Safety Culture Defence: Vigilance

This safety moment describes an important cultural defence, vigilance, and provides questions to promote team reflection and discussion.

Safety culture overview

The CER has endorsed the following safety culture definition:

> Safety culture means "the attitudes, values, norms and beliefs, which a particular group of people shares with respect to risk and safety."[1]

Safety culture is an intangible construct with a powerful impact on organizational safety outcomes. Because of its unobservable nature, it is useful to represent safety culture through a framework. A framework helps illustrate what safety culture looks like within an organization, and subsequently, can help organizations detect what areas of their organizational functioning are supporting vs detracting from a positive safety culture.

The CER's safety culture framework acts as an example for industry of safety culture in a high-risk organization. The CER's framework depicts eight cultural dimensions (i.e., eight elements of organizational functioning) that support vs. detract from a positive safety culture. There are four negative dimensions identified that act as threats to existing organizational safety defences: production pressure, complacency, normalization of deviance, and tolerance of inadequate systems and resources. On the other hand, there are four positive dimensions identified that act as cultural defences against these threats: committed safety leadership, vigilance, empowerment and accountability, and resiliency.

These dimensions are shown in the table below:

Negative dimensions (Cultural threats)	Positive dimensions (Cultural defences)
Production pressure	Committed safety leadership
Complacency	Vigilance
Normalization of deviance	Empowerment and accountability
Tolerance of inadequate systems and resources	Resiliency

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[1] Mearns, K., Flin, R., Gordon, R. & Fleming, M. (1998). Measuring safety culture in the offshore oil industry. Work and Stress, 12(3), 238-254. "Safety" includes safety of workers and the public, process safety, operational safety, facility integrity, security and environmental protection.

Cultural Defence No. 2: Vigilance

Vigilance refers to organizational preoccupation with failure and the willingness and ability to draw the right conclusions from all available information. The organization implements appropriate changes to address the lessons learned. It includes the continual collection and analysis of relevant data in order to identify hazards (human, technical, organizational and environmental factors) and manage related risk. The organization actively disseminates safety information in order to improve overall awareness and understanding of risks to safety. People are encouraged and willing to report safety concerns (unsafe conditions, errors, near-misses, incidents) without fear of blame or punishment. Employees trust that the information they submit will be acted upon to support increased awareness, understanding, and management of threats to safety. Errors and unsafe acts will not be punished when these events are unintended; however, it is clear that those who act recklessly or take deliberate and unjustifiable risks will still be subject to disciplinary action.

Key characteristics of vigilance (Attributes)

- Knowing what is going on, through a proactive surveillance process
- Understanding safety information through analysis and interpretation
- Everyone proactively reporting errors, near-misses, and incidents
- Sharing information and interpretation to create collective understanding of current status of safety and anticipated future challenges

Examples of vigilance (Descriptors)

1. The organization seeks information from a wide range of sources (e.g., contractors, local responders, landowners, communities, regulators, etc.) to support hazard identification.
2. Safety performance indicators are tracked, trended, evaluated and acted upon.
3. Safety information and performance data is communicated upwards and across the organization without distortion.
4. Prospective analysis is conducted to identify future threats.
5. Staff are aware of the connection between cause and effect as they track the consequences of their actions and decisions.
6. Teams avoid making decisions in isolation; instead they seek feedback about the impact of their actions from other parts of the organization.
7. Leaders seek to identify and understand active failures and latent conditions that lead to accidents.
8. The organization understands that a decrease in or lack of reporting does not mean that culture is strong or performance is improving.
9. Safety mistakes, errors, lapses are treated as an opportunity to learn rather than find fault or blame.
10. Incident investigation aims to identify the failed system defences and improve them.
11. Leadership seeks to exceed the minimum established regulatory expectations with regards to safety.
12. Leadership takes ownership and responsibility for safety standards and performance and does not rely on regulatory interventions to manage the organization's operational risk.

Questions for team discussion

1. How does our organization nurture and support vigilance?

2. What more can we do to nurture and support vigilance?

For more information and useful tools related to safety culture, visit the CER's Safety Culture Learning Portal at

www.cer-rec.gc.ca.