

Leadership and Pathway to Safety Culture

By Goran Prvulovic, MOCcHlth&Saf

Safety Culture

Safety Culture is indeed a tough subject. In fact the mere term culture from the organisational perspective is still a term for which there is no unilateral agreement. This subject has been extensively covered by work of prominent organisational culture thought leaders such as Schein, Weick, Reason, Hudson, Hopkins and others. Historically, there have been varying views on the meaning of safety culture. It was often described as a summary of individual and collective values, assembly of characteristics and attitudes, collective mindfulness or shared basic assumptions. Most of those ideas currently converge around one central point which describes safety culture as a set of accepted collective practices within the organisational environment or as Schein put it so eloquently “the way we do things around here” (Schein 1992).

Both, Reason and Hopkins align in the view that previously accepted description of safety culture being about individual and collective values or shared assumptions is not as useful as viewing the culture as collective practices, mostly as practices can over time influence individual values which are notoriously difficult to change. The notion is that by changing organisational practices, the culture can be modified much more readily and efficiently (Hopkins 2002).

From the safety practitioner’s point of view, this is something of a revelation. The idea makes perfect sense. Why attempt to change people values when the only thing we really need to in order to change culture is to focus on what we actually do in organisations. If we change practices, we will change cultures and also in time, individual values. This is where things start to become difficult. The idea about collective organisational practices is more than 25 years old, yet it does not appear to have inflicted much change or at least not a widespread transformation in organisational behaviour. This is an interesting development and in order to understand the issues, the idea needs to be well understood and examined.

The concept of collective practices developing and influencing organisational safety culture is based on a fundamental ownership of safety amongst the most senior decision makers, especially on their own behaviours and practices. Responsibility, accountability and ownership for safety culture rests firmly with senior management as a building block of not only the safety culture but the organisational culture as a whole. Schein, Reason and Hopkins are clearly articulating this thinking with Hopkins describing this as: “...it is the leaders who determine how the organisation functions and it is their decision-making which determines whether an organisation exhibits the practices which go to make up a “culture of safety” (Hopkins, 2002). This clearly identifies leadership at the senior organisational levels as the key creating factor of safety culture and this view is a mainstream thinking in safety profession today, as it is in modern concepts of management and organisational behaviour.

At this point in this discussion, it is paramount to highlight the difference between leadership commitment in context of verbalisation of safety and observable leadership behaviours and practices displayed in daily business conduct, especially in decision making. Actual observable practices of senior leaders are those that fundamentally underpin the verbal commitment, set the importance of safety in the organisation and in turn create a culture of safety in a true sense of it being ‘*the way we do things around here*’. Those

practices are specifically around what senior leaders in organisation emphasise on in their daily conduct, what they make important through verbal and body language, what they routinely question, measure, recognise, reward and see as fundamental factor in promotions and especially how they make operational decision in terms of making safety an ultimate priority at the sharp end.

The real question steaming from this discussion is, can a good safety culture exist on the organisational level without those practices of the most senior leaders? In the author's view and in the view of many senior safety professionals, it is highly unlikely, at least not in the way safety culture is generally being perceived, as a stable, caring, mindful, sustainable and consistent display of expected behaviours and practices, especially at operational, work execution levels.

The reasons for this are simple. Practices of the most senior leaders are those things they do that sets what is really important in the organisation, behind the fanfare and formal advertised position, organisational language or fancy slogans. Those observable practices and behaviours of senior leaders are consciously and unconsciously modelled and conformed to by senior operational managers and are in the same way relayed and cascaded further down the stratum levels to their direct reports, amplifying and modifying along the way until they reach workers at the sharp end. This often causes big differences between work execution methods and professed organisational values, with a shock and surprise effects at the top of the organisation when major accidents occur.

Contrary to some behaviourally based safety approaches, tendency and motivation to behave safely is deeply embedded in human psyche. Apart from appropriate skillset, alignment of professed organisational values with the actual operational practices of the leadership team is the most critical element in what people really need to be able to work safely and be mindful of risks. Achieving this alignment is most effective method in achieving behavioural modification in the workplace from the safety perspective, far surpassing ability and effectiveness of any other behaviourally based safety program or method.

The ability of senior management and the leadership team to understand the impact of their own behaviours, practices and be aware of hidden subliminal messages often passed through verbal, written, oral and body language is fundamental for creation of the organisational safety culture. Even more so, the ability to show courage, willingness to change and adjust those practices at the most senior levels is absolutely essential for taking the organisation on the journey of cultural improvement. It is the only way to build and sustain successful safety culture.

This paper will not discuss the reasons why some organisations and their leadership team take different approaches which distance top leadership and management layers from safety or pursue strategies that are based on beliefs that safety culture can be grown at lower organisational levels and can flow from bottom up. Those reasons are worthy of separate discussion however there is one critical factor which needs to be noted because it exists in various forms in all organisations and alongside observable behaviours and practices of senior leadership, it is yet another critical indicator of the particular stage in organisational cultural development. This is a specific view each organisation has of people, their role in accident causation and development of safety culture.

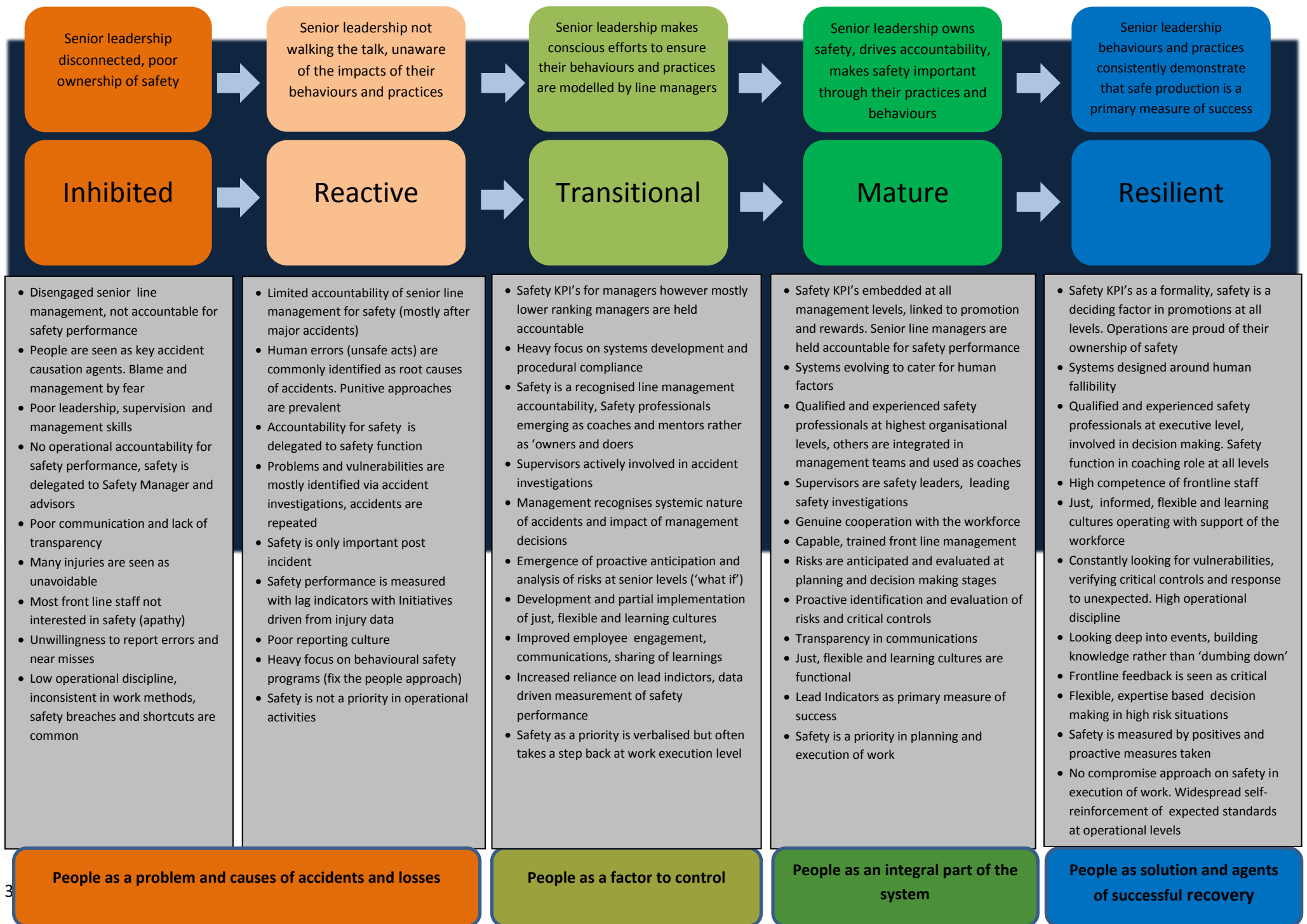


Figure 1 – Pathway Leadership Safety Culture Model

The view of people, which is often consciously and unconsciously driven and supported from the senior organisational levels, differs across organisations and industries and ranges from a viewpoint that people are key problem which needs to be 'fixed' and controlled to people being an integral part of the system and finally to a view that people are the solution and agents of successful recovery. There is a clear correlation of those viewpoints to individual stages of organisational cultural maturity. Each of those stages is unique and clearly identifiable from a variety of observable indicators and characteristics.

Leadership Safety Culture Model

There have been many concepts and models designed and used over the years to describe different stages of organisational safety culture and journey to '*safety excellence*'. Two most distinct models still in use today are DuPont Bradley curve and Hudson evolutionary model. Each of them has served as a valuable step in progression of safety efforts worldwide with some distinct differences of note (Hudson 2000),(DuPont 2016).

Bradley curve describes four stages in this journey, beginning with a reactive stage where safety is practiced '*by natural instinct*' where people are not taking responsibility, and progressing towards the final stage where safety is owned at front line levels and employees feel '*responsible for themselves and others*'. This model makes two critical assumptions. First one is that reactive stage is the beginning of organisational journey and no other stages exist which are lower on this evolutionary scale. The second one is around people and their '*natural instincts*'. By placing human natural instincts at the lowest end, this model points out to an inherent unsafe nature of humans if they are not controlled or otherwise motivated. In author's experience, this is hardly the case; people are generally very responsible, calculated risk takers by design, have strong natural sense of self preservation and ability to work safely which needs to be promoted and enhanced, not suppressed thought control and restriction. There are many industrial examples worldwide where human '*natural instinct*' and use of heuristics in rapid decision making has saved the day. It is the strange thing, we have developed the technology to try and eliminate or control the human condition and our imperfect design but are at the same time relying on human natural instinct to control those systems, 'feel' things system cannot, adapt to unexpected and bring them back to normal from malfunction. When we consider this, it is difficult to see human natural instinct as unsafe.

Essentially Bradley's curve passes the message that people are a problem to control, and it places the crucial emphasis on ownership of safety and responsibility on individuals, specifically on those on sharp end. It does not mention criticality of leadership, their own accountability or influence of their practices on the organisational safety culture. On the other hand Hudson model is much more comprehensive. It acknowledges importance of top – down approach in driving safety culture and correlation between management beliefs, their allocation of priorities and organisational ability to change.

The Pathway model proposed in this paper is a leadership safety culture model. It is intended as yet another step forward in a quest towards providing pathways for organisational cultural

development. Amongst other traits typical for each phase in organisational cultural development, the model is based on following key characteristic and principles:

- **Behaviours and practices** of the most senior leaders are key factor in defining the entire organisational behaviour towards safety by directly and critically influencing the behaviours and practices at all stratum levels, defining what is really important in the organisation, setting acceptable norms and creating a culture of safety
- **Ownership and accountability** for safety performance belongs with the line management. How this is allocated and applied in an organisation is a typical characteristic of the particular stage on the journey of developing a safety culture. It speaks volumes of how the organisation understands modern principles in safety and risk management, organisational development and business improvement. It indicates risk savviness and organisational maturity of the leadership team and their real commitment to improve safety performance. Consistent ownership of safety and good safety performance cannot sustainably exist at the sharp end without the strong ownership of safety at the most senior management levels and willingness to hold accountable those who are entrusted with planning, scheduling, resourcing and executing operational activities
- **View of people** and their role in safety is a defining component of the organisational safety culture and each step on the journey towards culture of resilience. Particular view of people significantly influences the entire approach of health and safety management starting with the content and 'flavour' of safety management systems, allocation of responsibilities, practices of management and supervision and execution of work.

Pathway safety culture model is not an evolutionary model. To call it as such would be to potentially imply some kind of autogenous, spontaneous or semi spontaneous cultural change. This is important in the context of understanding past efforts of some organisations to change culture from bottom – up via various safety interventions aimed at changing behaviours of workers without changing practices of the senior leadership team. Safety culture does not evolve on its own or develops from bottom up with 'support' from above. This is the critical mistake from the past. Instead, in order to be created enhanced or changed, safety culture requires conscious, systematic and consistent effort from the top of the organisation downwards, backed up with the consistent alignment of safety values with actual demonstrated practices, the same as production or any other type of culture.

Pathway model is a leadership and a change management model describing critical observable organisational behaviours present in each cultural stage, as well as direction and practical improvements organisation can undertake to continue on the journey. This journey and appetite for continuous improvement is entirely a conscious choice of the senior decision makers. The model does not suggest that each organisation begins the journey from the same starting point. There are organisations which are in reactive or transitional space even at their conception and commencement of business activities, as are those which evolve to mature stage and slip back into lower stages, often through change in leadership and structure. Journey in this space is a very

dynamic affair and almost completely connected to quality, resolve and changes in top organisational leadership.

Some important characteristics of each stage in the Leadership Safety Culture Model are:

- **Inhibited** – this stage is marked not by a lack of care as suggested sometimes in other models, but rather by significant disengagement at the senior leadership levels from safety accountabilities, with poor ownership of safety where the general view is that safety is responsibility of the workers and safety professionals. At this stage senior decision makers do not drive accountability for safety with line managers and people are seen as main causes of accidents, with widespread punitive actions being taken. Human factors are poorly understood and managing by fear and blame is common. Reporting culture is reduced to events which cannot be hidden, learning culture is in infancy, apathy towards safety at the sharp end is prevalent and operational activities are undertaken with little planning or anticipation of risks. Repeats of similar events are common. Many organisations begin their journey in this space but some stay in this space for a very long time
- **Reactive** – in this space behaviour and leadership practices at the top levels are often paradoxical in nature. Senior leadership understand the expectation to make safety important, they verbalise it but their actual decision making actions and practices are inconsistent and often contrary to professed values. They believe this verbalisation of safety is enough to set the scene of what is important and are not aware of the negative influence of their behaviours and practices to stratum levels below. At this stage in development line managers are generally not accountable for safety performance unless in rare cases of significant events. Ownership of safety is generally delegated to safety function and safety only becomes important after major incidents occur. Incident response often consists of mass display of ‘commitment’ by gathering important managers, making promises and pledges with going back to old ways soon afterwards. Human action is routinely identified as a ‘root cause’ in accident investigation with almost an obsessive views of individual human behaviour, driving in some cases multiple applications of behaviourally based safety approaches aimed to ‘fix people’
- **Transitional** – stage is a very important stage in development for any organisation striving towards reliability and safety excellence. It is a game changer as it means the leadership team is not only starting to be self-aware of the influence their practices have on stratum levels and the messages they send, they are also starting to focus on ensuring those messages are interpreted correctly and modelled by senior line managers. Transference of the same messages to lower ranking managers and supervisors is often inconsistent. Ownership and accountability for safety performance is shifting towards line management where it rightfully belongs and safety professionals are starting to be used as ‘thinkers’ and coaches to management structures rather than ‘doers’. This stage is marked by strong number and incident rates focused approach to management of safety, heavy reliance on compliance in applications of systems and processes as well as emergence of learning, just, and flexible cultures. The value of people engagement is recognised however people are seen as a factor to control in terms of making systems functional. Punitive approaches for

noncompliance are common however the understanding in human fallibility is also emerging and influencing outcomes of some accident investigations. Some flexibility exists for users at sharp end to change systems of work. It is important to note that some organisations stay in this space for a very long time, drifting in and out between reactive and transitional stages. The step towards mature culture is probably the most difficult one to make and it requires serious commitment from mature and trained leadership

- **Mature** – at this particular stage on the journey, senior leadership is of particular quality and very self-aware. They are mindful of safety implications resulting from their decision making processes, they drive strong accountability with line management and are modelling the importance of safety through their own behaviour. They hold safety as a key factor in promotions and allocation of rewards, maintain frequent visibility at sharp end and ensure that messages they pass are consistent and are being followed by local leaders. Safety professionals are firmly accepted as coaches and mentors with strong presence at executive levels. Supervisors are recognised as a critical role and are trained, supported and expected to own safety performance of their teams. Focus on systems and processes are strong however they are increasingly being developed to accommodate human condition rather than the other way around. People are seen as an integral and critical part of the system with corresponding cooperation and involvement. Risks are routinely assessed in decision making with increased focus on catastrophic risk management and departure from previous number driven, high frequency low consequence events.
- **Resilient** – stage is marked by mature leadership which has a high degree of understanding how organisational safety culture is formed, enhanced and sustained. This leadership is able to consistently display behaviours and practices which are completely in line with professed values and organisational advertised position and which demonstrate that safety results are not only valued but are a primary measure of successful production. Senior leadership does this by paying systematic attention to safety in everything they do; it is simply a way of life and ‘modus operandi’. In this final stage, accountability for safety by line management is a basic paradigm and it is the one demonstrated with pride. Lines between management and workers are blurred; at least when it comes to safety and the front line staff is not an owner but rather a partner in the ownership of culture. Leadership and promotions are defined and obtained by safety related behaviours, practices and achievements. Organisation is fully aware at all levels that just by reaching this state, organisation has not reached a final destination. Its journey and the real task of maintaining constant state of awareness, probing the existing controls and looking for unexpected has only just begun

How to affect the change

Embarking on a journey of cultural change is not a simple process for any leadership team and it usually requires an external assistance and coaching. As a guide, the following are essential steps and phases which need to be taken and experienced by top leadership team:

- **Realisation** – coming to terms with reality and a need to change can be very confronting and challenging, even amongst the most experienced executives. There has to be a process of internal justification which needs to be driven from the moral standpoint more so than anything else, despite the fact that safety is indeed a good business
- **Desire and alignment** – Just because there is a need to change does not mean that all members of the executive team will be ready to embark on it. Alignment at this level is absolutely paramount for success as many attempts to affect significant organisational changes have failed precisely for this reason. Alignment is a job for a CEO who is the main owner of the whole organisational culture and a key change agent in this process. Executives are either on, or off the bus that CEO is driving forward, it is usually as simple as that.
- **Assessing ability** – Senior leadership team needs to be objective and realistic of what they are trying to achieve, what resources they need and what key strengths they are missing and need to introduce to ensure successful change. Very few organisations are ready and able to embark on this journey from the emerging or reactive stage completely on their own. They usually require specialised, often external resources and internal ‘champions’ or project leads. Taking the organisation on the journey unprepared can be very damaging and disheartening for everyone
- **Scope** – Define scope, resources and specific steps which need to be taken to reach next stage on the cultural journey. Aim to achieve a step change, cultural change can take a significant amount of time, sometimes years. Ensure that a change plan is part of the long term organisational strategy and it is in line with SMART methodology (Doran, 1981)
- **Enrolment** – Once on board, senior leadership team needs to bring on board the rest of the business, starting with their direct reports and penetrating all stratum levels
- **Action** – Start the implementation of the change and involve employees at all levels. Develop short and long term business strategy around the cultural change. Maintain momentum and focus on implementation over time with regular review meetings

Changing an organisational culture is hard business, it takes huge amounts of energy and time however returns are increased profitability, lower risk profile and improved health and safety of employees and this really should be all the motivation any leadership team needs to take their organisation on the journey of improving the safety culture.

As a final word, context and principles explained in this paper should not be interpreted as overstatement of the roles of senior management in creation of safety culture. This is a simple representation of the reality we are all facing as we move further into the 21st century. Organisations are made and controlled by people and so are norms and accepted behaviours within them. There is no value in believing that safety culture can be delegated to lower stratum levels,

travel upwards from there or exist outside of the overall organisational culture applied to productive or financial activities. Safety culture and its development is a fundamental leadership function and responsibility. Behaviours and practices at the top of the organisations, especially in operational decision making, reward and recognition strategies and accountability of line managers are true representations of what is really important and what safety culture really is – ‘the way we actually do business around here’.

References

DuPont (2016). "Dupont Bradley Curve." 2016, from <http://www.dupont.com.au/products-and-services/consulting-services-process-technologies/brands/sustainable-solutions/sub-brands/operational-risk-management/uses-and-applications/bradley-curve.html>.

Hopkins, A. (2002) Safety Culture, Mindfulness and Safe Behaviour:Converging Ideas? 43

Hudson, P. P. (2000) Safety Management and Safety Culture - The Long, Hard and Winding Road. 24

Schein, E. (1992). Organisational Culture and leadership. san Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Doran, G. T. (1981). "There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives", Management Review, Vol. 70, Issue 11, pp. 35-36.

© Copyright 2016. RiskWise Solutions All rights reserved