
Understanding Styles and Approaches to OHS Effectiveness and Safety Cultural Change



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 need to change safety culture

In recent times it has occurred to coronors at inquests, auditors and government (eg. Cole Commission) that poor safety culture has a central role in normalising unsafe practice. The development of the Federal Safety Commission in the construction industry (with one of the highest rates of injuries to workers) was to address the issue of safety cultural change. Inspectors and auditors are now ever mindful that despite physical, technological, engineering, administrative and legislative measures to control safety, people are still being injured at work. These five controls in themselves are not the complete story about safety. Research by Geller, Reason, Slovic, Barling, Frone, Wilde, Rougton, Mercurio, Weick and many safety experts established that a high percentage of incidents and accidents are caused by unsafe practices entrenched and normalised by poor safety culture. The organisations which focus on the five controls **and culture** are what Weick calls “High Reliability Organisations” and “Total Safety Organisations”.

We all want the same thing but how do we get there?

Everyone interested in safety wants the same thing, they don't want anyone to be hurt. Injuries, whether physical or psychological, rarely bring pain to the just an individual. Injuries always have a domino effect and so the pain flows on to family, friends, business, organisations, employment arrangements, insurance, medical and therapeutic services. Any business that has regard for their employees and their families wants the best for them, it is also in business interests that they see employees at work the next day. Business interruption and disruption is costly and has a domino effect and so the disruption flows on to morale, confidence, negativity, scepticism, double-speak, motivation and unethical practice. These are the values which are sometimes evident in sub-cultures in organisational safety culture which invisibly work against change, development and innovation.

What works

There is much evidence to show that negativity, punishment and rigidity have little longitudinal effect in changing behaviour. The prison system is a testimony to the fact that punishment doesn't work. Whilst demand for more correctional facilities continues to increase the recidivism rate remains extremely high. From the time of the convicts we don't seem to have learned much from history about punishment. Whilst simplistic approaches to zero tolerance are espoused by law enforcement agencies and the media most educationalists know that the result of such policies entrenches resentment and nothing much is learned or owned by the victims of the policy. Longitudinally, zero tolerance drives reporting underground, develops a sub-culture of cynicism and disregards all that is known about how people really learn and change? Unless people are motivated positively to change and own the values associated with that change then the desired behaviour will not be realised or worse still is only realised whilst the agents of control are around.

The Human Dymensions Methodology - Psychosocial Safety

The focus of consulting, advice and training by Human Dymensions seeks holistic engagement and development through changing values, understanding human nature and how people learn. This approach has its focus on psychosocial dynamics and the power of self actualisation. Change results when people truly learn, own a new set of values and are motivated to act on those values. The following table explains this approach in comparison to some other approaches.

Comparing OHS Safety Cultural Change Styles

	Orthodox Safety	Behaviour Based Safety	Zero Tolerance Safety	Psychosocial Safety
Key Words	Systems Rules Compliance Legislation Regulation Codes of Practice	Behaviour Human Error Actions	Compliance Regulations Legislation Policing Rules Consequence	Motivation Learning Development Ownership Encouragement Values & Beliefs
Underpinning Foundations	Taylorism (Heinreich)	Behaviourism (Skinner)	Broken Window Theory (Wilson and Kelling)	Self Actualisation (Maslow)
View of People	People are parts of scientific management	People are like machines and are the sum of inputs and outputs	People make choices and think according to rules and rule braking	People are complex and follow what they value
Strategy for Change	Engineering, technology, invention and design	Negative and Positive Reinforcement Behaviour changes values	Punishment Authority and control changes culture	Motivation Culture changes as people develop ownership of values
Focus Question	How can the environment be changed?	How can behaviour be changed?	How can breaches be enforced?	How do people learn?
View of Culture	Culture is systems	Culture is the sum of observable behaviours	Culture is rules	Culture is values
View of Organisations	Management move parts of the organisation like a game of chess	Mechanistic Reality is the sum of what I can observe	A traditional hierarchy with strong lines of command and control	Organisations are organic, a compexity of interrelated systems of people, groups and values
Sub-cultures	Sub-cultures of Lemmings and Lions make the organisation Uniformity is achieved through engineering and shaping people	Depersonalised machine like processes Indifference Going through the motions Uniformity through process	Hidden resentments Under-reporting Champions and Misfits Uniformity through compliance	Engagement Humaising Understanding of diversity Harmony through understanding
Training	Technical focus, expertise in regulation	Doing and practicing	Learning the rules and reinforcing the consequences	Engagement and influencing thinking and values
Essential Concepts	Humans fit the machine	Observable acts	Compliance	Sensemaking Mindfulness Above and below the line