

Establishing an Effective Safety Culture

By Steve Arendt

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A 'safety culture' can be described as the way in which safety is managed in the workplace or at a job site. Energy News asked ABS Consulting's Steve Arendt, who has worked with organizations worldwide to develop safety systems, to tell us about safety culture development and sustainable performance in light of the new Gulf of Mexico offshore regulatory environment.



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The new Gulf of Mexico regulations will require offshore operating companies to implement new and improved management systems to help control offshore health, safety and environmental (HSE) risks. These management systems will be operated by people – people whose inherent attitudes about safety can affect the choices they make in operating these systems and, thus, the overall safety performance of the offshore assets and operations.

The industry needs to be certain that these systems are effective and create sustainable performance, rather than becoming costly paper-chasing exercises. Key to doing this is for offshore operators to embed these management systems in a highly reliable safety culture.

Essential Features of a Good Culture

Culture is the individual and organizational DNA that represents our tendency to want to do (1) the right thing in (2) the right way at (3) the right time, (4) ALL the time – even if no one is looking. Industry has established attributes of a good process safety culture to evaluate the existing safety culture and determine how best to improve it.

- Establish HSE as a core value
- Provide strong leadership
- Establish and enforce high standards of performance
- Formalize the HSE culture approach
- Maintain a sense of vulnerability
- Empower individuals to successfully fulfill their HSE responsibilities
- Defer to expertise
- Maintain open and effective communications
- Establish a questioning/learning environment

- Foster mutual trust
- Provide timely response to HSE issues and concerns
- Provide continuous monitoring of performance

How to Evaluate Culture

Typical ways to get a handle on HSE culture are:

- Employee surveys
- Interviews
- Work observations
- HSE leading indicator metrics

ABS Consulting uses all of these means as well as a formal approach for connecting process safety and HSE performance outcomes to culture, called the performance assurance review (PAR) approach.

Improving Safety Culture

Cultural improvement typically takes a long time to have a deeply rooted effect, but improvements can be seen fairly quickly if the culture change process is good. Conducting workshops at each organizational level, including contractors, is an effective way to educate, train, solicit input and engage the workforce in developing and owning the asset and company culture improvement plan.

Workshop topics include:

- Assess current plant culture and focus on strengths and weaknesses
- Take personal responsibility for evolving your HSE culture
- Understand potential historical root causes for culture problems
- Solicit ideas for improving culture
- Create personal culture improvement plans
- Develop, implement and monitor improvement plans
- Measure culture change via simple culture metrics

Path Forward

Some predict that future major incidents will all have poor HSE culture as a contributing factor. Culture will be the 'root cause' of the next decade. The industry must do more to equip itself to learn and to address the underlying organizational and culture causes of major accident situations – BEFORE they happen. Growing an effective safety culture will help ensure sustainable HSE performance – AND compliance.

For more information about safety systems, contact Steve Arendt at: sarendt@absconsulting.com or visit the ABS Consulting website at www.absconsulting.com.