Profiling Safety Culture

Safety Culture Category Explanations

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The Human Dymensions Profile of Safety Culture

The following descriptions seek to explain the nature of each one of the safety cultural categories determined through the extensive research work undertaken by Dr Robert Long. This paper seeks to explain these categories in layman terms without delving into complex academic discussion and to this extent relies on the reader to accept this purpose. If more extensive argument and evidence is required a full academic paper can be provided.

1. Safety Leadership (Leadership Values)

Since the 1980s the concept of culture has become the dominant concept used to understand patterns of organisational conduct. As a part of this focus on organisational culture there has developed a new wave of interest and research into the areas of management and leadership in organisations.

Leadership in organisations is not just the technical decision making but the strengthening of organisational culture. Leadership generates commitment and develops the management of meaning and as such has a profound impact on people's perceptions. The skillful management of symbols and language are the tools of trade for effective leaders.

It is important to note in this category that safety is in fact the adjective which describes the kind of leadership that is delivered, this is different than "leadership in safety". In this sense safety describes the leadership in the same way that other words are used to describe leadership such as "transformational leadership" or "authoritarian leadership". Safety drives the leadership style.

2. Safety Preparedness (Mindfulness)

The measurement of mindfulness is a critical safety cultural category. Safety Preparedness (Mindfulness) is much more complex than simply "having your wits about you" in a similar way that Sensemaking is much more than just making sense. Mindfulness is the key to managing workplace safety through:

- Preoccupation with failure
- Reluctance to simplify interpretations
- Sensitivity to operations
- Commitment to resilience and,
- Deference to expertise

3. Safety Thinking and Practice (Cognitive Dissonance)

The idea of Cognitive Dissonance is counterintuitive and explains why safety initiatives sometimes have a reverse effect. An understanding of cognitive dissonance plays a critical part in the capacity to change culture. Cognitive dissonance is concerned with situations which confront groups holding strong convictions which are confronted with clear and undeniable disproof of those convictions. The concept maintains that even when groups are confronted with falsifying evidence they seem to respond with an increased belief in the original conviction. This why some safety programs in organizations can have the opposite effect than what was intended.

The Cognitive Dissonance cycle begins as individuals form unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events. Subsequently, individuals experience events that may be discrepant from predictions. Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed. Interpretation, or meaning, is attributed to these surprises.

So it is that people construct frameworks in order to explain, understand and comprehend the stimuli which surround them. When they experience stimuli which does not fit into that framework or cognitive map they experience a sense of Cognitive Dissonance and either reframe their thinking or make the stimuli fit their thinking. This is why interruption, novelty, surprise or "turbulence" is so important in the scope of understanding how people make sense of their work and safety at work. The popular reference to "common sense" is misleading, there is little evidence that suggests we all make sense in common instead, there are varieties of ways in sensemaking. The counter intuitive process of cognitive dissonance establishes that people often make cvhoices which don't make sense to others.

4. Safety Influences (Psychosocial Triggers)

The measurement and detection of Psychosocial Triggers are an important part of safety culture. psychosoial triggers such as "groupthink", peer pressure and social influence are examples of safety influences.

5. Safety Systems (Sensemaking)

A system is a set (with common properties) of interacting units with relationships among them. The state of each unit it constrained by, or conditioned by, or dependant on the state of the other units. The affirmation that systems are always tight and responsive is not the focus of the methodology adopted by Human Dymensions. Systems in organisations also have delays, lags, irregular feedback and erratic behaviours. The emphasis in the loosely coupled system is on inter-sub cultural (tight) and intra-sub cultural (loose between) connectedness, this is the focus of the Human Dymensions systems methodology and is evident in the Human Dymensions iProfile Survey statements and analysis. A loosely coupled systems approach still asserts that there is a system (with goals and structures as well as flexibility and innovation) but that a loosely coupled system is more able to learn, develop resilience, sensemake, develop mindfulness and manage sub-cultural cognitive dissonance.

6. Core Safety Vision (Safety Congruence)

The core safety vision of any organization needs to be properly understood especially in light of what cultural and sub-cultural drivers that might be at work in their organization. It is possible that the very method of intervention and deployment of safety may create sub-cultures which indeed mitigate against the effectiveness of what is intended by implementing the desired OHS system.

7. Safety Priorities (Safety Judgement)

The perception of variation in safety priorities is often when the issues of "double speak" and cognitive dissonance come to the surface. This is because there is often a gap between espoused theories (what is said) and theories-in-use (what is practiced).

8. Safety Learning (Resilience)

The four sources of Safety Learning (Resilience) are:

- Improvisation and bricolage (validating ad lib and intuitive learning)
- Virtual role systems
- The attitude of wisdom and,
- Respectful interaction

Resilience is important because it explains why people under pressure and stress regress to their most habituated ways of responding. The last thing to expect under pressure is creativity. Role Systems are critical to the development of exit plans and risk management. Wisdom is where there is extreme confidence balanced with extreme caution in times of change, particularly when complex sensing is required. The Attitude of Wisdom is much more than the collection of experience.

9. Safety Competence (Commitment)

An essential aspect of resilience is the maintenance of an ongoing commitment to improvement. Improvement encompasses learning in self-knowledge, relational knowledge, content knowledge and to act in a mindful thinking mode (sensemake). All of these factors are measured in the Survey categories of Resilience and Commitment and are cross factored with the categories of Safety Systems and Safety Priorities. Commitment is a reference point for sensemaking. Normally when people act their reasons for what they do are either self-evident or not observable. Ownership is a critical part of commitment.

10. Safety Actions (Risk and Communications)

The Risk category is cross factored with the categories of Cognitive Dissonance, Mindfulness and Safety Priorities. The psychosocial approach to safety argues that Risk is both determined personally and socially. Risk is directly related to whether the organisational culture is an "informed culture". It takes four subcultures to ensure an informed culture, these include:

- Reporting culture
- Just culture
- Flexible culture and,
- Learning culture