

A Matter of Perception

By Mark Sabourin

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Question for CEO: If there was a tool that would let you find out what your employees really believe about the company's health and safety performance, would you dare to use it?

"In my workplace, if I mention a possible safety problem to my boss, I can rest assured that he or she will do whatever it takes to fix the problem as quickly as possible." In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".

Welcome to perception surveys.

Corrie Pitzer is the Managing Director of SAFEmap, an Australian company specialising in the analysis of corporate culture, and a leading international exponent of perception surveys as the tool of choice for measuring workplace safety. "Quite often" says Pitzer "management tries to impose a culture on an organization with mission statements and value statements." It seldom works. Culture, especially safety culture, develops not in the corporate office, but in the workplace where the people do the work, he says. When a company begins taking a serious look at its safety culture, it is often surprised by what it finds.

"In my experience," says Pitzer, "there is a considerable 'disconnect' between what management thinks happens down there and what employees know happens down there. When the results come in, what they show is often quite fascinating.

Or very disturbing.

A perception survey is essentially an audit, a measurement tool that can be used to gauge the state, condition or level of safety (or quality, or morale or almost anything else) in the workplace.

Perception surveys differ radically from the more conventional audit tools. Physical audits look at equipment. Systems audits look mostly in the filing cabinet in the office for things like policies, procedures and records. The traditional walk-around and-chat routine that often accompanies both of these audits will record spot impressions - spot impressions of how a worker will perform when he's being watched and spot impressions of what a worker will tell an auditor.

Physical and systems audits can go only so far. They measure what's there, but they do not necessarily measure whether what's there is working.

A perception survey measures how the people in the workplace perceive the situation, it records what they believe to be true, it gauges opinion, outlook and attitude. In other words, it measures the "culture" or the operative reality in the workplace.

Safety culture has the sound of one of those touchy-feely concepts that make consultants rich and the rest of us sigh or cringe. Dave Lafortune, who is a senior adviser for corporate health and safety with Ontario Power Generation, seems almost apologetic when he explains that safety culture has nothing to do with the high-sounding declarations of corporate principles that one often finds framed and polished on corporate lobby walls.

True versus real

"If I do my job the way that I was shown in training, and if I follow all the safety rules, I will have no trouble meeting the production levels that are expected of me." In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".

The concept of corporate culture made wealthy men of folks like Tom Peters, Robert Waterman, Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy, whose books defined it as the set of shared values and beliefs held by an organisation.

It's a fuzzy concept, one that Pitzer says is difficult, maybe even impossible, to measure. What can be measured, he says, is how people behave, how they perceive their own behaviour and how they perceive that of others. Some people call this "safety climate" rather than "safety culture" Whatever one chooses to call it, when Ontario Power Generation and the Australian mining industry set out to understand the relationship between work and safety as seen by the workers themselves, they did so by using perception surveys.

It's difficult to tell to what extent companies are looking at safety culture as part of their corporate safety initiatives. It's still a new concept. Broad organization-wide surveys of corporate perceptions have been around since at least the 1980s, says Pitzer, but the results of those surveys have given little of value to safety managers. The narrowly focused safety culture survey is a much newer addition to the safety manager's tool kit, and Ontario Power Generation and the Australian mining industry are among the few who dared to use it.

There are others, of course, who have looked or who will soon be looking at safety culture but who are reluctant to talk about it. It's not difficult to understand why. Corporate culture, mission statements, statements of core values and similar pronouncements have become part of a corporation's public face. Corporations use them to define themselves to the outside world.

Heather Harvey, director of human resources and environmental management at the Woodbridge Group, says her employer prefers to spend its time talking about safety culture and reinforcing it rather than surveying it. "Culture is seen in the way in which we behave and in the attitudes we have as individuals and in groups throughout the organization," she says.

Dave Shier, a health and safety staff officer with the Power Workers' Union, says his union is both participating in and supporting Ontario Power Generation's survey efforts. The true test, he says, will be the results and what the employer chooses to do with them.

"If you say the problem with safety is that people aren't careful, that's 'blame the worker' says Lafortune. "If you say the problem is the work environment, that's the opposite."

In effect, the concept of safety culture redefines the term "work environment" to include the whole range of attitudes and beliefs around work and safety, most of which are products of the workplace.

It boils down to the difference between what is "true" and what is "real". In a healthy corporate safety culture, the words "true" and "real" mean the same thing. In effect, it doesn't much matter what is "true"; it matters what the people doing the work believe is true, because it is the belief that they will act upon.

The perception survey is designed to discover what the people in the workplace believe is true, and whatever they believe and act upon, that's what's real.

We can also go a long step further. What the people in the workplace - the workers, their supervisors and their managers - believe is real defines the culture of that workplace. That culture permeates the space like the air everyone breathes. A new worker entering the workplace will breathe the air, absorb the culture and act in ways that are consistent with that culture.

Gut reaction

"If I were to decide to do something that everyone knows is risky, the people I work with would come and tell me to stop"

In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".

In Australia, the mining industry knew it had a safety problem. Accident frequency was falling, explains Dick Wells, executive director of the Minerals Council of Australia, a national umbrella group for the industry, but fatalities were not. In 1996, a particularly grim year, 33 miners died.

The industry collectively set an ambitious target: a mining industry free of accidents, illness and fatalities, and set a course to make it happen. Part of that course was attacking what Wells calls "the bottom increment" of accident statistics: those accidents that seemed to occur despite implementation of what he describes as some of the best safety systems in the world.

An ambitious undertaking like eliminating all accidents and illness from the Australian mining industry required an ambitious examination of safety

culture. The survey, managed by Corrie Pitzer and his colleagues at SAFEmap, sampled the perceptions of more than 7000 people employed in the country's mining industry.

The method used was a mixture of conventional and high-tech. Pitzer and his group gathered respondents in small groups, armed them with electronic devices on which to record their agreement and disagreement, and read them a series of positive and negative statements. The advantage of the method, says Pitzer, is that responses are not influenced by literacy and the process records the respondent's initial "gut reaction" to the statement.

The Minerals Council of Australia bravely proclaims that the results, released in July, 1999, were not surprising. It also concedes that good news was hard to find.

The vision of a minerals industry free of accidents and illness had been embraced by senior management, the survey showed, but the closer one got to the coal-face, the less credible that vision became. Among operators - the workers most at risk - there continues to prevail a culture of risk-taking and a fatalistic resignation to the inevitability of accidents.

The grim backdrop to the survey's findings is the body count. In the first two quarters of the 1999-2000 reporting year, there had already been eight fatalities in the Australian mining industry.

Dave Lafortune understands well the Australian mining industry's concern with safety culture. Ontario Power Generation's safety culture survey is a more recent initiative than that Down Under, but Lafortune is pinning his hopes on culture as a major predictor of health and safety performance.

Lafortune bases his belief partly on a recently concluded study that looked at the cultural causes of the unusually high sick-leave rate throughout the company. The study, though not a culture survey, nonetheless gave Lafortune strong hints that cultural issues may lie at the heart of many aspects of employee behaviour and performance.

Ontario Power Generation has recently undergone a period of upheaval, says Lafortune. The future of the company, formerly an arm of Ontario Hydro, has been uncertain, and the impending introduction of competition into the industry had led to widespread concerns about job security and the value the company placed on its employees. The study showed a clear link between job security and sick rate, says Lafortune.

Lafortune is still awaiting results of a perception survey covering some 4,000 workers in the non-nuclear side of the industry at Ontario Power Generation. The survey is meant to evaluate the effectiveness of new management systems and to provide baseline data for later research. A second survey, covering the balance of the employee population, is being designed.

Predictive value

"If a piece of equipment I work with needs repair or adjustment, there is someone I can call who will come and fix it without any hassles." *In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".*

Organizational Studies Inc. designed Ontario Power Generation's study, but senior consultant Gary Allen relies on anecdotal evidence only when he attributes improvements in safety performance to a strong safety culture.

He likens it to capturing "the hearts and minds" of employees. If employees feel they are working in a safe environment, they will be more productive, motivated and satisfied, he says. That's capturing the "heart". Surveys also identify specific information about narrow issues that management can act upon. That, says Allen, captures the "mind".

Culture surveys help tell you where you're going, says Dick Wells. He feels they may be predictive of certain behaviours, risk-taking for instance. Where he and Pitzer clearly agree is on the value, or lack of value, of conventional "lag" indicators: statistics measuring accidents, fatalities, lost time and the like.

They have no predictive value, says Wells. Pitzer goes even further. He says they have no value at all.

"Using an accident rate to measure safety performance is the same as using a thermometer to measure blood pressure," says Pitzer.

We've become good enough at managing safety, says Pitzer, and accidents now have little statistical value. Happily, for most organizations they are unusual, isolated events. "Accidents are very small events, statistically," he says. It is what precedes the accident, the range of risk-taking activity in the workplace that is the strongest measure of safety performance. That's what the perception survey considers.

"The most front-line measure of safety is a perception survey," he says. "That's what's really happening in an organization. It's common to find a number of cultures within the framework of a larger corporate culture, says Lafortune. These cultures can form around work groups or within horizontal strata of an organization. It's not necessarily a bad thing, he suggests. Once a culture survey has identified these groups, the organization can assess which one's best encourage safe behaviour and attempt to promote them elsewhere.

Pitzer's research found many such cultures within the Australian mining industry. A culture is a set of solutions produced by a group of people to meet specific problems they face, he says. Organizations may end up with as many cultures as they have sub-units.

Pitzer does not totally buy the conventional trickle-down theory of corporate culture: that strong consistent helmsmanship will eventually and inevitably translate into appropriate attitudes in the boiler room. Were it that simple, the survey of the Australian minerals industry should have yielded different

results. There, a vision of an industry free of accidents and illness, embraced and promoted uniformly by senior management, was disbelieved and rejected by the workers it was meant to protect. Although workers believed management's intention to reduce accidents and improve safety, they were largely resigned to the inevitability of accidents that were, they felt, outside anyone's ability to influence or control.

Pitzer calls this a "disconnect" " an example of culture suddenly taking a sharp turn and heading off in an entirely unexpected direction. It may be caused by something as simple as one level of the corporate hierarchy failing in its responsibility to transmit, through action and words, the values the company is seeking to promote. In the Australian mining industry, Pitzer points to the growing importance of management in the promotion of safety. This, he feels, marginalized supervisors' safety promotion role and led to a "disconnect" at the coalface.

" The people most exposed to the risk are the operators, but the people most influential over their behaviour are the supervisors," he says.

But the core of the problem may run much deeper, suggests Pitzer, and may cross national and industry boundaries. In fact he suggests the cultural disconnect identified at the Australian coal-face will likely be found in high-risk industries elsewhere, including Canada.

"Our CEO enforces the safety policy with managers, supervisors and workers the same way he or she enforces the expense account policy." *In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".*

The issue is the almost inevitable conflict between safety culture and corporate culture. Most corporate cultures today stress increasing levels of employee empowerment, says Pitzer, where initiative, bold thinking and creative problem solving is encouraged and rewarded. Safety cultures, especially those in higher-risk industries, stress the exact opposite. Commercial safety systems often have little to do with empowerment, he says. Government legislation prescribes what must or must not be done. And despite rhetoric about safety being a joint responsibility, ensuring a safe and healthy workplace remains management's duty.

The result, he says, is a cultural disconnect. The safety culture becomes "how we comply". The corporate culture becomes "how we get the job done", and in such an environment it almost inevitably ends in disaster.

"There are no tasks in my job that cannot be performed safely every time." *In your opinion, is this statement true? Score three for "always true", two for "usually true", one for "sometimes true" and zero for "never true".*

If you examine the fatalities in the Australian mining industry, he says, you will find that most were not the result of unusual activities. Miners are being killed doing jobs they are skilled at and are competent to do, acting well within accepted procedures. But because of the workers' skills and the strength of safety practices, the core risks within these tasks had come to be viewed as part of the job, and operators approached them with complacency. Walk a high wire a thousand times without incident, and you may begin to doubt the need for a net.

It's what Pitzer calls "the normalization of risk". He says that in positive safety cultures, workers come to believe that safety is increasingly under control. Their perception of the risk of work decreases, and their likelihood to engage in high-risk behaviour increases. The opposite also applies. Workers in organizations with weak safety cultures are far more keenly aware of the risks of work. In the cruelest of ironies, Pitzer notes that one of the organizations surveyed that scored the highest in terms of positive safety culture soon after suffered a disaster in which four miners were killed.

The man who led one of the most extensive surveys of safety culture warns that it's a big mistake to focus exclusively on safety culture as it is to ignore it.

"If you only focus on the safety culture, you inevitably lead to a high level of complacency," says Pitzer. Companies should strive toward a positive safety culture, he says, but always remain aware of issues surrounding the perception of risk, especially at the operator level. Both culture and risk have to be managed separately if progress is going to be made, says Pitzer.

Using a perception survey to find out what's really happening is one thing. Doing something about it is quite another.

Changing the safety culture is an art seeking to become a science. Many safety culture surveys don't give employers a road map for fixing things, says Gary Allen. Besides, safety culture resides within the realm of human emotions, an area where most of us have learned to tread gently.

Lafortune is a believer in the power of strong management. Safety culture can be turned and shaped very quickly if certain behaviour is a prerequisite for recognition and promotion within an organization. A strong CEO and a consistent corporate philosophy and direction are important, he says. Heather Harvey agrees. Once a company commits to a culture, it must ensure that all actions and decisions support that culture, not just by the CEO but at every level of the organization.

We've been far too focused on preventing accidents, says Pitzer, and not on managing safety as a broad entity. He draws a parallel with management's past practice of managing production rather than performance and quality.

"A quality model is going to be a very powerful driver for safety in the future," Pitzer predicts.

“Your workplace has a solid safety culture.” If you scored over 15 on the sample questions in this article, you probably didn’t add up the score right. If you scored 13 to 15, congratulations, the statement is true. If you scored from nine to 12, there is some truth to the statement, but the safety system needs work. If you scored five to eight, your workplace has real problems. If you scored under five you are working in a disaster zone.

DESIGNING A PERCEPTION SURVEY

“The best way to get started on the design of a culture survey is to get clear about where you want to end up,” says John Michela, associate professor of industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Waterloo. If you’re doing a survey, you likely intend to act somehow as a follow-up when the results are in. Trying to picture the range of possible actions you might take from survey results will help you achieve better focus in the survey.

- Be clear about what you mean by culture, says Michela. Is it what people care about? Is it how people think about things? Is it how people typically act when confronted with common situations? Is it how people think about the organization? Answering these questions in your own mind will help in the design and development of survey topics and questions.
- Surveys about work culture are best done at work during working hours in a group context, says Corrie Pitzer. Pitzer prefers not to use written questionnaires, since they exclude a segment of the population that is not literate and face a bias from people who don’t like filling them out.
- Maintain anonymity. Written questionnaires should not have a space for the name of the person filling it out, and they should be returned, when completed, in an envelope or to a drop box. If a verbal questionnaire is used in a group setting, the person administering the survey should be from outside the workplace.
- Make certain your sample is large enough to yield meaningful results, says Pitzer. His survey of the Australian mineral industry covered approximately 65 per cent of the total 11,700 employees. Ontario Power Generation intends to sample all employees over two surveys, says Dave Lafortune. Gary Allen says the entire employee population ought to be surveyed every 12 to 18 months. This can be supplemented, he says, by periodic smaller, more focused surveys of a random sample of the employee population.
- Avoid such emotion-laden terms as “attitude” “values” and “beliefs”, says Pitzer. Terms such as these are ambiguous and imprecise. Focus on what is tangible, neutral and clear: the perceptions of employees about the work environment.
- Communicate, says Allen. Make certain employees know who is being surveyed and why. Commit to disclosing results, warts and all. Commit

to acting upon the results, whatever they may be. If you do this, suggests Allen, the simple fact of conducting the survey can have a positive effect on safety culture and corporate culture.

- Involve, says Allen. If the work force is unionised, do your level best to get the union to cooperate. Make certain as many employees and departments as possible are involved in administering the survey. Broaden the sense of ownership. Too often, he says, surveys become the “property” of a department. It’s not uncommon to have them viewed as “an HR initiative.” Avoid this.
- Lafortune, Pitzer and Allen agree: follow up. Pitzer likens it to pulling the pin out of a hand grenade. “If you don’t do something with it, it can hurt you,” he says. Allen says a commitment to act upon the results, whatever they may be, is part of your “contract” with your workers. If you didn’t have a culture problem before the survey, fail to honour your part of the deal and you’ll be guaranteed of having one after.