decision makers are unaware of the performance and productivity benefits that come with a mature safety culture—otherwise they'd already be using it to deliver competitive advantage in these tough economic times.

The 'cop-out' we often hear is, "There is no need to measure our safety culture because we already know what it is." Whenever we hear those words we are reminded of people who refuse to get health checks, because they are not already sick.

Compelling reasons

International research provides compelling reasons for establishing an effective safety culture other than saving lives and reducing injuries. The American Safety Council cites improved reputation and company marketability; increased employee creativity and initiative; improved profit and shareholder value. Forty percent of 231 senior executives cited productivity as the top benefit of effective safety.

According to AIHA and OSHA, effective health and safety programmes reduce illness and injury by 20 to 40 percent and see a return of $4.00 for every $1.00 spent. New Zealand's Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment cites evidence that an effective safety culture creates improved productivity, increased job satisfaction, and enhanced business reputation.

Measuring health and safety culture is the first step towards being able to manage and improve it, and knowing where your business is on the improvement journey. Safety culture can be identified by five broad characteristics:

- **Acceptance culture:** Accidents and incidents shouldn't happen—we'll respond to them if they do;
- **Reactive culture:** We've got a low incident rate. When one does happen, we always find out who is responsible;

Likely new H&S responsibilities

- A new duty on directors and company officers to exercise proactive 'due diligence' to ensure that the business is meeting its health and safety obligations;
- The definition of 'director' widened to those people who participate in substantive decisions affecting the business—this is likely to include CEOs, and perhaps CFOs, HR managers and others;
- The definition of manslaughter extended to allow companies to be prosecuted where incidents of gross negligence are found;
- Tougher penalties imposed for breach—these include extending the maximum penalty from $500K to $3M.

- **Compliance culture:** We've got all the safety systems and processes in place. We audit regularly and are focused on clear targets;
- **Proactive culture:** We balance safety with work rate; we're always looking for ways to learn and improve. Employees understand and are engaged, but management make and apply the rules;
- **Mature culture:** H&S led by a director or senior manager; management & workforce share H&S responsibilities; safety is recognised as good for business, we strive for continuous improvement, we share knowledge with others. A mature safety culture is characterised by awareness, assessment and action in all these areas, and is supported by open and forthright communication.

Paradoxically, getting safety culture right is a powerful leadership tool to improve business productivity, quality, engagement, and financial performance. These are all aspects of a business that executives, directors, and board members are interested in, but only now is the link between safety culture and business performance finally being recognised.

Employee attitudes and behaviours have a huge impact on safety outcomes. They affect the cost of ACC and insurance premiums, medical expenses, time lost, and the return on investment in safety equipment, policies and processes.

The good news is that an embedded and mature health and safety culture is a powerful safety tool which is inexpensive to maintain. In a mature safety culture employees are mindful about risk, take responsibility for identifying and reducing hazards, and are conscious of keeping themselves and others safe.

Understanding safety culture is linked to understanding that safety is not the exclusion of danger, it is a state of mind. **et**

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