
The Compliance Mentality Compared to Excellence in Safety Leadership



Prepared by:

Dr Robert Long
Director
Human Dymensions
10 Jens Place
Kambah ACT 2902

Contact:
Mobile: 0424547115
Email: rob@humandymensions.com

ABN: 34 123 347 080

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The Minimum Standards Mentality

It doesn't matter what regime of rules, regulations, policy or legislation is put in place these all reflect the mindset of their creator. Rules, policy and regulations have a purpose, to control and manage activity and people through declared expectations and boundaries. Once a rule is set it is expected that people will comply and obey that rule. The trouble is, people are not machines and their lives, values and circumstances are fluid and change, they don't always obey rules. There are always reasons why people do not keep rules, there is often a "trade off" which to them at the time, makes sense. How we "make sense" of how others "make sense" of safety is the key to understanding and changing poor cultures of safety at work.

Rules about safety are designed to keep people safe, but what happens when people don't comply? Often the case is that regulators make more rules, on the assumption that the old rules weren't good enough or had loopholes in them. I was on a job in Mining recently where the Job Safety Assessment (or Safe Work Method Statement) was the size of a bed sheet and took 2 hours to complete, everyone complied with the process but I am not sure the workers ventured out to the job as critical thinkers. Progressive amassing of rules is not a neutral activity, it has its own spin offs on the user, new sub-cultures develop which mitigate against the constant impost of over regulation. These new sub-cultures are sometimes more dangerous than the risk the regulation endeavoured to control.

Zero and The Culture of Minimalism

The goal of Zero Harm or Zero Tolerance is popular in industry, what could be wrong with that? Yes, it is good to set goals but it is important that goals be practical and achievable, this is basic in any form of goal setting. The trouble with the word "Zero" is that it is not value neutral, its use and the way it is framed has spin offs into negative sub-cultures of scepticism, fatalism and cynicism. It is because humans know that perfection is not achievable that they retreat to the security of regulations, if something happens it was the fault of the regulation. Unfortunately, the compliance mentality draws people's focus to the minimum, people tend to not spend energy and money on the "extras" why should they, they aren't required by regulation. Focusing on the basics creates a mindset and culture which get stuck in the minimum, enough is enough. The minimalist culture is difficult to budge and of no use when circumstances require free thinking, critical problem solving skills, insight and creativity "outside the box". The minimalist mentality doesn't inspire a culture of innovation, ownership, leadership and change but entrenches the safety culture in "make do", cover off the basics, "get the job done" and "common sense".

Leading in Safety Excellence

The key to effective leadership is the pathway of excellence, the leader knows that people will not be safe if they are treated like robots. People need to be motivated, inspired and "own" their own safety. Otherwise, people tend to only behave to the rules when the police are around. The constant policing of fundamental things on worksites such as PPE is indicative of a culture which is focused on the minimum, ownership of safety is low and dependent on the presence of someone else to think safely for them. Minimalist thinking is also evident in the way people are trained in industry, cover off the competencies, precious little investment in cultural change and climate management.

The safety leader knows that the bottom line is not just "get the job done", its get the job done with quality and safety. The safety leader knows that a workforce where "safety ownership" is present requires less spending on policing. Safety ownership doesn't just obey the law, it understands and is motivated by the principles and "spirit" of the law. The challenge for industry is to try to dig its way out of "bare bones" minimalist mentality and thinking in such areas as training. bare bones training is neither inspiring not motivating but rather, entrenches mediocrity. Its done because we have to, not because we want to.

The following table helps to explain and compare the two mindsets.

Comparing Safety Compliance Management and Safety Leadership

	Compliance Management	Safety Excellence Leadership
Key Words	Compliance Regulations Legislation Policing Rules Consequence Managing	Motivation Learning Development Ownership Encouragement Values Beliefs Leading
Underpinning Foundations	Legislative and regulation focused	People and culture focused
View of People	People are instruments and cogs in the machine or project	People are complex and understanding their motivations and behaviours is critical in developing learning and change
Strategy for Change	Punishment Authority and control changes culture	Motivation Culture changes as people develop ownership of values and are “inspired” to be safe
Focus Question	How can breaches be enforced and minimised?	How do people learn and change?
View of Culture	Culture is defined by rules	Culture is the expression of underlying values, beliefs and attitudes
View of Organisations	A traditional hierarchy with strong lines of command and control	Organisations are organic and a complexity of interrelated systems of people, groups and values
Sub-cultures	Hidden resentment Scepticism, cynicism Champions and Misfits Uniformity through compliance	Engagement Humaising Understanding of diversity Harmony through understanding
Training	Training obligations under the Act Train to the regulations	Engagement, critical thinking and learning the “spirit” and values of the OHS Act
Essential Concepts	Compliance Minimum requirements are sufficient	Understanding human motivations Inspiring people to excellence, beyond just the basics to maturity