



## DECODING SAFETY CULTURE Myth or Reality?

By Robert Pater

**Our beliefs shape our focus and efforts, ultimately determining our outcomes. So, when it comes to safety culture, where do you stand? Have you, like me, encountered vigorous debates questioning the very existence of safety culture?**

### Robert Pater

Robert Pater, M.A., is managing director and founder of MoveSMART. Clients include Advan-Six, Amtrak, Arcelor-Mittal, BHP Billiton, BMW, Borg Warner, BP, Cummins, Domtar, DuPont, Hawaiian Airlines, HD Supply, Honda, Keolis, Kloeckner Metals, Marathon Oil, MSC Industrial Supply, Nissan, ONE Gas, Rio Tinto, United Airlines, U.S. Steel and West Rock. Pater is a professional member of ASSP's Columbia-Willamette Chapter.

**The deniers** who say there is no such thing as safety culture contend that it is a nothing-burger that academicians, consultants or soft-thinking theorists have imagined. Note that “safety culture” is not a new label. According to Cooper (2000), “The term ‘safety culture’ first made its appearance in the 1987 OECD Nuclear Agency report (INSAG, 1988) on the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.” One definition of safety culture is “the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization’s health and safety management” (Lee, 1996, as cited in NIOSH 2023).

The concept of safety culture extends beyond mere academic debate. Like all mindsets, embracing or rejecting it guides organizations toward diverse outcomes, like a path leading to very different destinations. Leaders who don’t perceive something as significant naturally won’t dedicate focus, efforts or financial resources toward enhancing it.

But a recent study extensively and rigorously analyzed safety culture, investigating 829 European companies across 29 countries over a 15-year period (Bautista-Bernal et al., 2024). This study evaluated the connection between safety culture and the safety and financial performance of those numerous—and statistically significant—companies.

The study authors began by acknowledging the aforementioned polarizing debate regarding the existence of safety culture. “There’s substantial critical discussion, criticism, and caveats around safety culture in the empirical space (e.g. what is safety culture, what variables form the construct, is it separate to or part of organizational culture, functionalist vs. interpretivist approaches and more)” (Bautista-Bernal et al., 2024).

### What Is Safety Culture?

Readers may have inferred my stance on the importance of enhancing safety culture from my initial remarks, or from my longstanding advocacy in spoken form and several articles. Such topics are often subject to bias, so to provide a clearer sense of where I’m coming from, here is some of my background:

- Undergraduate and graduate degrees in human factors and organizational psychology, complemented by more than 30 years of experience in the international arena primarily with large and multinational corporations across various industries.

- Working with companies with a wide array of safety performance, from exemplary aiming to

maintain high execution, to those struggling to find effective solutions, and many with average performance striving to exceed mediocrity.

- Engaged extensively with OSH leaders in both professional and confidential contexts, both in person and online.

Admittedly, my background doesn’t necessarily make my opinions more valid than anyone else’s. However, I see *Professional Safety* as a venue that fosters reflection and dialogue. In my experience, I have found that for companies to achieve significant improvements in safety performance, they must not only impart necessary high-level skills (e.g., directing attention, risk assessment, decision-making, high-level specific task-related skills such as manual handling, attention control, reducing and responding to safety resistance), but also actively encourage and reinforce the application of these skills across all levels of the organization through leadership messaging, congruent staffing, appropriate policies and procedures, and reinforcement, among others.

This approach goes beyond simplistic directives (e.g., “Just get it done”) that often result in people reverting to old habits (e.g., “Just do things the way we have always done them”). Crucial elements of safety culture encompass the extent to which these skills are decided upon and disseminated and the level of encouragement and reinforcement provided to apply them. Too often, disappointing results from otherwise promising interventions appear to stem from inadequate and inconsistent support for the actual use of such methods—a gaping hole in safety culture where an organization is too front-end loaded.

### Three Things (I Think) I Know: My ABCs

**A. My perspective is that both sides of the differing opinions on safety culture present valid points.** Yes, safety culture is inherently challenging to precisely define; it is intangible and subjective, not quantifiable by universal agreement, leading to as many interpretations as there are different leaders. Every system, whether a family unit or a company, operates on a set of explicit expectations and rules, complemented by implicit messages that dictate how things are expected to be done. Together, these expressed and implied expectations and guidelines shape an organization’s overall culture.

“Culture” is the unseen yet very tangible reality that suffuses and surrounds all personal and professional relationships in every family and in each organization, as well as the variations delineating different work shifts and business units.

But objectively measuring safety culture is a complex, if not insurmountable, challenge at this time. Still, I urge leaders to avoid the trap of equating what is easily measurable with what is true. For instance, I have heard several safety professionals adamantly argue that if something cannot be measured, then it does not exist. This stance can cascade into writing off working on consistently improving safety culture due to a lack of universally accepted objective metrics. Setting a range of leading indicators can help with this situation (see my previous articles for suggested strategies).

However, the complexity of documenting or measuring safety culture does not diminish its reality. Bautista-Bernal et al. (2024) recognize that due to the multidimensional character of safety culture, “there is no consensus about the concept and its measurement.” But as W. Edwards Deming (2000) has said, “The most important things cannot be measured.” This statement underscores the potential significance of safety culture beyond its quantifiability.

The absence of reliable objective measures does not invalidate the existence of safety culture. Attributes such as love, friendship, loyalty, trust and open-mindedness defy direct measurement despite being central to our personal lives. Yet, their significance as influential forces in shaping relationships and actions is widely recognized, including impact on communications, teamwork and creativity.

Similarly, the effectiveness of safety and risk management protocols hinges on our ability to acknowledge and address hazards, many of which are not immediately obvious. Not seeing or giving sufficient credence to risks, especially those not immediately visible or below the threshold of conscious awareness, does not negate their existence or potential impact on outcomes. To dismiss such dangers is akin to shutting one’s eyes in the midst of danger, significantly reducing the ability to protect oneself effectively. Just because you can no longer see the wolf charging at you does not mean you are no longer in danger of its bite.

It brings to mind a note I found in a UV light sanitizer I purchased, which read, “The invisible enemy is always the most dangerous,” presumably referring to microorganisms posing potential immediate or future danger. Consider the risks posed by invisible factors such as radiation, odorless gas emissions, ultrasonic sound vibrations or the subtle yet impactful effects of, for example, hypertension—also called “the invisible killer.” Research has shown that sleep disorders have a considerable impact on cognitive function (which can greatly impact safety), immune response and overall health. And consider strains and sprains—the leading cause of compensable lost-time injuries over many studies and numerous years—where seemingly minor exposures to adverse conditions can cumulatively build toward significant wear and tear, hampered performance and eventually debilitating problems that culminate in substantial pain and costs. These examples

underscore the critical importance of addressing the invisible aspects of safety, emphasizing that the unseen can profoundly influence both individual well-being and organizational safety and health.

**B. I don’t see safety culture as an isolated or discrete entity.** Rather, it is an integral, essential subset of an organization’s overarching culture. This broader culture encompasses the practices and principles that guide how a company operates—what it professes to value versus its actual actions, including any discrepancies between the two. This includes:

- the differences between official policies and those tacitly understood practices
- what behaviors are rewarded versus overlooked
- the focal points of leadership attention as opposed to areas that are glossed over
- the challenges we choose to actively confront versus those we are resigned to accepting

This perspective aligns with Bautista-Bernal et al. (2024), who underscore the notion that safety culture is deeply embedded within and reflective of the broader cultural and operational dynamics of an organization: “Safety culture cannot be disassociated from the general organizational culture of the company.”

**C. Like overlapping elements in a Venn diagram, safety culture is deeply intertwined with productivity, performance, customer service, and the morale, satisfaction and engagement of workers.** These elements together comprise the operational framework of a company, defining the messages conveyed to both its employees and customers. This framework influences the daily focus of leadership, shaping their perceptions and impacting their decision-making, which ultimately guides the organization’s direction during periods of stress or crisis.

I have specifically found that the perspectives and beliefs of organization leaders about their colleagues—encompassing those they directly manage, those they interact with less frequently, and even those they seldom or never meet—are key factors in a company’s safety culture. Although not overtly observable or quantifiable, these beliefs guide leaders’ focus, shape their perceptions, influence their decision-making and ultimately dictate their actions. This complex, often below-the-surface syllogism from beliefs to thought to action is not confined to top executives; the attitudes and behaviors of mid-level managers and frontline staff also contribute essential pieces to the broader safety culture puzzle. Want to upgrade safety culture? It is essential to figure out how to actually elevate belief structures around safety and overall relationships from an organization’s top to bottom. It will not happen overnight, but it is highly doable.

### **Safety Culture Impact on Business Performance**

Culture and performance are fundamentally intertwined within an organization. Specifically, safety culture, safety performance and overall business success share a positive relationship over the medium to long term. It may be possible for a little

Objectively measuring safety culture is a complex, if not insurmountable, challenge at this time.

Continue to push the envelope toward positive change in underlying safety culture and overall safety performance.

while to compromise standards, under-staff without respite and otherwise make safety less of a priority while still reaping profits; but in my experience this is not sustainable.

I have yet to see a company with an excellent safety culture that performed poorly in its overall main business mission over time. Conversely, I have not come across an organization that exhibited ongoing high-flying fiscal strength that had poor or even less-than-middling safety performance and culture.

The highest functioning organizations I've closely worked with don't see and message safety as the number-one priority, which would imply other organizational priorities as number-two or number-three priorities, and so forth. Rather, they see and message safety as essential, on par with productivity and morale—intrinsically linked, but neither at a higher nor lower level.

I recall working for many years with a Fortune 500 company that had a diverse range of business units. At a conference for senior- and executive-level managers, the company's then-CEO said, "Growth through acquisition is a key strategy for us. And the first factor we assess when considering a company is their safety performance and culture. This approach has consistently offered us a reliable gauge of the company's true operational health, especially amidst potentially conflicting data or emerging issues."

This highlights the significance of how an organization's safety is intrinsically linked to, and reflects, overall performance. Bautista-Bernal et al. (2024) corroborate the CEO's insights. They found that "the better the safety performance, the better the firm's performance. . . . Both safety culture and safety performance, as measured by total injury rate, are positive predictors of a company's financial performance."

### Five Key Insights From the Study

When considering the results of Bautista-Bernal et al. (2024), there are five key insights that offer important takeaways for OSH.

#### 1) Safety Culture Is Tangible

In any organization, safety culture manifests through daily practices, employee engagement and visible commitment to safety and well-being from leadership.

#### 2) Safety Culture Is Multidimensional

The study authors found that, due to the multidimensional character of safety culture, "there is no consensus about the concept and



its measurement" (Bautista-Bernal et al., 2024). Safety culture is an underlying foundation, beyond specific or temporary decisions or actions, and the authors point out past tendencies to "confuse the concept of safety culture with that of safety climate." According to the authors, "safety climate refers to a situational element at a given time, whereas the construct of safety cul-

ture presents a multidimensional nature and is a concept in continuous interaction."

Unwritten rules often guide the subtleties of workplace culture, such as the importance of meticulous cleanliness, the unspoken commitment to quality or the collective responsibility for maintaining a safe environment. Awareness and adherence to these can significantly impact overall safety culture.

#### 3) Safety Culture Has Multiple Contributors

Bautista-Bernal et al. (2024) note that safety culture must be developed at the individual worker level as well as at the organizational level, incorporating multiple stakeholders and technological, organizational, human and external aspects.

#### 4) Safety Culture Is Unlikely to Have Quick Fixes

The authors note that safety culture is a relatively stable social construct that develops gradually over time. It is influenced by several enabling factors that do not define safety culture but create the conditions that enable its development:

- organizational factors (e.g., leader commitment, structures, systems, resources)
- group-level factors (e.g., cohesion, psychological safety)
- individual-level factors (e.g., safety-related knowledge, sense of control, individual commitment)

#### 5) Safety Culture Can Improve With Strong, Consistent Leadership & Practices

The creation or enhancement of safety culture is dependent upon the deliberate manipulation of organizational characteristics that impact safety management practices. Even the right continued minor adjustments can lead to significant improvements in safety culture.

### Questions for Further Consideration

What is your perspective on safety culture within your organization? Can you read its presence in daily operations? Are there mixed messages about safety that might be confusing? What are the unwritten rules that others know (or should know)? How do individuals throughout your organization

(e.g., executives, managers, supervisors, workers) view safety culture and safety leadership? How has safety culture been trending in your company (up, down, on a plateau)? How changeable or improvable is safety culture perceived to be? How optimistic or skeptical are individuals throughout the organization?

How adaptable and open to enhancement do you find safety culture to be? Have you discovered any practices or initiatives that genuinely contribute to improving safety culture? What actions have you taken that have led to meaningful changes, no matter how small they might seem? Have these been adequately communicated throughout your company, with successes and credit spread widely?

I encourage taking specific actions. Ask real questions and listen. Assess your organization's safety culture. Implement improvement initiatives detailed above. Share this and other articles. Engage with others within your company, with colleagues at ASSP meetings, on LinkedIn and virtually. Continue to push the envelope toward positive change in underlying safety culture and overall safety performance. **PSJ**

## References

- Bautista-Bernal, I., Quintano-García, C. & Marchant-Lara, M. (2024). Safety culture, safety performance and financial performance. A longitudinal study. *Safety Science*, 172, 106409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2023.106409>
- Cooper, M.D. (2000). Towards a model of safety culture. *Safety Science*, 36(2), 111-136. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-7535\(00\)00035-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-7535(00)00035-7)
- Deming, E. (2000). *The new economics for industry, government, education* (2nd ed.). MIT Press.
- NIOSH. (2023). Definition examples of safety culture and overlap with safety climate. [www.cdc.gov/niosh/learning/safetyculturehc/module-1/4.html](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/learning/safetyculturehc/module-1/4.html)
- Pater, R. (2008). Inspiring safety culture. *The Compass*.
- Pater, R. (2008, May 1). Next level safety cultures. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/articles/2008/05/next-level-safety-cultures.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2008, Oct. 1). Advancing ergonomic culture. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/articles/2008/10/advancing-ergonomic-culture.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2009, Jan. 1). Stepping up your safety culture. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/articles/2009/01/01/stepping-up-culture.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2009, Feb. 1). Developing a culture of alertness. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/Articles/2009/02/01/Developing-Culture-Alertness.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2009, May 1). The two ultimate culture questions. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/Articles/2009/05/01/The-Two-Ultimate-Culture-Questions.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2009, Sep. 1). Quantum cultural change. *Occupational Health and Safety*. [www.ohsonline.com/Articles/2009/09/01/Quantum-Cultural-Change.aspx](http://ohsonline.com/Articles/2009/09/01/Quantum-Cultural-Change.aspx)
- Pater, R. (2009, Dec. 1). Fueling cultural change. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/articles/2009/12/01/fueling-cultural-change.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2011, Oct.). Six safety leadership strategies: Energizing and sustaining safety performance and culture. *Professional Safety*, 56(10), 16-18.
- Pater, R. (2012). *Raising the level of cultural leadership* [Webinar].
- Pater, R. (2012, April). Cultural leadership: Stepping up the four levels, part 2. *Professional Safety* 57(4), 28-31.
- Pater, R. (2012, Nov.). Leading a concentric ergonomic culture. *Professional Safety*, 57(11), 23-26.
- Pater, R. (2013, Jan.). Keen-sighted leadership for culture change: Developing vertical and horizontal vision. *Professional Safety*, 58(1), 24-26.
- Pater, R. (2014, Jan.). Creating safety leadership, Part 1: Seven pitfalls to avoid. *Professional Safety*, 59(1), 19-21.
- Pater, R. (2014, Feb.). Creating safety leaders, Part 2: Building three levels of leadership. *Professional Safety*, 59(2), 22-24.
- Pater, R. (2014, March 1). The ins and outs of changing culture. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <http://ohsonline.com/articles/2014/03/01/the-ins-and-outs-of-changing-culture.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2015, Jan. 1). Elevate culture by releasing adhesions. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <https://bit.ly/45nvc1u>
- Pater, R. & Chapman, J. (2015, March). 9 internal keys for significant culture change. *Professional Safety*, 60(3), 24-25.
- Pater, R. (2015, April). Recasting leadership to change culture. *Professional Safety*, 60(4), 22-24.
- Pater, R. (2015, June). Superior leverage. *Professional Safety* 60(6), 30-32.
- Pater, R. (2015, June 1). Three essentials for elevating safety culture. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <https://ohsonline.com/Articles/2015/06/01/Three-Essentials-for-Elevating-Safety-Culture.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2015a, Sept.). Advanced culture change leadership. *Professional Safety*, 60(9), 24-26.
- Pater, R. (2015b, Sept.) Blueprints for successful cultural leadership. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <https://ohsonline.com/articles/2015/09/01/blueprints-for-successful-cultural-leadership.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2016, April 1). Recasting advanced cultural leadership. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <https://bit.ly/3osK9PV>
- Pater, R. (2017, March). Use leading indicators to derail ergonomic injuries, part 1: Preparation strategies. *Professional Safety*, 62(3), 22-24.
- Pater, R. (2017, April). Use leading indicators to derail ergonomic injuries, part 2: Set up and apply early indicators of success. *Professional Safety*, 62(4), 21-23.
- Pater, R. (2018, Sept.). Changing the hidden safety culture. *Professional Safety*, 63(9), 20-23.
- Pater, R. (2018, Nov. 1). Leading indicators for breaking through persistent injuries. *Occupational Health and Safety*. <https://ohsonline.com/articles/2018/11/01/leading-indicators-for-breaking-through-persistent-injuries.aspx>
- Pater, R. (2022, June). Minding the gap: Overcoming the strains (and sprains) of psychosocial contributors. *Professional Safety*, 67(6), 14-19.
- Pater, R. (2022, Sept.). Significant and sustaining soft-tissue safety: Leading people and changing culture. *Professional Safety*, 67(9), 16-20.
- Pater, R. (2023, June). Leading safety from within: Training internal safety catalysts. *Professional Safety*, 68(6), 40-43.
- Pater, R. (2023, Sept.). 10 considerations for upgrading safety culture. *Professional Safety*, 68(9), 16-21.
- Pater, R. (2024, Jan.). Revitalizing safety performance and culture: A four-step leadership strategy. *Professional Safety*, 69(1), 14-19.

### Cite this article

Pater, R. (2024, April). Decoding safety culture: Myth or reality? *Professional Safety*, 69(4), 16-19.