Working Toward an Effective Safety Culture

By Michael L. Miozza

A safety culture exists in every organization right from day one; it cannot be built, created or pursued. Safety cultures may be good, bad, mature or immature. If an organization wants to improve its culture, it must nurture its existing safety culture until safety is seamlessly integrated into the organizational culture.

Ultimately, an organization’s safety culture is a function of both worker and management performance. In most organizations, three groups affect the type of safety culture a company will experience. Senior management, employees and supervisors each have important supporting roles that help define the safety culture.

Senior management plays a significant role in determining the safety culture of an organization. If senior management is hands-off, blames employees for workplace incidents, provides no resources, shuts out employees, it safety culture will likely be weak. If senior management is hands-on, communicates and builds trust with workers, provides adequate resources for safety and values employee input, the safety culture will be strong.

Another group that plays an important role in determining the strength of the safety culture is employees. Active, trusting, engaged employees help advance the safety culture. The more involved employees are the more likely the organization’s safety culture will be strong. There are examples in literature to support the notion that active employee involvement and engagement have a positive effect on an organization’s safety performance.

And the last group, which is the glue that holds the culture together, is supervisors. This group is sandwiched between workers and senior management. Supervisors are the ones who must create a blame-free workplace when an incident occurs. Trust and respect must be established for the culture to flourish and supervisors play a key role. They must communicate management’s wishes and listen to workers grumble. The quality of that communication will greatly affect a safety culture. But for there to be any success all three groups must have a mutual respect for each other. It is also essential that all three groups align if the organization wishes to foster a positive, caring safety culture.

Some say that a strong safety culture exists if there are no competing priorities, which means that safety comes in first every time. However, I do not buy that. For
safety to mean anything in a company it must become a core company value. This means that an organization must integrate safety with other organizational core values such as production, quality, human resources, customer service and finance. Safety cannot be treated as an added activity because one core value is not more important than any other. Safety must be so tightly interwoven in the organization’s DNA that it would be difficult to separate the value out from other core company values.

If safety wins every time, that means there is a struggle between production and safety. Safety does not need to win every time when an organization has successfully integrated the value of safety into the fabric of the organizational culture.

**Signs of an Effective Safety Culture**

A good safety culture includes effective communication between management and employees and visible management, whereby senior management visits employees working on the manufacturing floor or out at the construction site. Another sign is when an organization holds everyone accountable for safety. In a strong safety culture, everyone feels responsible for safety and pursues it on a daily basis. Employees go beyond their duty to identify unsafe conditions and behaviors, and intervene to correct them. An organization with a good safety culture is not afraid to celebrate its safety successes.

Culture is broad and not a simple process to change, especially when considering an organization’s belief system, attitudes, values and goals. Many forces influence the culture. Changing the safety culture in an organization takes times and consistency. It is frequently a multiyear process, but it is well worth the effort. Literature supports the notion that an organization will see benefits when it creates a sound safety culture in the form of reduced operational costs and increased efficiencies in operations. Consider it both an investment in the people and the business.

**Safety Culture Phases**

Some safety practitioners believe an organization’s safety culture is difficult to characterize, but I would argue it is not. Culture is a process with several phases. Five distinct developmental phases can help define an organization’s safety culture. As an organization moves from a weak to a strong safety culture, it goes through the following five phases [Figures 1, 2 (p. 3)].

**Phase 1: Indistinct Phase**

At this phase, safety is almost nonexistent and is indistinguishable as a core function in the organization. Safety Acuity: 20/180

- Nearly blind
- Safety is almost nonexistent and is indistinguishable as a core function in the organization.

**Phase 2: Initiation**

Safety is based primarily on rules and regulations and is in its infancy stage.

Safety Acuity: 20/80

- Corrective lenses needed

**Phase 3: Illumination**

Safety is considered an organizational objective and there is knowledge about the benefits of safety.

Safety Acuity: 20/20

- Average eyesight

**Phase 4: Insight**

Safety can always be improved and there is a solid understanding of the safety function.

Safety Acuity: 20/10

- Better than average

**Phase 5: Inspirational**

Safety is exceptional and the system is moving in the right direction.

Safety Acuity: 20/2

- Hawk eye
in safety and they are generally disengaged.

Some characteristics of an organization in Phase 1 are:
• Safety is not a core company value.
• Little money is spent on safety. Safety is a cost.
• Likely in this organization there is no written safety policy.
• Management tends to roll the dice with safety and they often blame employees for workplace incidents.
• Workers’ compensation expense is viewed as a cost of doing business.

Phase 2: Initiation Phase
At this phase, safety is in its infancy and is based primarily on rules and regulations. However, there is some safety awareness, and management is just starting to see the light.

Some characteristics of an organization in Phase 2 are:
• Management may feel that OSHA enforcement is weak.
• Senior management starts to realize that people must be held accountable or there is no safety.
• Senior management recognizes the need to provide safety training.
• Senior management begins to grasp that they must move past blaming employees for workplace incidents.

Phase 3: Illumination Phase
Phase 3 is called the Illumination Phase because safety is now an organizational objective, and there is knowledge about the benefits of safety. At this stage, there is enlightenment. Senior management begins to realize that employees play a critical role in the success of the safety system. Supervisors understand they are responsible and accountable for safety.

Some characteristics of an organization in Phase 3 are:
• The organization starts conducting regular safety inspections.
• Safety metrics are developed for the organization.
• Safety is part of new-hire orientation.
• A safety committee is formed and meets regularly.

Phase 4: Insight Phase
The Insight Phase includes a solid understanding of the safety function. However, the safety function can still be improved. Senior managers are concerned about safety, and they are asking about what they can do to improve the safety system. Safety performance is actively monitored. At this stage, off-the-job safety becomes important and wellness committees may be formed.

Some characteristics of an organization in Phase 4 are:
• Supervisors now take the time to orient new hires about safety.
• Safety is discussed at senior management meetings.
• Near-hit incidents are now investigated.
• All employees are held accountable for safety.

Phase 5: Inspirational Phase
The final Inspirational Phase is where safety is exceptional. Both management and employees are highly motivated to have a safe workplace. Safety is seamlessly
### TABLE 1
Safety Management System iChart Development Phases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Phase 1 Initiation</th>
<th>Phase 2 Initiation</th>
<th>Phase 3 Illumination</th>
<th>Phase 4 Insight</th>
<th>Phase 5 Inspirational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indistinct</td>
<td>Safety is almost nonexistent and is indistinguishable as a core function in the organization.</td>
<td>Safety is based primarily on rules and regulations and is in its infancy stage.</td>
<td>Safety is considered an organizational objective and there is knowledge about the benefits of safety.</td>
<td>Safety can always be improved and there is a solid understanding of the safety function.</td>
<td>Safety is exceptional and the system is moving in the right direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Invent</td>
<td>Workers compensation expense is considered a cost of doing business. Safety is given lip service. There is no written safety manual or policy. Senior management pays very little attention to safety.</td>
<td>Senior management starts to see the light. The organization creates a safety policy statement. Management takes action after an incident occurs.</td>
<td>Total buy-in by senior management. The organization puts their vision for safety in motion. There are clearly defined safe work policies and procedures.</td>
<td>Senior management asks how the safety management system can be improved. There is a real commitment to safety. Management is starting to understand the safety system.</td>
<td>Profound knowledge. Management looks at safety through a “different lens”. Management “walks the talk”. Very visible and leads by example. Wants to lead their industry in safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Invest</td>
<td>Show me the money! The organization spends little on safety. If we cannot afford safety maybe we should not be in business.</td>
<td>The organization starts providing resources to achieve safety standards.</td>
<td>Broken, defective, or improperly maintained equipment that could cause injury is promptly repaired or replaced.</td>
<td>Staffing is at appropriate levels. The organization realizes safety is good business.</td>
<td>Safety is appropriately funded. Employees are given time to do the job safely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Integrate</td>
<td>Safety is not a core company value. Safety resides in a silo.</td>
<td>The organization starts to realize that safety must be integrated with production, quality, and other core organizational values.</td>
<td>Senior management is committed to turning safety into a core company value. Line supervisors understand they are responsible and accountable for safety.</td>
<td>Senior management knows safety must move beyond a top priority because priorities may shift over time. Safety moves from a priority in the organization to a core company value.</td>
<td>Safety is seamlessly integrated with production, quality and other core company values and is on equal footing with those values.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Introduce</td>
<td>Safety is not part of the new hire orientation agenda.</td>
<td>There is discussion that safety should be considered when a new person is on-board.</td>
<td>Safety is now part of new hire orientation.</td>
<td>Supervisors take the necessary time to orient new hires about safety.</td>
<td>A co-worker is allowed to spend time with the new employee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Involve</td>
<td>No established safety committee that meets regularly.</td>
<td>The organizations safety message is starting to be expressed as they begin providing resources for safety.</td>
<td>There are regular scheduled safety committee meetings. Meeting minutes are distributed to all employees.</td>
<td>Senior management allows employees to be totally engaged in the safety process.</td>
<td>Employees “see” safety as interesting, energizing and practical. Managers and employees work together on teams to constantly fix the safety system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Inform</td>
<td>Not only does senior management not “talk” safety, they don’t even “talk” about it!</td>
<td>Senior management discusses ways to keep employees informed about relevant safety matters.</td>
<td>Management provides clear communication at every level of the organization.</td>
<td>Safety is discussed at senior management meetings. Safety terms are part of the organizations language.</td>
<td>Communication is a two-way street and employees feel very comfortable talking about safety.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Instruct</td>
<td>Safety training is nearly non-existent. Management believes that all it takes for workers to be safe is a little common sense.</td>
<td>Senior management recognizes that knowledge is the foundation of a sound and sustainable safety system.</td>
<td>The organization conducts meaningful ongoing safety training.</td>
<td>A stronger safety culture has been built through safety training.</td>
<td>The organization spends significant money on training and realizes that there is a return on their investment.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Table 1 continued on p. 5
### TABLE 1, CONTINUED

**Safety Management System iChart Development Phases**

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<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>Phase 1 – Indistinct</th>
<th>Phase 2 – Initiation</th>
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<th>Phase 5 – Inspirational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Inspect</td>
<td>Safety inspections and audits are not regularly conducted. The organization does not have its eye on safety.</td>
<td>Senior management grasps the concept that workplace hazard recognition is an important ingredient of a safety management system.</td>
<td>The organization conducts regular safety inspections.</td>
<td>Regular documented safety inspections and audits occur and feedback is provided to the department manager or supervisor.</td>
<td>There is a commitment from management to look at the safety inspection data and provide necessary resources to quickly act on the findings. Corrective and preventive actions are initiated in a timely manner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Investigate</td>
<td>Incidents are not sufficiently investigated.</td>
<td>Senior management understands that they must move past blaming employees for workplace incidents.</td>
<td>Incidents are thoroughly investigated for root cause.</td>
<td>Near misses are a wakeup call for the organization.</td>
<td>Every incident and near miss is thoroughly investigated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Intervene</td>
<td>There is little progressive discipline for safety infractions. When an employee is hurt on the job there is no post injury management system in place to help the injured worker.</td>
<td>Senior management realizes there must be accountability for safety or there is no safety.</td>
<td>To reinforce safe behavior progressive discipline is issued for safety infractions.</td>
<td>Accountability for safety performance is established for every level of the organization. Line supervision is now accountable for safety, not just the safety manager.</td>
<td>Progressive discipline is consistently used to reinforce that senior management is serious about safety. There is an effective post management injury system in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Influence</td>
<td>If people are your most important asset, then why are they not treated as such?</td>
<td>Senior management provides the necessary resources for safety incentives.</td>
<td>Meaningful rewards are given to employees who make safety suggestions.</td>
<td>The organization celebrates safety achievement and success. Employees &quot;caught being safe&quot; are given praise and/or small rewards.</td>
<td>Employees are duly recognized for their safety achievements and rewarded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Indicate</td>
<td>Safety performance is not measured very well, if at all. Senior management has no idea of the health status of the safety function in the organization.</td>
<td>The organization realizes if it cannot manage safety, then it does not measure performance. Measuring alone will not produce results. Action is required at his stage.</td>
<td>Safety metrics are developed for the organization. The organization is moving from reactive to proactive prevention and on the path to a healthy safety system.</td>
<td>Senior management reviews the safety management system regularly. The organization benchmarks safety performance against others in the industry.</td>
<td>The safety data demonstrates that the safety management system is effective. Continual improvement of the safety process has led to the organizations enhanced safety performance and efficiency benefits, such as, cost reductions and improved production output.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
integrated with other core company values such as production, quality and finance. The organization actively looks for ways to improve the safety system. The organization understands that the business benefits directly through reduced costs and indirectly through improved morale and increased productivity.

Some of the characteristics of an organization in Phase 5 are:

• Management walks the talk and management has a strong conviction that workplace incidents and injuries are unacceptable in their operations. The CEO or business owner gets it.
• Safety is appropriately funded. Safety is an investment.
• Management wants to lead the industry in safety.
• Safety is everyone's responsibility. There is accountability at all levels of the organization.
• The company lives and breathes safety. It strive to be a world-class safety organization.

Over time, an organization can move through all five of these developmental phases. A safety culture is dynamic and an organization should always seek ways to improve it. A company’s safety culture must be judged according to its success at eliminating hazards and reducing injuries and illnesses.

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