



Safety Culture Defence: Committed Safety Leadership

This safety moment describes an important cultural defence, Committed Safety Leadership, and provides questions to promote team reflection and discussion.

Safety culture overview

The CER has endorsed the following safety culture definition:

Safety culture means “the attitudes, values, norms and beliefs, which a particular group of people shares with respect to risk and safety”.¹

Safety culture is an intangible construct with a powerful impact on organizational safety outcomes. Because of its unobservable nature, it is useful to represent safety culture through a framework. A framework helps illustrate what safety culture looks like within an organization, and subsequently, can help organizations detect what areas of their organizational functioning are supporting vs detracting from a positive safety culture.

The CER's safety culture framework acts as an example for industry of safety culture in a high-risk organization. The CER's framework depicts eight cultural dimensions (i.e., eight elements of organizational functioning) that support vs detract from a positive safety culture. There are four negative dimensions identified that act as threats to existing organizational safety defences: production pressure, complacency, normalization of deviance, and tolerance of inadequate systems and resources. On the other hand, there are four positive dimensions identified that act as cultural defences against these threats: committed safety leadership, vigilance, empowerment and accountability, and resiliency.

These dimensions are shown in the table below:

Negative dimensions (Cultural threats)	Positive dimensions (Cultural defences)
Production pressure	Committed safety leadership
Complacency	Vigilance
Normalization of deviance	Empowerment and accountability
Tolerance of inadequate systems and resources	Resiliency

¹ Mearns, K., Flin, R., Gordon, R. & Fleming, M. (1998). Measuring safety culture in the offshore oil industry. *Work and Stress*, 12(3), 238-254. “Safety” includes safety of workers and the public, process safety, operational safety, facility integrity, security and environmental protection.

Cultural Defence No. 1: Committed Safety Leadership

Safety is an organizational value demonstrated by a genuine leadership commitment and expressed by providing adequate resources, systems, and rewards to serve this end. Senior leaders recognize that commercial goals and safety can come into conflict and take measures to identify and resolve such conflicts in a transparent and effective manner. The strategic business importance of safety is reflected in the company's strategy, business plans and processes.

Key characteristics of committed safety leadership (Attributes)

- Direct participation of leaders in the safety system
- Leader inquiry and understanding of threats
- Leaders taking action to address hazards and deficiencies in the system
- Leaders valuing safety efforts and expertise

Examples of committed safety leadership (Descriptors)

1. The management system specifies an accountable officer (AO) with authority and control for human and financial resources.
2. The management system specifies direct reporting lines between key safety personnel² and the AO.
3. Leaders attend safety training and participate in safety reviews.
4. Timely action is taken to mitigate hazards even when it is costly to do so.
5. Safety positions are accorded equal status, authority, and salary to other operational assignments.
6. Leaders are willing to stand up for safety even when production is impacted.
7. Safety is considered at high-level meetings on a regular basis (not only after an incident).

Questions for team discussion

1. How do our organizational leaders nurture and demonstrate committed safety leadership?
2. What more can we/they do to nurture and demonstrate committed safety leadership?

For more information and useful tools related to safety culture, visit the CER's Safety Culture Learning Portal at www.cer-rec.gc.ca.

² Key safety personnel refer to people with responsibility for and/or knowledge of the health of the safety system. This would include those responsible for development and implementation of any part of the management system, and those who monitor, evaluate, and identify remedies for performance issues related to the entire safety system.