



Training

Charting Safety Culture: You Can't Improve if You Don't Measure

Don Sears | Jun 20, 2019

How does your company view safety? Is it a burden or a source of pride? Learn how establishing values and then measuring them can have a major impact on safety and company culture—and company performance overall. Happy, safe workers make for productive and caring employees.

Don Eckenfelder, CEO of Social Operating Systems, was scheduled to present a session on how to measure safety culture at the *ASSP Safety 2019 conference*, but he ended up having to cancel. Not to worry: We spoke to him before the ASSP event this year and picked his brain on what it takes to establish, measure and have a successful safety culture.

Eckenfelder, who has a background in chemical engineering, also had a long career as a corporate safety manager, including roles at Chesebrough-Pond's, which was acquired by Unilever in 1987. In 1996, Eckenfelder wrote the book *Values-Driven Safety: Reengineering Loss Prevention Using Value Inspired Resource Optimization*.

"I'm an amateur applied social scientist trapped in the body of a safety engineer and chemical engineer," says Eckenfelder.

Social Operating Systems, based in Glens Falls, New York, has served more than 100 clients since 1995—most of which have had long-term retainer relationships with the safety culture company. From General Electric Co. to Turner Industries to a family-run aluminum extruder in upstate New York, Social Operating Systems has helped companies isolate and benchmark their values—and used specific exercises to help them overcome problem areas.

"Our core concepts are that a man's character is his destiny, and so by extension, an organization's culture is its destiny," says Eckenfelder. "And, of course, we use Peter Drucker's comment, 'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.'"

Keep track of all this year's ASSP event coverage on our MSC at Safety 2019 page.

How Individual Character Affects Safety Culture—and Why You Need Metrics to Drive

Change

What does individual character have to do with safety culture? Well, if you understand the influence a strong culture can have on safety, then it likely has everything to do with it. Culture is a predictor of performance, believes Eckenfelder.

As part of the description for the ASSP session he intended to present, he **wrote** the following:

“Everything you do in an organization affects the culture. The question is whether that change is positive or negative and if positive whether it is the best or most efficient and effective way to achieve the improvement. Without measurement, you’ll never know... except anecdotally.

“Reflecting on the compulsion leaders have for metrics, I concluded that without a viable and defensible culture measurement methodology the potential for ideas about the importance of culture would be unlikely to go beyond discussions and lack sustainability.”

There is a logic here—and a lot of fine-tuning over the years to attain a methodology that aligns with metrics, Eckenfelder explains. Yet, measurement by itself is not the point. Companies use metrics to drive change. Once culture has been measured, it can be managed.

“Over the years, even today, nobody really seems to have a good way to measure culture,” says Eckenfelder. “We do. And it works.”

The First Step to Measuring Safety Culture: Establish Values and a Plan, Leadership Must Lead

One way to capture data about safety is to survey employees, but that is not where to start, according to Eckenfelder. There should be an objective—which begins with crafting your safety values and using them to create imperatives that can be benchmarked.

“We sit down with our clients in workshops with a cross section of their employees and determine what they want, what they think their attributes should be, come up with the beliefs and values and create a customized culture,” says Eckenfelder. “We then use barometers, a scorecard, and develop a process for them.”

Some companies may not know what they want for their values—so Eckenfelder will try to use models of companies with successful cultures. Through research, companies with strong culture also tend to perform at high levels—and they take safety as seriously as they do other aspects of the business.

In fact, the most successful companies don’t have major compliance issues because it becomes a natural byproduct of a company’s management processes.

“You’ve got to start with the person who’s at the top of whatever the organization is and if they don’t believe in this, you’re going nowhere,” says Eckenfelder. “But then instead of trying to influence the whole organization, you can move directly to the workers ... They love this, they love talking about it, they love doing it. And then when you get the person at the top, and the people at the bottom who have bought in, you squeeze the people in the middle.”

Take the Pulse: Capture Safety Sentiment Data and Be Transparent with the Findings

Eckenfelder has branded his approach as “values-driven safety” and believes his applied social science is about attitude over regulatory or behavioral modification. Safety culture is the “operating system” for safety programs.

He preaches leadership by example and is focused on process over injury statistics. Safety professionals need to be given stature in the company—and gimmicks are frowned upon. Every employee has a responsibility to safety.

Do you focus too much on injury statistics and outcomes of risk rather than risk itself? Read “Finding Common Ground Where Business and Safety Converge.”

“The cure for a culture that needs improvement is exercises and then ongoing measurement to assess the impact,” says Eckenfelder.

Social Operating Systems’ method involves taking the barometer of all employees, anonymously, based on the imperatives that are linked to the values. After years of tweaking, the scorecard has become a simple Ten Commandments-style list with a zero to 10 scale—zero is lowest maturity and 10 is the highest.

To download the scorecard, [*click here*](#).

To download the barometer, [*click here*](#).

Here are some of the statements in the list at the low and high end:

No. 1

Low Maturity

We do safety because it is required.

High Maturity

We do safety because we care about each other.

No. 6

Low Maturity

Safety performance measurement is not well understood.

High Maturity

We understand and like the way safety performance is measured.

No. 8

Low Maturity

We never have resources for safety.

High Maturity

We fund safety because it is profitable.

The numbers are tallied up and given a score in all 10 statements. The numbers are then mapped to a safety barometer scale that has more depth for the level. Here are some barometer result examples:

If a company scored a zero in the first example range above (“We do safety because it is required/We do safety because we care about each other”), the barometer chart shows:

“Safety driven by regulation, management directives and the cost of accidents.”

If a company scored a 6 for the same example, the barometer says:

"Concern for people is balanced with compliance and injury costs but is seen as a separate subject."

And if a company scored a 10 for the same example, the barometer says:

"Sincere concern for employees drives safety and is in perfect harmony with other activities."

The findings should be shared with all employees and be used to start conversations and trigger exercises that can be worked on to help safety culture become second nature. And the scorecard and barometer can continue to be used to benchmark where things are and to set specific company goals.

"If you do safety well, you tend to do a lot of other things well, too," says Eckenfelder. "And that's just good. It improves efficiency and effectiveness, team spirit, camaraderie, everything. Doing safety well acts as a lubricant for virtually everything else. The first safety value is to do it for the right reasons. Because you care about your employees. And if you care about your employees, they're going to care about you."

How would you describe the safety culture of your company? Do you think you could measure safety culture?

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