

# What Is Safety Culture?

by Capella Healthcare



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about safety culture. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Definition of Safety Culture
2. Contributing Factors Rooted in Safety Culture



**Safety Culture: Culture can eat strategy for lunch...really!**

Organizational Wellness and Learning Systems. 2016. Blog. [online] Available at:

<https://organizationalwellness.com/blogs/blog/tagged/maslow>.

## 1. Definition of Safety Culture

Safety culture came into prominence as a result of the Chernobyl nuclear power disaster in 1986, when it was apparent that managerial and human factors affected safety performance. The term "safety culture" was first coined in INSAG's (1986) *Summary Report on the Post-Accident Review Meeting on the Chernobyl Accident* where safety culture was described as follows:

*"That assembly of characteristics and attitudes in organizations and individuals which establishes*

*that, as an overriding priority, nuclear plant safety issues receive the attention warranted by their significance.”*

(IAEA, (1991) Safety Culture (Safety Series No. 75-INSAG-4) International Atomic Energy Agency, Vienna)

Other safety culture definitions followed in its wake, such as these:

- The product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization's health and safety management (U.K. Health and Safety Commission)
- The way we typically do things [safety] around here (Cullen report from Ladbroke Grove, rail crash in 1999)
- A sub-facet of the overall organizational culture (Reason, 1997)
- The product of individual and group beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that determine the organization's commitment to quality and patient safety (The Joint Commission- Accreditation Manual)

These additional definitions highlight what positive safety culture looks like:

- Organizations with a positive safety culture are characterized by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety, and by confidence in the efficacy of preventive measures (ACNI, 1999)
- A positive safety culture is characterized by the following attitudes: Our actions and decisions reflect our values; safety is our passion; quality is our trademark; integrity is our character; and people are our strength. Corporate and individual risk perceptions become aligned. (Federal Aviation Administration)

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## 2. Contributing Factors Rooted in Safety Culture

Since the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, several key accidents have plagued multiple industries, such as NASA (Challenger, 1986); BP Texas Oil Refinery, 2007; rail (Clapham Junction, 1989); and aviation (Air France 447, 2009), to name a few. In all of the incidents, it was identified that a flawed safety culture was a major contributor to the accident.

It is clear that major disasters and organizational accidents are not simply the result of human errors, deficient systems, faulty defenses, and technology failures. They arise from ingrained policies and standards that often predate the catastrophe itself. An organization's norms and values regarding safety practices and the priority it places on safety will affect how safety is practiced in the workplace.

Management culture and style is also a significant factor, for example, an unconscious bias favoring productivity over safety, a penchant for short-term gain, or being highly reactive. A management style can range from ways of managing an accident to how much consideration for safety underlies decision making. Senior management must set safety culture standards by allocating resources, providing clear policy direction, promoting open communication, and modeling desired behaviors.

New people to an organization will learn the policies and then observe how it is really done. If 99% of people are compliant with a policy, the new people will probably follow suit. However, if only 50% of the people

comply, the new people may feel like they have free choice in order to fit into the new culture.



#### BIG IDEA

An organization needs consistent safety management that aligns the local unit culture and individual behaviors with that of the whole organization in order to sustain an effective safety strategy.

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## Support

If you are struggling with a concept or terminology in the course, you may contact **RiskManagementSupport@capella.edu** for assistance.

If you are having technical issues, please contact **learningcoach@sophia.org**.