



Safety Culture Defence: Empowerment and Accountability

This safety moment describes an important cultural defence, Empowerment and Accountability, 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. 3: Empowerment and Accountability

Management benefits from the expertise of frontline workers in order to achieve better solutions to meet safety challenges. Employees feel that they can stop any activity when they notice a potential hazard in order to mitigate, eliminate, or report it even when that may have an impact on production or costs. Accountabilities and responsibilities for safety are clearly established and documented at all levels of the organization. Ownership for safety outcomes is present at all levels and functional areas of the organization.

Empowerment and accountability (Attributes)

- Employee participation in safety management activities
- Organization-wide safety ownership and communication
- Willingness to do what is right in regards to safety
- Breaking down of organizational silos

Examples of empowerment and accountability (Descriptors)

1. Employees participate in setting safety standards and rules.
2. Employees participate in the investigation of accidents and near-misses.
3. A person's safety performance is considered when hiring, retention, and promotion decisions are being made.
4. Contractor safety performance is given same weight as other criteria in procurement activities.
5. Positive labour relations exist.
6. Employees (regardless of position) express safety concerns (e.g.: if safety procedures are not being followed, if hazards or procedures are unknown for a particular task).
7. Performance management systems include a wide range of safety criteria.
8. Informal leaders are encouraged to promote safety.
9. Employees are held accountable and rewarded for a demonstrated commitment to safety.
10. Those with responsibility for representing employees (e.g.: health and safety committee members) are provided with adequate training, skills, and resources.
11. Non-operational staff recognizes their business decisions may impact safety.
12. Employees communicate with other departments to understand safety implications of decisions.

Questions for team discussion

1. How does our organization nurture and support empowerment and accountability?
2. What more can we do to nurture and support empowerment and accountability?

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