

White Paper

Assuring the Intention of Stop-Work Authority: The Role of Culture and Leadership on Policy and Procedure

The Prevailing Power of Culture

Organizational culture can be thought of as “the accepted way things get done” in an organization. And when principles or policies (like stop-work authority) collide with culture, culture always wins. As a result, if your organizational culture does not consistently support employees when they deem it necessary to invoke their stop-work authority, they will be much less likely to invoke it when they need to in the future. This lack of support may create situations where employees do still call for the work to stop when at-risk, but only at a point when it is too late to prevent the undesired event from occurring.

So, if organizations do overtly state that employees should absolutely feel empowered to stop work as needed for safety, what are the cultural norms (both spoken and unspoken) and implied messages that can undermine such a policy? Some of the contrary messages regarding stop-work authority that employees all too often hear or perceive are:

- *Stopping work = interrupting productivity.*

In a production-ruled organization, anything interrupting productivity is viewed negatively. Leaders here often focus on short-term goals at the expense of safety and sustainable operations excellence.

Executive Summary

In most organizations, employees recognize the meaning of the phrase stop-work authority as every employee having the unassailable right to call work to a halt at any time they determine it is too at-risk to continue. And the intention is that employees do invoke it as needed. All too often, however, this right intention does not play out as we have defined it.

So with something seemingly so clear, why does variability from this intent persist? Understanding the answers to this question and addressing the underlying causes will enable organizations to avoid stop-work authority becoming a practice on paper alone, elevate its importance to where it should be, and yield broader safety and workplace improvements.

- **Stop work only if imminent harm is present.**

This message implies that near-certainty of an accident or injury is the prerequisite for stopping work. Further, it increases the possibility of waiting too late to interrupt a sequence of events that can lead to injury.

- **If you stop the work, you had “better be right”.**

As above, bringing production to a halt in a production-driven culture for any reason or for a false alarm translates to “She stopped the work for no good reason.” This approach fails to support employees who try to assure safety.

- **Stopping too early is a “Chicken Little” mentality.**

Here, leaders and workers foster a mind-set that holds “We could never get any work done if we stopped for every little thing that people think is at-risk.” Bravado is implicitly encouraged and too often fosters an at-risk environment.

- **Stop work = more work.**

For many employees, stopping work means they will have to “make up” for perceived lost time, address the exposure themselves, and generally cut into the precious commodity of time of which they already have too little.

Organizations where these types of beliefs persist have obviously not been successful in creating what we call a high organizational value for safety, a safety climate that is predictive of safety performance, across the enterprise. Instilling this value starts at the top. Attention to safety has to be consistent and safety has to be held in higher importance than traditional priorities such as production and profitability. Fortunately, these aims are not mutually exclusive. Organizations that place top priority on safety typically occupy the highest tiers of productivity and profitability as well.

Leadership Influences on Culture and Policy

Sound, supported policies are essential for effective organizational functioning. But sound policies can be severely diluted or outright destroyed if poorly implemented or unsupported by leaders in day-to-day work situations. For example, stop-work authority policies are flawed by design when they place sole responsibility and burden on a single employee for shutting down the work. While employees must be able to recognize and weigh risk independently when needed, they also need the support and assistance of supervisors and peers to help assess exposures to injury. They need to back one another up without fail when a decision is made in the name of protecting employees. To place employees unnecessarily “alone on an island” when they assess risk is detrimental to desired outcomes. Supports must be present.

Think about your present operating environment and others where you have been. If a front-line employee stops work out of concern for safety, what is his or her immediate supervisor likely to say? Will it be a skeptical, “What’s going on here? Why did you shut down the machine?” Or will it be a genuine, “Is everybody okay? Anything we need to take a look at?” Will the supervisor reinforce that the employee made the right call to be on the safe side? Sadly, the response is all too often one of skepticism and misplaced concern that requires the employee to defend his decision. What employees need are supervisors who assist in assessing potential exposures and who support employees for doing the right thing. There are several elements of organizational culture that have a strong effect on these and similar interactions, including:

- **Approaching others** – The extent to which employees feel free to speak to one another about safety concerns.
- **Leader-member exchange** – The relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor.

In particular, this scale measures the employee’s level of confidence that her supervisor will go to bat for her and look out for her interests and vice versa.

- **Perceived organizational support** – The extent to which employees believe that the organization cares about, values, and supports them.

When examining these cultural elements, ask, “How often do supervisors in this organization get feedback on production and related operational metrics?” In many organizations, that feedback comes daily or even constantly. That is not a bad thing. But how does it compare to the feedback supervisors and employees get around safety? For some, feedback on safety only comes when an individual gets hurt. When this is the case, organizational value for safety (OVS) is personified in a negative way that undermines the aims of the organization.

The reality is that, in most organizations, far more safe things happen every day than at-risk things. We need to recognize that. We need to reinforce and enable those positive actions and discover what can be done to increase them even further. In short, we need to show employees that we value them personally and absolutely value their safety. Caring for them and protecting them is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

When employees feel valued, they feel better about coming to work. They also have higher morale, have stronger relationships with supervisors and others, and not surprisingly are more productive. Supervisors and leaders across the organization are keys in building this kind of culture. Leaders need to be engaged, supportive of employees, and active in seeking engineering controls or

other resources to solve problems. This is consistent practice in cultures that support stop-work authority and safety generally. Having a clear picture of where your organization’s operating environments stand on these and other elements of organizational culture is key to unlocking insights about the effectiveness and efficacy of your policies and their respective intents.

Planned Pauses and Stop-Work Authority

Some leaders and workers have trouble balancing the abruptness that is suggested by stop-work authority policies, and rightfully so. Taken too literally, it could be interpreted as, “Keep on working until you think something bad is going to happen.” But exposure is dynamic. And because of that, smart leaders and organizations also build work “pauses” into their operations. This can be defined as taking planned or unplanned breaks from scheduled work to assess and/ or reassess the status of exposure and, if needed, apply controls and remedies as needed to reduce exposures (risks) to acceptable levels. This is a part of our work, not a stopping of work. It also suggests an environment where employees are comfortable going to their peers or supervisors to ask “What do you think?” about potential exposures.

When exercising pauses or when stop work authority is invoked, it is important for leaders to not only ensure that

exposures are properly addressed, but to also consider the question, “Is the concept of risk acceptance consistent in our workplaces? In many cases it is not and alignment is necessary. As a first step, assuring that everyone understands and supports fundamental principles such as:

No one at any level of the organization should be against controlling exposure; our goal is “Safe production done right the first time.” Anyone against pausing to evaluate exposure control is sending the message that production supersedes safety. Leaders are responsible for setting the tone of the culture and focusing on true upstream contributing causes of injuries which are exposures. No one should ever accept that is okay for someone to be hurt on that job.

Most organizations and leaders will find wide variability across employees and work groups regarding their tolerance to exposures.



Regardless of individual tolerance, to exposure, if an employee is trained how to recognize exposure in the workplace then exposure is something that all can see and recognize. And any time we see exposure increase, regardless of unique tolerances to risk, we have to pause, step back, and evaluate.

Tying it All Together

Leaders must establish and build a high value for safety across the entirety of the organization. Before one can discuss the value for safety, however, it is important to ensure first that leaders are aligned on what safety is. Many define safety as the absence of injury, damage, or loss. The problem with that definition is a focus on the negative: It only tells us what we do not want. Obviously no one is in favor of injury, damage, or loss.

Think instead in terms of what we do want. Safety can be defined in the positive as controlling exposures for others and yourself. Notice that this idea is much broader than just injury prevention for self. If we control exposures for ourselves and others, we are proactively working to reduce risks. That in turn translates into better safety performance, better quality, and greater ability to stay on schedule and on budget. In essence, it is achieving operational excellence through “Doing things right the first time.”

This broader definition of safety poses two fundamental questions:

1) Is it really possible to reduce exposures?

The answer is yes, absolutely. Many organizations have done it successfully and managed to achieve new levels of performance through a focus on exposures.

2) When do we measure safety success (or: When will we know we are improving)?

The simple answer is, right away: Job by job and task by task. When we understand exposure, we can typically detect changes (up or down) in the moment. This means we have an opportunity to respond to exposures ahead of injury. And yes, if the exposure cannot be controlled right away, we may need to pause or stop the work until it is.

Building and sustaining the processes and support for stop-work authority requires engagement from throughout the organization. Of course, different levels will have different roles. What is important is to establish that participation is imperative and that, regardless of level, all are expected to adhere to several core principles:

- *Safe work, performed right the first time, is the ultimate return on investment for the shareholders of a company.*

- *Focusing on exposures is vital to safe work and is a proactive approach, rather than reactive one.*
- *Workers must be able to recognize and control exposures dynamically and be supported in doing so.*
- *Soon, certain, and positive reinforcement should be provided to people when they pause work to assess and control exposures.*
- *Exposures must not be allowed to persist unaddressed.*
- *Controlling exposures is INCLUDED in our work, not an add-on to the work.*

When stop-work authority and similar policies play out differently in practice than on paper, organizational culture is almost always at the root of the issue. Understanding these elements, and the effect that leaders have on them every day, will help you to not only assure the intent and efficacy of policies like stop-work authority, but will also empower you to build an organizational culture that supports safety and operational excellence generally.

- ▶ Dennis Jackson, a vice president with BST, works with senior executives, leadership teams, and other key client leaders to help them create a vision for their organization's future. By identifying the barriers to achieving their goals and developing actionable plans for removing those obstacles, he helps guide them to their desired results.



Let's talk Strategy:

Learn More

Interested in learning more on how your organization can become consistent and achieve comprehensive safety excellence? Connect with us.

Connect with Us:

Email us at osr.info.us@dekra.com
Call us: +1-805-646-0166 or visit
[DEKRA.us/consulting](https://www.dekra.us/consulting)