4. Promoting a positive health and safety culture

The culture of an organisation makes the greatest contribution to its health and safety performance. Unfortunately culture is not an easy concept to understand, measure or manage. A good health and safety management system can go some way to setting the scene for developing a good culture, but it goes much deeper than that.

4.1 What is a health and safety culture?

According to HSG65 "The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management."

Also (quoting from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations)

"Organisations with a positive safety culture are characterised by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety and by confidence in the efficacy of preventative measures."

Safety culture is not a difficult idea, but it is usually described in terms of concepts such as 'trust', 'values' and 'attitudes'. It can be difficult to describe what these mean, but you can judge whether a company has a good safety culture from what its employees actually do rather than what they say.

4.1.1 Signs that suggest a poor culture

The symptoms of a poor health and safety cultural include:

- Widespread, routine procedural violations;
- Failures of compliance with health and safety systems;
- Management decisions that put production or cost before safety.

These conditions can be difficult to detect because a poor culture not only contributes to their occurrence, it also means that people may be inclined to hide or cover-up violations and unsafe practices.

Reference – 'Inspectors human factors toolkit - Common topic 4: Safety culture' available free at http://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/comah/common4.pdf

4.1.2 Signs that suggest a positive culture

The following can suggest an organisation has a positive health and safety culture:

- Visible management commitment at all levels in the organisation;
- Good knowledge and understanding of health and safety throughout the organisation;
- Clear definition of the culture that is desired;

- Lack of competing priorities with health and safety (e.g. production, quality, etc);

- A realistic idea of what is achievable whilst being challenging;

- Visible evidence that investment is made into health and safety, including the quality of the working environment, equipment provided etc.;

- Being proactive so opportunities for improvement are dealt with before problems arise;

- Good communication up, down and across the organisation;

- A fair and just discipline system;

- Meaningful involvement of the workforce in all elements of health and safety.

4.1.3 Improving the health and safety culture

It is not possible to improve culture directly. Instead, it is necessary to work at improving factors that can have a positive influence on culture. For example:

- Increase the amount of time managers spend visiting the workplace (not just after an accident);

- Improve managers non-technical skills (e.g. communication);

- Increase levels of workforce participation in safety related problems and solutions;

- Promote good job satisfaction and moral;

- Promote a 'just culture' where blame is only used where someone takes reckless risks;

- Implement a competence assurance program to ensure everyone throughout the organisation has the skills they need to work safely.

Reference – 'HSE Human Factors Briefing Note No. 7 - Safety Culture' available free at http://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/comah/07culture.pdf

4.1.4 Breaking a health and safety culture

It takes a long time to develop a good culture (most estimates suggest five to ten years) but it can be lost very easily. Erosion will occur more quickly than growth, and single events can have a catastrophic impact. Examples of where it can go wrong include:

- Managers 'forgetting' to talk about safety;

- Managers appearing to pay 'lip service' to safety;

- Disciplinary action being taken that is perceived as unfair;

- Failure to respond to issues raised by the workforce;

- Failure to consult the workforce when decisions are made;

- Poor business results leading people to believe their job is in danger;

Cultures continually evolve and continuous attention is required to ensure changes are positive and not negative. High staff turnover, initiative overload and inconsistent decision making can make it very difficult to maintain a positive health and safety culture.

4.2 Safety management systems (SMS)

To provide a good foundation for a health and safety culture it will necessary for an organisation's health and safety management system to go beyond the legal requirements. HSG65 proposes the POPIMAR model for a system. Its elements include

Policy - set a clear direction for the organisation to follow;

Organising - put a structure and arrangements in place to deliver the policy;

Planning and implementation - establish, operate and maintain good systems;

Measuring performance - against agreed standards to reveal where improvement is needed;

Audit - planned assessment of arrangements;

Review - taking account of all relevant experience and applying lessons.

The key message from this is that information from performance measurement and audit must be reviewed, and then the findings from the review fed back into the appropriate elements of the system. This makes it a living system that adapts as required to ensure it makes a positive contribution to health and safety.

A note about the text

This is an excerpt from Health and Safety 2008 written by Andy Brazier, which covers all the key elements of health and safety as it stands as a discipline at the end of 2007. The book provides a quick reference, focussing on hazards in the workplace and practical controls of risk. The aim has been to present the health and safety processes so that, if these are understood, appropriate solutions to a very large range of health and safety issues can be developed. It provides links to freely available HSE guidance throughout.

The book has been arranged, to a large extent, around the syllabus of the NEBOSH National General Certificate (NGC). This is because the syllabus appears to provide a very comprehensive overview of all the key issues of health and safety. Also, by doing this it is hoped that the book will be a useful aid to people studying for the certificate, acting as a supplement to training material from course providers or to assist in self-study.

The draft text of the whole book is available at
http://healthandsafetycertificate.blogspot.com/

If you would like a copy of the book or more information go to Andy's website at
http://www.andybrazier.co.uk/Health&safety/book.htm