

## How Is Your Risk Culture?

### Let's Start With Culture

Culture presents a paradox for most organisations and people in that it is easy to talk about, but difficult to define. That is, most people can readily comment about what the culture of their organisation is like (good, bad, toxic, positive etc.). However, if asked to define it many struggle, and in my experience they typically default to the idea of culture being about behaviour.

The most common “culture as behaviour” definition is “culture is what we do around here”. This idea is convenient in that it provides a compact and reasonably simple definition, but in the end it is too simplistic to be useful. It implies that to understand the culture of an organisation all I would have to do is to observe the behaviour, but this throws up a number of issues.

### What About Night Shift?

Do you change your behaviour depending on where you are and who you are with? Do workers behave differently during night shift (compared to day shifts)? Does behaviour change in the lead up to a big audit. If culture was behaviour, then that would mean that the culture is changing, but of course it's not. The culture is influencing the behaviour, but it's not the same thing. Night shift doesn't have a different culture because their behaviour is different, they have different behaviour because their culture is different.

### Culture is About Shared Beliefs

An alternate view (from behaviour) is that culture is about the shared underlying assumptions that drive behaviour at an organisational and group level. These shared underlying assumptions are group (and sub-group) based beliefs about the organisation that have been developed over time in response to internal and external challenges, and importantly they are considered valid enough by the group to be passed on to others\*.

In this world, culture is messy and complex. It resists easy classification or measurement because it sits within each of the individuals who make it up. But it helps explain why we change our behaviour depending on where we are and who we are with, why night shift can have a different but consistent set of behaviours even though different people work it, and why people react the way they do in the lead up to audits. In essence, it's because they have learnt to, or been taught to.

### Your Risk Culture

So your risk culture (a sub-culture of the broader organisational culture) is about the beliefs and shared assumptions that exist in relation to risk (but it isn't the risk related behaviour). To identify risk culture, you need to look behind the behaviour to discover the assumptions and beliefs driving it.

I'll talk more about how you can do this soon, but to give a bit more of an idea these are the types of things I tend to look at to help uncover the risk culture of an organisation:

- How is risk being defined and talked about (formally and informally)?
- What is considered risky around here (where is the focus- safety, environment, staff behaviour, money)
- How do the staff think the organisation perceives risk (eg. threat or opportunity, good or bad)?
- How is uncertainty managed (can it be talked about/ is it suppressed)?

### **Why Bother?**

Risk seems a central part of every business now, whether it is discussing risk in general, or having to complete a risk assessment every time you start a shift. But if we have different underlying beliefs about risk then it makes dialogue and meaningful outcome very hard. This is because the real issue for culture is not so much whether it's positive or negative, it's whether it is consistent and predictable, or cracked and disconnected. Culture influences the meaning people attribute to things, especially things like risk assessments and policies.

By way of example, within safety we nearly always treat risk as if it is bad (isn't the goal to eliminate risk wherever possible?). But what if the individuals doing the work think that risk is OK? What if their belief about risk is that without risk there is no learning or growth? Or what if the organisation thinks that the purpose of using a permit to work process is to manage safety risk, but the people using it believe that it's simply to help the company manage legal risk (protect someone)?

### **How Is Culture Seen?**

This is a tricky question given that I've said that culture is about beliefs and not behaviour, and you can't really see beliefs, right? So, the place to start is with language. That is, what people say collectively and individually. At its heart, investigating culture is about engaging and listening with people, not observing them. In my experience, if you ask questions in the right way, and then genuinely listen, you will get an insight into what people think. I try and ask questions like "Tell me about...", or "Talk me through...", rather than "What is..." or "Do you...".

### **Final Word**

Culture and risk are both very complex issues that resist simplification. But there is huge opportunity in embracing both in a meaningful way. As mentioned above, the real danger with culture is where it is cracked and disconnected. Where what is said by the organisation is not matched with what is believed by the people in it. Where an organisation says they value learning for example, but suppresses risk taking to the point where innovation and growth can't happen because people have learnt that if you make a mistake you get fired.

With culture, you can't go straight to fix, you have to go through discovery first. Go and have conversations with people about risk, but don't ask them to repeat the corporate line on risk, ask them to tell you about what risk means to them. Ask them to talk to you about what they consider risky? Then ask them what they think about the way the organisation tackles (not manages) risk? That will give you much more insight about the risk culture than any behaviour.

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