

CREATING AND SUSTAINING A SAFETY CULTURE

A mini-guide for today's health and safety pros

Contents

01

Turning safety strategy
into safety practice

02

Culture starts at the top
(but can't stay there)

03

Communication
is everything

04

The 5 building blocks of
an effective safety culture

05

About InteleX





Turning safety strategy into safety practice



Like many businesses, of course you want to ensure your people enjoy a safe working environment. But as you'll know, it's one thing to put a robust safety strategy in place, it's another to have employees live and breathe it in how they work every single day.

In a now famous quote, management guru Peter Drucker said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." He saw that no matter how much work organisations put into developing comprehensive strategies, if the culture wasn't aligned, they never stuck. Never.

Creating safety strategies that stick is the focus of this guide.

A foundation for behaviour

An organisation's culture governs how the business operates and how people interact. It regulates what's seen as acceptable (and what isn't). And it underpins trust at all levels – whether in the firm's management, its health and safety teams, or between coworkers.

You can't force culture

Of course, creating and sustaining a safety culture is anything but easy. Culture tends to be organic and to resist any kind of top-down regulation. It doesn't like to be written down and codified. It's a free spirit.

In fact, heavy-handed approaches to imposing a culture tend to result in a them-and-us environment where frontline workers actively work against management 'initiatives'. Truth is, on the whole people don't like change. More than this, they hate being changed.

A more effective approach

So what can you do to foster a true safety culture in your business?

In this mini-guide, we're going to offer some insights and approaches you can use. We'll look at the role of management, the critical importance of effective communication, and we'll explore five building blocks you can use to structure your approach.

Let's get started.





Culture starts
at the top (but
can't stay there)



While culture can't be imposed (no matter how many corporate away days a business runs), it can be modelled. This starts at the top. Senior management must both talk and (very visibly) walk the safety message. They need to show the business is committed to workers' safety (even if this costs the organisation in terms of lost opportunities).

Safety culture is business culture

The reality is: safety culture can't be divorced from business culture. Both must be fully in sync if safety is to be rooted deeply into how the company operates and the behaviour of its people. No one should be under any illusion: employees are highly skilled at spotting gaps between what they hear in company meetings and what they experience day-to-day on the ground. And these gaps can critically undermine your safety efforts.

The role for senior leadership

Leaders must both set the overarching vision for safety and hold everyone accountable (including themselves) for turning it into a cultural reality. This means ensuring issues are reported upon transparently across the organisation and opportunities for improvement are acted upon quickly and decisively.

Importantly, it also means publicly celebrating successes, modelling the good just as much as correcting the bad. People tend to be more motivated to change their long-term behaviour with praise and encouragement than with endless fault-finding.

It's also about being consistent, identifying key safety messages and maintaining focus on communicating them often. A never-ending range of short-lived initiatives can cause more harm than good. Employees quickly learn to ignore them (they'll soon be replaced by something else).

Getting out of the boardroom

Leaders must be seen actively taking safety messages to the shop floor (no, an email and a few posters are not enough). This counters the common accusation that leadership simply doesn't understand how things work in the 'real world'. Culture is fundamentally about doing and being seen to do.

For their part, employees must feel empowered and encouraged to take issues to senior managers. In fact, they should be praised for doing so. Because without this two-way conversation, the business will never achieve the engagement needed to develop an effective, living safety culture.

We'll explore communication more in the next section.





Communication
is everything



One way of viewing culture is that it is a conversation the business has with itself. All good conversations are about people talking with each other, not at each other. They ensure all parties feel listened to and understood. Not everyone will always agree of course, but at least they'll understand where they differ and can actively take steps to close gaps.

Context is critical

Every business is different (as is every person within it). There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to communicating about safety and embedding it into the fabric of the organisation. For example, a worker in a hazardous section of an oil refinery is likely to have a very different view of safety than someone working in sales at company HQ.

Find common ground

Often, communicating effectively about safety means focusing on what really matters to employees (eg family and life outside the workplace) and showing that working safely means they'll get to carry on doing the things they love (and continue to be there for their loved ones). The details may differ by role and geography but the overarching focus is something most people can agree on.

Fixed vs flexible

There will always be a tension between what should be fixed in how we communicate about safety and what should remain flexible for on-the-ground interpretation.

Success is likely to come from focusing on keeping the core principles and objectives fixed on a company-wide basis but enabling local teams to determine how they will realise these within their specific context. This offers both the consistency safety professionals want to see and gives employees ownership over making it work in the real world.



Ultimately, communication is about forging trust at all levels. Trust in management that they genuinely value the safety of their people. Trust in health and safety teams that they understand how to protect staff members.

It's about the why as much as the how

A lot of communication around safety is about how people avoid accidents. But when it comes to creating a safety culture, conversations need to focus as much on the 'why' of safety as the 'how'.

Employees must buy into the wider idea of what it means to stay safe – protecting themselves and their coworkers from harm, prioritising safety over expedience – before they commit to adopting the desired behaviours. It's both an emotional and a rational act.

Communicating trust

Ultimately, communication is about forging trust at all levels. Trust in management that they genuinely value the safety of their people. Trust in health and safety teams that they understand how to protect staff members. And trust in employees that they'll do the right thing, report issues and hold each other to account.

When this trust is in place, all sides will feel empowered to discuss what's right, what's wrong, and how to improve safety across the business. And this is a sure sign that safety is truly becoming part of the wider culture.





The 5 building blocks of an effective safety culture



While culture is complex and multifaceted, the foundations of creating an effective safety culture are comparatively simple. There are five core elements...

01

Compliance

Legal and regulatory factors underpin virtually all health and safety activity. While these are not 'cultural' in their own right, it is impossible to have an effective safety culture without ensuring the business complies with all its duty of care obligations.

02

Capability development

Making safety part of the culture demands that employees, managers and leaders have the required knowledge and skills to keep people safe. These range from technical capabilities to determine the best approach for each task through to emotional soft skills to gain the rapport and empathy needed to influence people's behaviour.

03

Resource availability

Today, everyone is busy. Everyone has to-do lists that never seem to shorten. But embedding safety into the culture is in major part a function of time. Do people have time to report issues (from incidents to near misses)? Do health and safety managers have the resources to analyse what's been reported and act to mitigate unacceptable risks? And do senior leaders have time allocated to communicate (and actively model) the safety behaviours the business needs to see?



04

Management involvement and accountability

As we've already pointed out, culture is fed from the top. So it's critical that management is involved (and seen to be involved) in supporting safety initiatives. Time is a factor here too but it goes deeper. Management must fully engage on both a rational and emotional level. They must commit to ensuring accountability to help make safety core to how the business operates day-to-day. The entire programme depends upon it.

05

Behaviour and mentoring

Safety that only exists on paper or in a thousand-page rulebook will never create the kind of culture that most health and safety professionals want to see. To truly deliver on the vision, it's vital that consistent, effective mentoring and coaching is put in place. This creates a muscle-memory of safety on the ground where it really matters.

An important first step.

These foundations are just the start of course. No one can pretend that changing existing cultures, creating new ones, and sustaining them over the long term is easy. But with the right commitment from key stakeholders backed by effective communication and ongoing measurement, today's organisations can create robust, enduring safety cultures. And that's good news for everyone.



About Intelelex

Intelelex Technologies, ULC is a global leader in environmental, health, safety and quality (EHSQ) management software.

Since 1992, Intelelex employees across the globe have been committed to innovating and enabling organizations to send their employees home safely every day, leaving behind a more sustainable world to the generations that follow, and manage quality so that only the safest and highest quality products make it to market. Intelelex's scalable, web-based platform and applications have helped clients across all industries improve business performance, mitigate organization-wide risk, and ensure sustained compliance with internationally accepted standards (e.g. ISO 9001, ISO 14001, ISO 45001, and OSHAS 18001) and regulatory requirements. Almost 1,400 customers in 195 countries trust Intelelex to power their EHSQ initiatives. Headquartered in Toronto with regional offices and employees around the world, Intelelex became an Industrial Scientific company in 2019.

For more information about Intelelex, visit www.intelelex.com