



FOCUS ARTICLE

Top Ways to Measure Safety Culture

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Surveys and statistics are sometimes overused or even misused in an attempt to measure safety culture. For a reliable assessment of where your organisation stands, diversification and refinement may be in order. Our expert discusses the most effective approaches to evaluating safety culture and points out the pitfalls along the way.

Safety Culture Beyond Statistics and Surveys

Companies often assume that measuring safety culture is as simple as reviewing the statistics they keep. If markers like LTI (Lost Time Injury), TRIF (Total Recordable Injury Frequency) or FAC (First Aid Cases) are on the low side, the reasoning goes, the organisation's safety culture must be good. They may also look to employee feedback through surveys to assess safety culture.

These methods certainly can provide useful information, but they may not provide a complete picture. Moreover, organisations need to consider which statistics they rely on and how surveys are administered. There are also other ways to evaluate safety culture that tend to be overlooked.

Differentiating Safety Statistics: Leading and Lagging Indicators

All organisations concerned about safety collect data such as Lost Time Incidents/Injuries (LTI), First Aid Cases (FAC), Total Recordable Injury/Incident Frequency (TRIF), near misses and fatalities. These statistics quantify incidents, injuries and deaths occurring over a given period of time and are called lagging indicators, because they reflect what has happened in the past.

Leading indicators, on the other hand, are statistics that indicate the potential for an incident in the future and point to ways to improve safety performance. Examples include the number of **safety training courses** staff have attended or the number of safety audits

and actions arising from them. A safety audit, for instance, may identify issues with safety critical equipment, which in turn gives rise to actions being raised, completed and closed. The result is accident prevention. A near miss can also be treated as a leading indicator, as long as the organisation addresses the circumstances that led to it. Leading indicators provide organisations with the opportunity to course correct and avoid incidents. Their efficacy, however, depends on the actions taken in response.

Survey Success

Surveys are only as valuable as the questions they ask. When designing or choosing a **survey to measure safety culture**, it must be verified to ensure that it actually assesses that topic--otherwise there is no guarantee that the results you receive will be relevant or representative. Be mindful, as well, not to “survey out” employees by relying on questionnaires to the point that staff become survey fatigued. Choose wisely when making decisions about whether to run them, taking into account what the organisation will gain and whether there are other options available. Finally, don’t underestimate the importance of feedback. Survey respondents will be more enthusiastic and thoughtful about their answers if they know it makes a difference. Once survey results are ready, it is important to share them and explain what will occur as a result of the findings.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are an excellent alternative to surveys, as they allow face-to-face interaction with employees and encourage people to have their say in an open format. When structured and facilitated correctly, focus groups elicit information that is difficult to obtain

within the closed framework of a questionnaire, where responses are guided by the questions themselves.

DEKRA’s Culture of Care Diagnostic, for example, uses focus groups to verify survey results. The format provides an opportunity to obtain anecdotal feedback in support of the numbers the survey has given us. Our focus groups are semi-structured, meaning we introduce some key themes, but also follow participants’ leads. It’s important to recognise that what employees discuss in these groups clearly matters to them, so we provide a forum of open discussion, which provides highly valuable insight into the organisation’s culture.

Interviews

Interviews are quite similar to focus groups in that they allow face to face contact and can be used to verify previously collected data. To be most effective, one to one interviews should be semi-structured, so that the interviewee is invited to discuss topics of import to them. In contrast to focus groups, the level of confidentiality is greater, meaning people are more likely to be honest.

Observations

Finally, collecting information and verifying assumptions about an organisation’s safety culture can also be accomplished by actually getting out and observing it. Conducting site walks and having conversations with people “on the tools”, you gain more insight into safety culture than any survey, interview, focus group or statistics can provide. The key thing to remember is that not seeing something says as much about the culture as seeing something does.

Safety Culture Toolbox

Focus Groups



Interviews



Observations



Safety Culture Toolbox

The best way to gain a full measure of safety culture is to use multiple methods, perhaps combining 2 or 3 of those listed above. Conducting focus groups with respondents following a survey, for example, can confirm the reasons behind the survey scores. Our **Culture of Care Diagnostic** incorporates various methods to measure safety culture, including the five already mentioned, in order to provide our clients with hard evidence in support of our

conclusions and recommendations. It also allows us to pinpoint specific areas of improvement – the ones that are consistently low across all methods. Clients' satisfaction with our mixed method approach is a strong endorsement of its efficacy. To understand your organisation's safety culture more fully, get to work creating a toolbox of assessments, and seek external support for additional expertise.

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Carlene Smith is Consultant, Assessment & Solutions at DEKRA Organisational Reliability Ltd. She has a master's in occupational psychology with a specific interest in helping organisations improve their performance, whether that is in regards to safety, productivity or the organisational culture. Carlene joined DEKRA in 2012 following her undergraduate degree in Psychology. Carlene's current role focuses on providing clients with cultural assessments and recommending and developing appropriate solutions to increase cultural maturity with the aim to create a culture of care.



DEKRA Organisational Reliability

DEKRA Organisational Reliability is a behavioural change consultancy. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference for the better'. We deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees. Measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal. We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 39,000 employees in 50 countries.

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