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A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING SAFETY CLIMATE

MAKING BIG DECISIONS ON SMALL DATA





A New Way of Understanding Safety Climate

A subpart of safety culture, safety climate is integral to the creation, implementation and ongoing sustainability of a safe, effective job site.

By Joshua Estrin

Together, safety culture and safety climate can create a safe construction workplace, but when ambiguity exists between the prime contractor and those in charge of ensuring the work site is free of hazards both seen and unseen, worker safety is deeply undermined, leading to unsafe acts and unsafe conditions.

It is equally important to understand the implications of the misconception that safety criteria cannot be predicted. Safety is the result of actions taken to eliminate unsafe acts and unsafe conditions. Safety can be predictable, given the appropriate conceptual model, specifically one that addresses both organizational and worker performance regarding safety — more specifically, the

examination of safety performance by addressing safety climate behaviorally, both at an organizational level as well as the individual level.

Safety performance must be conceptualized at a macro level (culture of safety) but can only be operationalized at a micro level (climate of safety). Because safety performance may be used to describe these two different phenomena — an organizational measure of safety outcomes as well as safety-related behaviors of the worker — any responsible job safety analysis (JSA) must hold safety performance behaviors and safety outcomes as separate and distinct.

Safety outcomes are tangible events or results, such as accidents, injuries and fatalities, whereas safety performance



Furthermore, OSHA offers the necessary tools and resources and is an easily accessible “clearinghouse” for not only construction industry standards and initiatives, but also scalable resources that can be utilized by those macro- and mezzo-level groups and individuals charged with creating and sustaining both a culture and climate of safety.

OSHA does not take behavioral safety lightly. Instead, OSHA establishes and updates behavioral-focused industry practices as it continues to recognize and publish the importance of the need for:

“Ongoing measurement and feedback system with upstream activity measures that encourages positive change. Examples include the number of hazards reported or corrected, numbers of inspections, number of equipment checks, JSAs, pre-start-up reviews conducted, etc.

While it is always nice to know what the bottom line performance is, i.e., accident rates, overemphasis on these and using them to drive the system typically only drives accident reporting under the table. It is all too easy to manipulate accident rates, which will only result in risk issues remaining unresolved and a probability for more serious events to occur in the future.

Reinforcement, feedback, reassessment, mid-course corrections and on-going training are vital to sustaining continuous improvement.”

of the worker is best defined as the actions, perceptions or behaviors that workers exhibit.

A safety plan at all levels must take into account the broader forces (i.e., macro level) as well as a micro-level exploration, specifically that of the worker. As with any plan of action, there are both direct and indirect relationships leading to outcomes and behaviors.

Micro level, or that which is worker-related and psychological in nature, reflects a strong direct link to safety knowledge as related to safety performance. This goes far beyond simply understanding how to perform work safely; it has greater implications, as this knowledge includes recognition of who is in charge of worker safety on the construction worksite.

Source: OSHA Safety and Health Systems eTool/Module 4: Creating a Safety Culture.

Safety does not occur in a vacuum and, as such, no single entity can be expected to create, implement, sustain and reinforce the complexities of a safety climate. Even a shared vision is not enough on the part of upper management, as a vision without action does not keep the worker safe. Instead, defining specific roles and responsibilities for safety is imperative, and while each executive, manager, supervisor and foreman should not be expected to understand or perform the roles of his or her superiors, an understanding of how overall safety will be managed by all the entities in charge is integral for the creation of a climate of safety to function. **D**



Joshua Estrin received his M.S. from Columbia University School of Social Work in health/mental health and disabilities in 2000. In 2003, he became a licensed clinical social worker in Florida where he practiced as a bilingual clinician. Estrin was also an adjunct professor at

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facilitation and mediation, he works in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors helping other companies and organizations in their objectives to attain and maintain alignment among the three key elements of an effective and efficient workplace: business strategies, organizational designs and human dynamics.

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