

## Building Cultural Maturity in Safety and Risk

### Introduction – The Culture Paradox

Culture represents a paradox for many organisations. While most people can readily comment on it (it's good/bad, supportive/toxic, weak/strong), few can meaningfully define it. Common attempts tend to be vague and focus on culture as behaviour ("Culture is the way we do things around here"). However, these definitions are too simplistic and create a trajectory where culture change is really just behaviour change, which typically makes things worse. At the leader level we see a lack of cultural literacy play out through superficial discussions about wanting to improve culture, without any meaningful or effective strategies ever being developed or implemented. The framework discussed in this paper outlines a process for enacting cultural maturity (specifically targeted at safety and risk) from within the organisation.

### Culture is not Behaviour or Systems

The common association of culture as behaviour often leads to culture change strategies that focus on systems or management. Things like trying to create a "just culture" by changing the accountability framework, or trying to improve connection and trust by mandating that managers must adopt a situational leadership style. While these approaches will influence culture, it's often not in the way intended because they are applied as interventions rather than organic improvements. The failure to consider the inevitable trade-offs and compromises further compounds the negative outcomes.

### Culture as Shared Beliefs

Viewing culture as shared underlying beliefs that are created and moderated by individuals within the organisation shifts the focus of culture onto what influences shared beliefs, and away from behaviour. This is a more complex view of culture, and it changes where attention is focused (particularly after incidents). It pushes attention onto relationships and trust, rather than training and paperwork. It forces different questions to be asked like "What do culture, safety and risk mean to us as leaders?", "What shared beliefs are in play that influence a particular behaviour?", "What role did we (as leaders) play in those beliefs forming?", and "How do I influence shared beliefs rather than just trying to change individual behaviour?"

### Cultural Literacy

Culture is a wicked problem that cannot be solved or fixed, only tackled over time. While leaders don't need to be culture experts, they do need a basic level cultural literacy. They need a shared understanding about the fundamentals of culture like what it is, how and where is it seen within organisations, and how behaviour is influenced. In the same way that organisations invest in ensuring leaders are fluent in the basics of finance, governance, compliance, safety, and environmental expectations, organisations should ensure that leaders have a capability to talk meaningfully about culture.

### A Framework for Enacting Cultural Maturity

The model contained in this paper provides a framework for leaders to enact a more mature safety and risk culture within their organisation. It is not a solution for bad culture, it is a scaffold that will support

leaders in identifying and developing their own solutions and strategies. While culture is always changing, planned culture change is another matter. It's not easy, it takes time, it can't be a solution, fix or initiative, and it has to be an inside job.

### **Social Psychological Bias**

Culture is a social process, and so this framework has been developed (and operates) within the social psychological safety discipline. This is relevant because other disciplines of safety (eg. behavioural, process, zero-harm) have been applied to culture in the search for solutions and fixes, often with poor outcomes. This is not to negate other safety disciplines but to highlight that there are different disciplines within safety, and that they are suited to tackling different issues. Don't ask a social psychology specialist to design a guard, and in the same way, don't ask an engineer to develop a culture improvement strategy.

### **The Model**

As a framework for enacting cultural maturity, the model represents a series of specific questions asked in a particular order. It first aligns leaders around the meaning of safety, risk and culture. It then requires leaders to describe their safety culture goal in a meaningful way (that isn't behaviours), and identify the capabilities needed to achieve that in the form of specific actions. Implementation must be initiated and lead by the leadership team, and actioned through enrolling all stakeholders. The application of the framework would typically be supported by a safety culture specialist (a culture coach).

### **Influences on the Framework**

This framework has been specifically influenced by the following work:

- Culture:
  - and Social Psychology, Dr Rob Long.
  - Definition, Edgar Schein.
  - Maturity, Patrick Hudson.
  - and Competing Values, Kim Cameron & Robert Quinn
- Sensemaking and Resilience, Karl Wieck.
- Risk and Safety Maturity Matrix, Dr Rob Long.
- Social Sensemaking, Rob Sams.
- Safety Paradigms, Dr Rob Long.
- Wicked Problems, Craig Ashurst.
- Antifragility, Nassim Taleb.
- Trade-Offs and Compromises, Rene Amalberti.
- Risk Intelligence, Dylan Evans.
- Work as Done V Planned, Prof Sidney Dekkar.

### **Conclusion**

Tackling culture in safety and risk is a wicked problem. To achieve change leaders require a foundational level of cultural literacy, as well as alignment around the core elements safety, risk and culture. From this shared starting point meaningful actions can be identified, and then implemented through enrolling all stakeholders. The framework outlined in this paper scaffolds organisations and leaders through that process.

This is an evolving model in its early stages, and so questions, comments and feedback are welcome.

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