

Indian Safety Culture

Who is driving the culture in your business? The simple answer is everybody and nobody; any culture is largely self-sustaining so it drives itself, yet by definition culture is the collective values (what is important to us) and beliefs (expectations) of everyone in any given group. These give rise to the group attitudes or mindset, which in turn, results in the acceptable norms and characteristic behaviours of the group.

This goes for any group in any situation. Our main interest is a workplace group: team, department, division or business. The power of culture lies in the fact that most individuals within the group feel more comfortable when they conform to the norms and their behaviour fits in with that of others around them. This is particularly important in a situation where there is a fairly transient workforce, all of whom arrive with pre-existing attitudes and standards of behaviour. If the culture is strong enough they will all be absorbed by it and conform to the expected standards. If the culture is not strong enough these new-comers are more likely to retain more of their own standards.

The norms and standards have to come from somewhere. Generally they will be well established yet at the same time they do evolve over time. The changes that do occur are most likely to be initiated by the more influential members of the group and copied by others. This process starts by those in the group with the most influence communicating their own values and beliefs, which in turn will inform the values and beliefs of the wider group. This communication will probably not be a direct sharing or by open discussion but more likely it will occur by the interpretation of the behaviours displayed by the influencers. This visual form of communication tends to be the most effective mode.

So who are the influencers? Influence, by whatever means is a key part of leadership. It is our leaders that set the tone, whose beliefs we adopt and whose values we share. In the workplace many of these leaders are appointed and hold positions of authority, but not all of them. There can be a range of strong characters that certain people will look up to. Some of them may hold beliefs and espouse values that are at odds with the greater good. Indeed some of these leaders may be Well Poisoners, infecting others with their unsavoury attitudes. In order to drive the culture forward and establish the most appropriate behaviours that will keep everyone safe, we must encourage the leaders to utilise their influence for good rather than poisoning the atmosphere.

If we are to improve the strength of the culture it is also helpful to accurately recognise where it currently stands, which means understanding the perceptions, expectations and priorities to be found within the group. This is why we carry out a culture assessment.

There are a number of factors and cultural attributes that I have found to be typical in many, though not all, Indian workplaces - not all of which are helpful.

- There is usually a fairly high degree of deference towards more senior people. Many people tell me that they would find it difficult to speak to a senior manager if they were to see them behaving unsafely. To overcome this, the senior people need to 'give permission' to those less senior than them - in fact make it an expectation and express disappointment at not being challenged.

- I have generally found a strong, rule-based 'Compliance Culture'. Rules are clearly important but it is never sufficient to just impose more rules and then be surprised when people don't follow them when they are not being supervised. They need to be 'sold' to the workforce, in fact even better, involve them in creating the rules.
- There appears to be an attitude that more training is the answer to every problem. In most cases people don't need teaching that if they fall from height they will be badly injured; if they walk through oil they will slip; if something falls on their head it will hurt. Just simply telling people these things is not enough – they already know. They need to recognise for themselves that it could happen to them and understand for themselves the implication this will have for them and their family.
- The general approach to engagement with people about safety tends to be quite negative with most conversations only arising after a problem or when someone is caught working unsafely. It appears to be rare to find examples of positive reinforcement for safe behaviour. The approach is very much Tell and not much Ask and Listen.
- In many organisations, ownership of safety appears to rest with the EHS Managers not with Line Managers. Safety, Along with other aspects of work life must be a line function with the role of the EHS Manager being to provide advice guidance, support as well as an independent view without the pressure of performance or productivity. Of course they will be expected to take a leading role in the event of a significant incident.

Many of the above points are to be found in businesses in every country around the world where I have worked so are not exclusive to India. However from my experience they certainly feel to be quite strong here.