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Solutions for regulated industries

5 Questions to ask about your safety culture

Contents

Introduction

The term safety culture gets thrown around a lot, and it's sometimes hard to understand what it truly means, let alone figure out how to promote and establish a strong culture in the workplace. Culture is a broad term that includes the collective behaviors, attitudes, knowledge, habits, and beliefs common to a specific group.
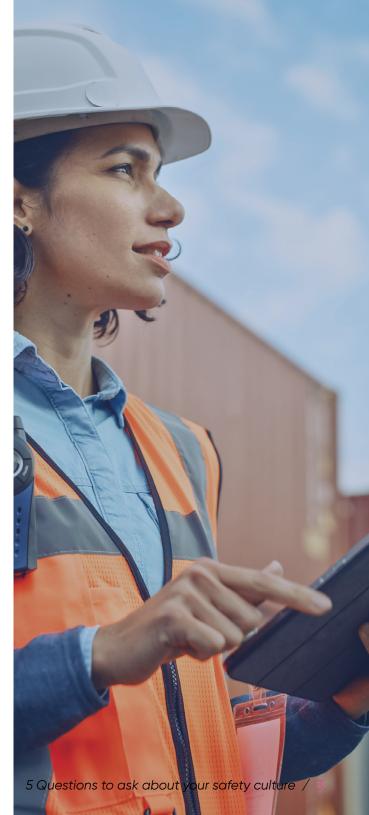
Every workplace has a distinct culture that develops and evolves over the years due to specific influences. While most companies have written programs for how employees are supposed to behave regarding safety, the company's safety culture is how those things are actually done.

In short, one simple explanation of safety culture is "how employees behave when no one is watching." Are safety habits second nature, or are they quickly abandoned without constant reminders?

For example, the company's safety manual says that employees must wear a face shield when using an angle grinder to protect their face and eyes from flying debris. However, the supervisor doesn't buy face shields and tells workers to use their safety glasses instead.

This deviance from the written policy is an example of a poor safety culture and how it can negatively affect workplace safety. If your organization does not have a strong safety culture, it is important to understand the root causes of detractors and skeptics. Why are people resistant to safety behaviors?

Here are five questions to ask about your company to see where the barriers exist, and how you might overcome them.

#1

Are you communicating safety as stories or statistics?

Most leaders and employees understand that workplace incidents are expensive, and their unexpected direct and indirect costs can hurt the profitability and growth of an organization. However, it can dehumanize safety when your company only speaks about safety and health with statistics or from a financial standpoint. By primarily communicating safety performance through abbreviations like TRIR and LTIR, you deprive yourself of an essential motivational aspect: the drive to assist your colleagues in returning home safely every day.

Companies that want to improve their safety culture should not rely on numbers and figures when discussing the importance of safety with staff. Instead, telling personal stories about how workplace incidents affect people's lives, families, and wellbeing makes safety resonate more profoundly. Safety shifts from a company initiative to a commitment to peers and the people who care about them.

More questions to ask:

- Do EHS newsletters and updates mention the physical and emotional toll of incidents, as well as the business's safety goals?

- After an incident, do leaders check in on the wellbeing of the involved employees and their families?

- Do leaders and staff share personal stories about past workplace incidents?

- Does the safety signage posted around your facilities emphasize keeping parents, siblings, and neighbors safe, or stick only to safety instructions?

#2

Are the lessons in your safety training sticking?

Unfortunately, in some organizations, safety training is performative and done to check a compliance box, providing little value to participants.

As a result, training happens, but the knowledge is rarely applied, and the behaviors it's intended to change never seem to improve.

These results could indicate an issue with the training material, the trainer, or the relevance of the training to the audience's job duties.

Good training is a cornerstone of an effective safety program. If employees aren't responding to the training program, investigate the weak links and resolve them promptly. Performative training can be a liability, rather than an asset, to safety performance.

More questions to ask:

- Do increases in training hours correlate with a reduction in workplace incidents?

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- Do incident and injury spikes coincide with gaps within training records?

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- Does training material match the reality of the work in the field?

#3

Do your KPIs value quantity over quality?

Many organizations place a quota on the number of safety audits and observations they expect leadership to complete. While this is an excellent first step towards increasing safety participation, what comes out of the audits will only be as valuable as the attention put into them.

Leaders who don't see the value of audits will complete them as quickly as possible, not giving this valuable process the effort necessary to make real change. Such rushed audits can amount to what **Stephen Martin**, former director general of the Institute of Directors, termed a "Royal Procession" – a tour of sites involving senior people, but with little consequence. If leaders do not follow through with safety procedures in earnest, how can employees be expected to behave differently?

More questions to ask:

- Does your company have a method to measure the quality of audits and inspections?
- Do leaders willingly participate in audits and inspections, or is there pushback on the process?
- Has the organization demonstrated how the audit and inspection process improves workplace safety?

#4

Do leaders walk the talk?

Cultural improvement begins at the top, with leaders setting the trend for how every team member will behave when it comes to workplace safety. Therefore, if leadership's words don't match their actions, that's a fatal flaw in building a workplace safety culture.

For example, if the CEO speaks about safety in every staff meeting but then cuts corners with safety when making business decisions, this will weaken employee commitment to safety programs.

Actions are more powerful than words; if the two don't match, employees will always follow the actions. Therefore, to improve culture, leadership needs to walk the talk when it comes to workplace safety.

More questions to ask:

- Do leaders involve the safety department when planning new projects?
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- Do supervisors become visibly frustrated with safety requirements during meetings?
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- Do managers look for loopholes to get around safety policies and regulations?

#5

Do you follow through?

Identifying hazards and risks with safety audits is crucial to creating a safer work environment, but it's only the first step. Many organizations do an excellent job identifying hazards, but have limited accountability for addressing those hazards and eliminating or reducing the risk.

For many, that's because they don't have a system for tracking corrective actions, creating accountability, and ensuring action items are closed on time and as expected. As a result, organizations have hazards that management thinks are fixed but are still in the work environment... incidents waiting to happen.

If employees who report hazards see no action taken, they may stop reporting in the first place. In this way, inaction can erode safety culture.

Commit to action, and broadcast those improvements to your workforce when those actions are taken. For instance, highlight a recent risk reduction that was driven by an employee hazard report, the arrival of new PPE that provides greater protection or comfort, or 100% completion of the annual safety training plan.

More questions to ask:

- Does your organization have an efficient method for tracking corrective actions?

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- Does that method notify responsible parties and allow management to quickly see who has fulfilled their obligations and who hasn't?

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- What is your organization's track record of completing corrective (and preventive) actions on time?

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- How is your on-time completion rate trending over time?

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- Do you communicate safety improvement and results?

How Ideagen can help

Building a strong safety culture is essential to improve workplace safety, but it takes commitment. Companies that want to build a strong safety culture need a strong foundation of reporting, notifications, and visibility to demonstrate progress to their workforce. Adopting enterprise-wide EHS software is a great place to start.

Incident reporting, corrective action tracking, and auditing software from Ideagen can help you take your workplace culture to the next level. Schedule a demo today to learn more about how Ideagen EHS can help you make a safer, more compliant workplace.

Request a demo

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