

# Why focusing on a “Safety” Culture can defeat Safety

by Thomas A. Smith

*A system is a functioning whole that cannot be divided into independent parts and be effective.* Dr. Russell Ackoff

The ultimate challenge for management has always been how to address the paradox of Safety vs. Production. Ask workers and managers ‘What comes first - production or safety?’ the majority will say “Production.” There is a management myth production is an either/or proposition. That you can have high production or high safety but you can’t have both at the same time. This belief thrives in certain types of corporate cultures that develop different and ineffective solutions to the safety paradox.

Over time Management has come to view safety as a given and tries to solve safety problems in a logical, rational, sequential order moving forward one step at a time. It believes the *given* for safety is people. So to address the safety paradox it works to solve *people* problems first. In doing so it chooses to ignore the system. This prevents management from being able to resolve the ambiguity of how to be safe and productive simultaneously.

Quality management faced a similar dilemma. Until the 1970’s American managers believed there were two givens for quality. Number 1: Workers were the primary source of poor quality. Number 2: High quality products and services cost more. They learned the hard way from Japanese competitors they were wrong on both counts. On the former it became obvious the source of poor quality was management theory not workers. On the latter they discovered quality actually costs less not more.

The Japanese secret to improving quality, taught to them by American consultants, was to always put the customer first and manage differently. By adopting this approach they learned how to manufacture with less and less defects and waste and always listen to the customer. As American managers transformed, companies went from manufacturing products with thousands of defects per millions to near zero. They also started to pay attention to their customers needs. They did not achieve this by focusing on solving worker problems. Eventually they realized the American management paradigm of command and control had to change and this could not happen in the culture that drove its success.

A recent Wall Street Journal article about GMs’ recent recall problems highlights the importance of corporate culture. In the article Charles Elson states, “Chief Executive Mary Barra's biggest challenge isn't fixing defective cars. It will be fixing the flawed corporate culture that produced them. *The same culture that led to the (GM) bankruptcy led to these safety issues.*” (My emphasis) <sup>1</sup> Mr. Elson’s assessment of Ms. Barra’s challenge and all other companies is 100% correct.

## Where does the safety problem start?

When a company has a sudden increase in: safety recalls; employee injuries; workers compensation costs or a serious accident, management believes they have a “safety” problem. In the safety profession it has become fashionable to promote a “Safety Culture” as *the* solution to safety problems. It sounds logical and rational. Unfortunately advocating for a safety culture will do little or nothing to dissolve safety problems and ultimately will make matters worse.

A general characteristic of all organization is their proclaimed objectives differ from their true objectives. If you are going transform safety you have to get to understand fundamentally what management is really doing versus what they profess. Aligning words and action requires recognizing

the difference between what is practiced and what is preached and a different way of thinking than what currently prevails. Which means you must transform your culture.

Besides a *Safety Culture* (502,000,000 hits on Google) apparently companies also need an *Accounting Culture* (143,000,000); a *Lean Culture* (50,400,000); a *Quality Culture* (386,000,000); a *Sales Culture* (384,000,000); a *Marketing Culture* (500,000,000); a *Human Resources Culture* (155,000,000); and a *R&D Culture* (193,000,000). I'm sure this doesn't cover all of the particular cultures people believe are a pre-requisite for running a successful business but you get the point.

Establishing a "Safety Culture" where safety comes first all the time would put safety in direct competition with the other management disciplines. Each one working to gain prestige, power and influence in the organization by promoting its requirements.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln's words should remind us that emphasizing a specific culture for each and every Management discipline is a self-defeating proposition. Not only for the particular operation but for the overall success of the business. The quality movement proved to improve quality companies must break down barriers between disciplines and suppliers so they will cooperate not compete with each other. Promoting separate Management discipline cultures invariably produces tension, in-house fighting and competition. Which has nothing to do with making any kind of improvement in a business.

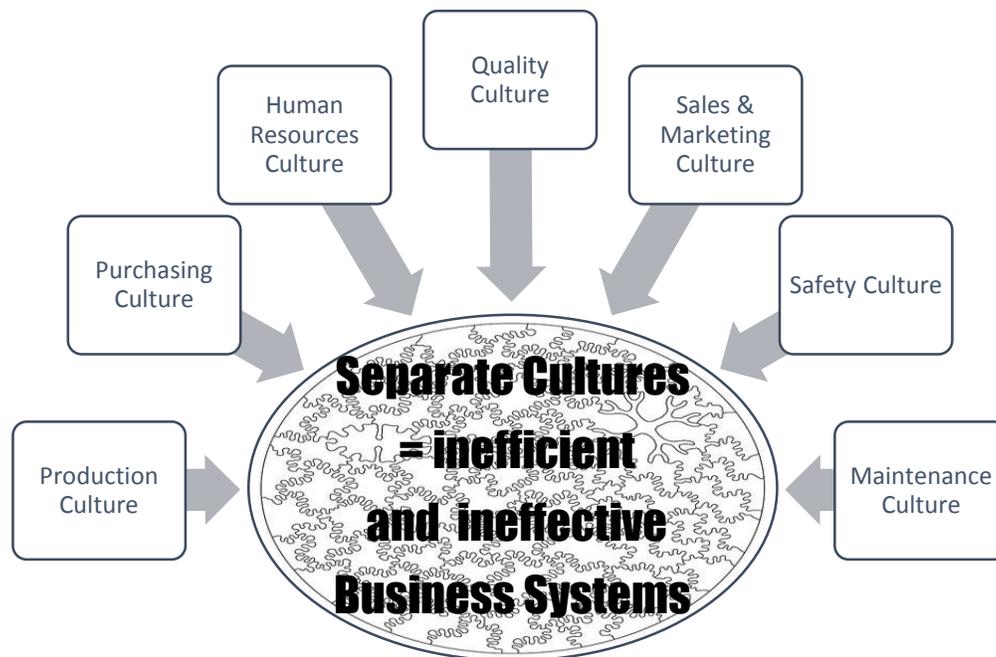


Figure 1 Each Management discipline promoting its own "Culture" destroys the system

Having segmented cultures for each discipline will result in segmented aims. The culture of production must have an aim of getting product out the door. The culture of quality must aim to ensure and improve quality. The safety culture will aim for compliance of safety rules and regulations and so on. In this world employees' ability to pay attention to quality, safety or becoming lean will be limited, confusing and increase the risk of making mistakes and alienating people.

Managers have not learned what it means to optimize business. They do not see the company as a whole system with an aim in which each discipline and all employees work together to achieve the aim. They do not understand there are times when one element of the system may take a loss so overall the system gains. Consequently short term thinking prevails. Each management discipline works for its own best interest today with no thought about tomorrow.

This creates sub-cultures but they are still dominated by the prevailing culture of the organization which can be good or bad. A *bad* culture produces self-serving, competitive profit centers that destroy the system. Silos develop between disciplines in which the overall aim of the system disappears. When each discipline has its own self-serving “culture” people will work to do what they believe is best for them and lose sight of the aim of the company and its customers. This would be a rational way to behave. Examples of these self-defeating sub-cultures that have destroyed companies are too numerous to list. But there are studies and research that prove organizations dominated by a *good* culture outperform competitors in all business metrics, including customer loyalty, employee satisfaction, financial and safety outcomes. <sup>2</sup>

### **The impact of Culture on safety**

Culture is an ineffable term. Generally speaking culture is the commonly shared thinking, values, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs of people in an organization. From the top to the bottom it influences how people react in situations. It doesn't have to be a major issue in the boardroom. The influence of culture is evident in daily work routines of all management disciplines. Especially safety.

All accidents are preceded by multiple situations of stress producing tension in the system. Culture is vividly revealed at these times specifically when people are required to make moral and ethical choices. Such as when a supervisor tells or allows an employee to do a job even though safety precautions are not in place or ineffective. When difficult choices must be made culture determines how people respond. It is the best defense mechanism for handling these moments appropriately. Therefore culture is the leading indicator of business outcomes be it quality, productivity, sales or safety.

### **What kind of culture do you have?**

The important challenge for any company is to determine what is its culture? It helps to know qualitative research has identified three distinct types of organizational cultures: <sup>3</sup>

1. A Passive/Defensive culture in which employees believe the best thing they can do is to interact with others in inoffensive ways to protect their individual job security.
2. An Aggressive/Defensive culture where employees believe working on a task is best done in forceful ways to protect their status and job security in the organization.
3. A Constructive culture in which employees are encouraged to work together and cooperate to face the daily challenges of business in a positive way.

### **The impact of a Passive/Defensive culture on safety**

A Passive/Defensive culture drives people to seek to protect their position but in a very innocuous ways. Managers and workers learn it is not in their better interest to try and change things. Employees work to maintain the status quo and do nothing to rock the boat. Better to go along with the present program rather than try new innovative thinking and ways of doing things. These norms are applied throughout the various disciplines including Safety.

For safety this translates into middle managers setting safety goals to please others such as upper management with no knowledge of the capability of the system to meet the goals. Innovative ideas for improving safety have no chance in this culture. Managers will avoid taking any risks like giving employees more autonomy for safety. The goal is to maintain safety standards and identify deviations from them. Safety means following orders and checking with supervisors rather than taking action on what truly causes safety problems. Shifting of responsibility regarding safety issues is prevalent.

### **The impact of an Aggressive/Defensive culture on safety**

An Aggressive/Defensive culture has managers and workers who work to protect their own individual status but do so more forcefully. Departments and people compete with each other and cooperation may even be seen as a weakness. The safety discipline in this type of culture will invoke safety rules and regulations by fiat to ensure compliance. It will encourage competition between disciplines and locations to achieve a safety goal such as reducing the number of injuries.

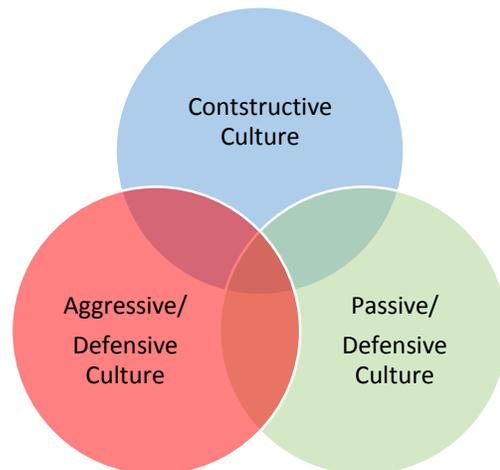
Supervisors look for safety mistakes made by workers and remind them to follow safety rules explicitly. When opposed they invoke their authority to make workers comply with safety rules. For managers safety is a no-nonsense proposition so they believe they must be hard, tough about it. Management views production as the most important thing about work. So safety comes in a distant second place at best. Managers may even work to make their safety numbers look good at the expense of being honest about them.

Both cultures result in the prevalence of short-term thinking with little or no attention paid to long-term solutions or consequences. Where these cultures exist people learn that to survive it is better to worry about their self-interest than the aim of the organization.

Ultimately these cultures pay lip service to safety. Management cuts costs by buying cheaper safety equipment or delaying its purchase, reducing maintenance, or reduces or stops having safety meetings. Employees, encouraged indirectly by managers who ignore or endorse their actions, take chances such as not following safety procedures because they take too long. These are just some of the more obvious safety deficiencies created in the two cultures.

### **The impact of a Constructive culture on safety**

A Constructive culture produces managers and associates who consistently demonstrate a balanced concern for people and tasks. Not only for themselves but for customers and suppliers. People support each other and have no problem working individually or on a team. People value cooperation, teamwork and learn how to dissolve problems instead of patching them. Workers are given autonomy to manage safety in the present and the future. They are trained in team problem solving since they know safety problems are usually systemic. They apply systems theory and understand even simple systems are too complex to be understood by one person. They understand the language of statistics and use it to give a safety a Voice of the System.



*Figure 2: The Three Cultures in Organizations*

Managers and workers understand safety is an integral part of every process. Local safety departments may not even exist in operations because managers and workers know how to integrate quality, safety and production. Management works constantly to build respect and cooperation of everyone to make processes inherently *safe*. Everyone views the safety paradox as challenge to be addressed not ignored. Everyone understands you cannot have high productivity *unless* you have high safety. They work daily to achieve the balance of this paradox.

The culture of any organization ultimately determines how disciplines operate, not the other way around. The important question is: What is the culture of your company? The answer determines the performance of each management discipline in your operations - especially safety.

---

<sup>1</sup> WSJ article, June 5, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Article presented at the 2005 ASTD Expo, Orlando, FL., June 6, 2005, Financial Returns from Organizational Culture Improvement: Translating “Soft” Changes into “Hard Dollars”

<sup>3</sup> Psychology Reports, June 1993: MEASURING NORMATIVE BELIEFS AND SHARED BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE INVENTORY, Robert A. Cook and Jane Szumal

Thomas A. Smith (Smitty) is a management consultant helping Managers and Associates understand culture and how it impacts performance. He specializes in the impact of culture on quality and safety. He has written a book, *“System Accidents: Why Americans Are Injured At Work And What Can Be Done About It”* and presented research papers on this subject at two of the International Deming Research Conferences at Fordham University, NYC. He can be reached at [tsmith@mocalinc.com](mailto:tsmith@mocalinc.com), (248) 391-1818