

Safety Climate vs Safety Culture – Does it Really Matter?

Who really cares about climate or culture? Does it really matter? How on earth is it even related to safety? Why should I even invest in these things?

These are all really valid questions, which many of our clients have asked over time.

An organisation's climate and culture strongly predicts its health and success. Climate and culture has been in public and corporate interests since the 1970s, with researchers and organisations alike noting the impact of climate and culture on profitability, performance, staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention of talent, and the basic functioning of an organisation. Safety culture is a substrate of broader organisational culture, so in essence, if your organisation's culture is not very healthy, then it is unlikely that your safety culture will be either.

Despite this, many climate and culture change efforts go nowhere, and climate and culture stagnates. Unfortunately, when this occurs it feeds back into the questions and doubts that we mentioned above. If your organisation is going to invest time and money into climate and culture transformation, you want to know that it is going to work. This is never more so the case when it comes to safety culture – where the risk of a poor culture can be serious injury or death, and significant impact on your bottom line.

SAFETY CLIMATE OR SAFETY CULTURE?

Over time culture and climate have come to be used interchangeably in organisational lexicon. Although they have quite distinctly different meanings, they are complementary to one another. Both play an important role in an organisation's overall success. Organisational climate describes the more 'surface' or 'visible' beliefs and attitudes of **individuals** toward the organisation that influence their behaviour in the workplace. In a safety context, climate has been described as *what we say* and *what we do around here*. It sums up how people perceive and regard the importance of safety, how they talk about safety, and whether they are likely to act in a manner that promotes safe behaviour. However, what we say and what we actually do are not always one and the same! People can espouse a whole bunch of beliefs and attitudes toward safety, but not necessarily act in accordance with these. For instance, many people say to us "sure safety is important to me" while also using their mobile phone while driving, or speeding to the next job because they are going to be late. You know what we are talking about!

An organisation's culture, on the other hand, refers to the deeper level of *how we do things around here*, and more importantly, reflects the group beliefs, attitudes, values, norms, and so on, that merge to form a **collective** set of beliefs, attitudes, values, norms and behaviours in the organisation. Culture is what gives your organisation its identity and forms the basis for how you operate and **do** things. Culture is in evidence when you hear people in your organisation say, "This is the way we do things around here" and "We look after each other in this place". Your organisation may have one pronounced culture, but chances are that if your organisation is large or made up of several units or groups, then you will have cultures within cultures – what we call subcultures. In a safety context, this could prove challenging, as you may need to investigate the collective beliefs, attitudes, values, etc. of each subculture for a genuine transformation and truly sustainable positive safety culture.

The distinction between the two terms, while subtle, is important. If you can influence the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of **individuals**, then you have a greater chance of influencing the **collective** – that is, your overall culture. The greater the number of individuals who believe in and fight the safety cause, the stronger and more embedded your safety culture. On the other hand, safety climate can be used as a measure of culture to a degree, and if you know exactly what you are measuring then you have a greater likelihood of successfully targeting those factors that are adversely impacting your climate and culture.

WHY MEASURE SAFETY CLIMATE AND CULTURE?

Continuous improvement in health, safety and environmental performance requires developing and monitoring of safety technology, systems and competent people. However, sound practices and procedures are not sufficient alone, and often lead to a safety *performance plateau* with further improvements difficult to achieve. Maintaining the prevailing safety culture does not usually enable the organisation to move safety performance off this plateau. The immediate benefit of assessing and profiling safety climate and culture is the action planning that a profile allows. A positive safety climate or culture provides an environment where continuous improvements in safety performance can be made.

HOW TO MEASURE AND REVIEW YOUR CURRENT CLIMATE AND CULTURE?

Safety climate provides a tangible indicator of the underlying culture, and consequently, can be used as a measure of safety culture. There are two main ways to measure safety culture and climate. One method is by using numbers and statistics, commonly called a quantitative approach to measurement. The second method is by using structured and proven processes to ask people their opinions and to share their stories and experiences. This is commonly called a qualitative approach to measurement. Both are helpful and provide useful and complementary information.

Commonly used quantitative measures of safety provide information about an organisation's safety culture and climate. For example, how many lag indicators and lead indicators an organisation uses, and what these indicators are, tells us something about the safety culture and climate. Typically lag indicators provide information about what has happened in the past (e.g., number of lost time injuries within a certain timeframe) and lead indicators provide information which helps to predict how effective an organisation's safety program is and how it could be improved (e.g., number of times a supervisor identifies and positively rewards safe behaviour on the job within a certain timeframe). At Soteris, we assist our clients to design, implement and monitor measures of positive safety culture and climate. We are particularly interested in highlighting and recognising what is working well. We also offer proactive and practical advice for improvement where needed. [Click here to find out more about measuring and celebrating zero harm.](#) (hyperlink)

Another type of quantitative measure is a climate survey tool, which measures the various factors that make up a positive safety culture and climate. These tools are useful in providing information about the current status of your organisation's safety culture and climate. They are also used to measure the success of targeted safety improvement programs. Organisations undertake the survey prior to the commencement of their safety improvement program, and at nominated points in time during and after the program implementation. The difference between the survey results at the before, during and after intervals provides an indication of the success of the program.

Organisations may choose to use a licensed climate survey tool, which has been based on rigorous research and has been previously validated. For example, one of the licensed tools that we use has 40 questions, which assess 8 major factors of safety climate. Some organisations also choose to use

How healthy is your organisation's safety climate and culture?

what we would call a pulse survey. A pulse survey is a point-in-time assessment tailored specifically to measure the critical aspects of climate and culture for that organisation. Essentially it “takes your pulse” in relation to safety culture and climate. A pulse survey doesn’t have the scientific rigour of a published or licensed climate survey tool, however offers fast feedback about targeted safety factors. Soteris is able to assist you by administering and reporting on the results of licensed safety climate surveys. At Soteris we also use our extensive experience in survey design and analysis to develop, administer and report on pulse surveys targeting particular aspects of your safety climate and culture.

Last but by no means least, are the various qualitative methods available to assess safety climate and culture. These include site visits, interviews, focus groups, and event/incident review. Typically, many organisations don’t go beyond surveys and safety indicators when they measure safety culture and climate. However, qualitative measures uncover the meaning behind the numbers and offer specific guidance about the best ways in which to maintain existing strengths and improve where needed. Qualitative methods are commonly used to understand and shape both organisational culture and safety culture. It is very difficult to change culture unless you first understand it, and the best way to understand it is through qualitative methods. Qualitative methods have the added bonus of promoting dialogue, engagement, and shared problem solving, all of which contribute positively to an organisation’s safety culture.

At Soteris, one of our key areas of expertise is in combining proven, highly effective quantitative and qualitative measures to provide you with an accurate and informed assessment of your existing safety systems, culture and climate. We believe in the value and importance of complementing quantitative assessment with qualitative assessment. In particular we offer a specifically developed interview program, which incorporates narrative analysis and incident/event recall to gain an understanding of how mature your current organisational and safety culture is. By using our experienced registered psychologists to conduct our interviews and focus groups, individual staff members are reassured that their individual contributions will remain confidential, and we report only on trends and themes without revealing the identity of any one person. We have found that we receive very honest and open feedback, which is of enormous benefit to the organisations we work with. Our tailored analysis identifies and recognises the positive aspects of your safety culture and provides you with practical and proactive ways to improve where needed.