

By: WILLIAM C. RIECK
 Director, Training Programs
 ABS Consulting

Culture clash: Use training to build your safety culture

Culture is the tendency in all of us to want to do the right thing in the right way at the right time, ALL the time — even when no one is looking. Culture is the result of all the actions and inactions in institutional and work force memory. Good cultures evolve from common values and attitudes developed as the group seeks to properly solve common problems; it is hard to measure and more difficult to change.

While organizational culture has often been discussed by executives and business leaders looking to drive corporations toward business excellence, it is more recent that the terms “culture” and “safety” were combined. Now, “safety culture” is an everyday word in refineries, platforms and process facilities here in the Gulf Coast and across the globe. OSHA, the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, the Baker Panel and other independent researchers helped drive this adoption when they confirmed that a strong safety culture can have the single greatest impact on accident reduction. Culture will be the “root cause” of the decade.

These findings confirmed that established programs (process safety management, safety, mechanical integrity, incident investi-

gation, procedures, training, etc.) alone could not ensure a safe operating environment if the safety culture was not strong enough to support those tools.

What is a strong safety culture?

A safety culture is formed by factors like management beliefs, values, myths and company policies and procedures. In addition, supervisor priorities and the balance between production pressures and quality issues can also define the culture. Responding to unsafe behavior with corrective actions and activities like training and communication that build employee involvement and buy-in are powerful influences that strengthen an organization’s safety culture.

While the factors above can help define the kind of culture that exists, there are also a number of proactive steps that can directly lead to a stronger safety culture. These include safety as a core value, strong leadership, high standards of performance, documented safety culture emphasis, a sense of vulnerability, individuals empowered to fulfill their safety responsibilities, deference to expertise, open and effective communications, questioning and learning environment,

mutual trust is fostered, timely response to safety issues and concerns and continuous monitoring of performance.

When these 12 attributes are a conscious part of management’s focus, the underlying culture can then apply tools like process safety management programs, process hazard analysis, incident investigation, training and procedures to ensure a higher level of safety assurance.

How can we determine our SCQ?

Perhaps the most direct way to measure an organization’s safety culture quotient (SCQ) is by a survey of employee attitudes and perceptions concerning how safety is valued and managed at the facility. In addition to the survey, an assessment of technical evidence also helps to define a facility’s SCQ.

Does multisite mean multicultural?

The short answer is very often and that isn’t always a good thing. In a recent safety culture assessment for a multisite process owner, ABS Consulting uncovered nearly opposite views of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization’s safety programs. Corporate management was surprised by the

extent of this disconnect — further evidence that what you don’t know may hurt you.

How can training help build a strong safety culture?

First of all, training can help to establish a consistent view of the importance of building a strong safety culture. This might include courses that start with managers and supervisors and then operating teams with sessions designed to build communication skills, open dialogue about safety issues and begin to establish relationships built on trust and common values. Too often, cultural norms place a higher priority on production goals, at the expense of safety issues. Conducting scenario-based training sessions that challenge and reward participants to give safety goals priority over production can be a step in the right direction.

Above all, people need to know the “why” not just the “what” if they are going to buy in and begin to truly support a change in the facility’s safety culture. Use the power of training to help communicate and enhance your safety culture.

For more information, contact William C. Rieck at wrieck@absconsulting.com. □

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