

Case Study 25: Safety Culture – by Industry Group

Keywords: Safety Culture / Transit / Trucking / Safety Organizations / Other Organizations

Safety culture is defined here as the recognition and acknowledgment of safety as a core value, with the associated enforcement and support for safety procedures and practices.

Transit Safety Culture: Safety is integral to transit operations and the transit industry. Consequently, all transit authorities recognize the importance of safety and incorporate it into their corporate culture, even though some do not call it out as a separate element. The “fish in water” metaphor occurred repeatedly in this context. (Fish are totally immersed in water so questions about the water would be meaningless to fish.) Safety culture is reflected in programs like an elaborate three-part program consisting of a hazard identification process for everybody, a “Safety Minute” clinic for operators, and quarterly safety meetings at the management level. Alternatively, in a large authority interviewed, safety culture is conveyed in a “Safety Blitz” which is an organized and coordinated agency-wide action involving training, operations and security groups focusing on incident hotspots (including but not limited to crashes).

Trucking Safety Culture: Safety is integral to trucking company operations, especially for companies transporting hazardous materials. USDOT regulations and reporting requirements reinforce this. Consequently, all trucking companies have some level of safety culture (i.e., at least acknowledge the role and importance of safety to the business), even though it may not be formally recognized as a separate element. Leading edge/proactive examples of safety culture are reflected in programs like one company’s recognition and acknowledgment that peer-to-peer accountability is a critical element in the safety strategy, with broad support (especially top-down), a given necessity, including a driver committee that advises management on safety matters. Every supervisor coming in to contact with drivers going on duty has had “reasonable suspicion” training. (This is more inclusive than the required supervisor training under 49CFR382.603.) One respondent responsible for company safety proudly said “The safety department is the entire organization!” meaning safety is everybody’s responsibility. In addition, “psychological safety” (encouraging people to feel their job is safe and they will be free from retaliation if they speak up) is built on trust, and also builds trust.

Safety Organization Safety Culture: The relationship of a given safety program to safety culture varies with the missions of the safety organization. All the safety organizations interviewed recognize and appreciate the value of an active and robust safety culture. However, some actively encourage and attempt to facilitate the development of an active safety culture in their members or clients, others take it as a given. Still others see it as outside their core mission. One DOT is actively implementing an internal safety culture program within the DOT itself.

Other Organizations Safety Culture: Safety culture dominates three of the four groups, although for slightly different reasons. All four of the hazardous group employers have highly

proactive safety cultures. There are typically multi-faceted formal program elements, such as explicit training consistent with the various operating environments, as well as some form of informal networking relating to safety (either facilitated by the company or spontaneously arising, or both). The university shuttle and limo/tour bus groups both have highly visible safety cultures, aggressively supported and promoted by the organization at all levels.

In the case of the limo/tour bus example, this is recognized as a critical element in the promotion of the business and is directly used as a marketing tool. Safety culture is stated by name and by example, and actively practiced throughout the organization. (Their safety culture ethos even extends to the mechanics and physical facility.) An operational example is switching drivers out for over-night runs, even though the hours of operation had not been exceeded. Emphasis is on correction rather than discipline. Consequently, reinforcement is constant via reminders, individual monitoring/feedback, and targeted retraining. There are also monthly safety “quizzes” and reminders. The goal is to eventually replace regular periodic “broadcast” training with individually-targeted training.

The outlier is small employer trucking companies who of necessity are focused on the day-to-day running of the business. (“Chasing the dollar,” as one interviewee put it.)