



Safety Culture Threat: Tolerance of Inadequate Systems and Resources

This safety moment describes an important cultural threat, Tolerance of Inadequate Systems and Resources, 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 Threat No. 4: Tolerance of Inadequate Systems and Resources

Tolerance of inadequate systems and resources occurs when it becomes acceptable to work with inadequate systems and resources, which often occurs when the organization tries to do too much with too little. No allowance is made in business and operational planning for unanticipated problems and changing conditions, which would include resource contingencies for completion of work. The organization is slow to react to changing conditions. Most attempts to make the operation safer through enhanced systems and resources happen following an incident or regulatory action.

Key characteristics of tolerance of inadequate systems and resources (Attributes)

- A pervasive belief that organizational success or survival is dependent upon making do with what is available
- A reactive stance towards safety management
- The organization stretching human and financial resources in order to “manage” costs
- The organization’s failure to provide adequate skills and tools to manage risk

Examples of tolerance of inadequate systems and resources (Descriptors)

1. The management system is inconsistently implemented.
2. Inadequate human and financial resources are assigned to safety activities.
3. A single person is assigned responsibility for multiple positions/portfolios.
4. No competent backup personnel for critical safety functions exist.
5. Poor working conditions exist.
6. Operational workarounds are common.
7. Degraded safety conditions exist.
8. Maintenance backlogs exist.
9. Quality of documentation is poor (inconsistent, inaccurate, out-of-date, inaccessible, etc.).
10. Employees receive the minimum, inadequate or poor quality training.
11. Little or no training is provided on system safety, risk and error management strategies.
12. Change management process and procedures are ineffective or absent.
13. Equipment needed to perform work safely is often unavailable.
14. Equipment provided for work is not fit for purpose and/or not serviceable.
15. Warning or alarm systems are not fit for purpose.
16. Proactive maintenance of assets is overdue.
17. Extended time lapse exists between reports of safety concerns and their resolution.

Questions for team discussion

1. How does our organization stay vigilant to and combat tolerance of inadequate systems and resources?
2. What can we do to enhance our vigilance to tolerance of inadequate systems and resources?

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