

Safety Leaders as Culture Creators

Recommendations for Organizational Change

By Kevin Slates

Safety leadership has received increased attention in recent literature and studies. Recent events such as an industrial chemical explosion in Tianjin, China, that resulted in billions of dollars in damages and killed at least 114 people, including 64 firefighters, highlight the importance of organizational cultures that promote safety. That event serves as yet another example of how catastrophe can occur when companies have poor leadership and safety culture.

What role does leadership play in changing organizational culture? Lussier and Achua (2004) suggest that changing company culture can be daunting. An organization's safety culture can usually be observed in safety-related attitudes, beliefs and values displayed by management and employees.

The author and many OSH professionals believe organizational culture can vary in behavior norms displayed by both management and employees. These norms or cultures can be considered strong or weak. How do you know if your organizational culture is weak? Weak organizational cultures are

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characterized by nonconformity of values, beliefs and norms.

Weak & Strong Organizational Cultures

Weak organizational cultures are characterized by leadership's inability to motivate employees to accept, support and carry out its vision. In safety, weak cultures may be characterized by lagging indicators such as lost work time, restricted work activities and injuries. OSH researchers and clinicians suggest three specific approaches leaders can take to successfully change organizational culture. Leaders must be:

- able to recognize which aspects, beliefs, values or behavioral norms of the current culture are supporting or detracting from achieving organizational goals and objectives;
- able to communicate to all employees which values, behaviors or beliefs must be changed to achieve a strong organizational culture;
- seen by employees as modeling expected behaviors or policies required by management.



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In summary, if a leader's actions and behaviors match expected organizational values and beliefs, employees' behaviors are more likely to match the espoused culture. The results of having effective organizational leadership are far-reaching in an organization, and have significant implications with regard to safety performance. A strong culture is characterized by using leading indicators to assess safety performance, and management committing significant time and resources to communicating organizational values and principles to employees. In a strong culture, the leader is able to communicate a clear vision and inspire individuals from top management to employees to buy in to the vision (Lussier & Achua, 2004). ■

References

Lussier, R. N. & Achua, C.F. (2004). Leadership: Theory, application, skill development (2nd ed.). Mason, OH: Thompson South Western.

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