

Implementing Culture Change -- Three Strategies

by Steven I. Simon, Ph.D.

Introduction: The Culture Change Model

- General Motors worldwide reduced total recordable rates by 77% and lost-time injury rates by 89% since 1994.
- The General Electric steam turbine manufacturing plant in Fitchburg, Massachusetts reduced accident rates by 76% from 1994 to 1998.
- At Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories, the skilled trades group slashed occupational injuries by 80% and saved a documented three million dollars since embarking on an innovative safety improvement process in 1990.

What do these safety improvement efforts have in common? They are all the result of the Culture Change Model. But each represents a particular strategy, in keeping with the Model's distinguishing principle of customizing interventions to the specific culture of the client system instead of opting for cookie cutter programs. A behavior-based project could increase the number of safe behaviors while stopping short of impacting the organization's core values. Authentic culture change transforms the organization's core values change as well.

What follows illustrates three very different strategies for implementing culture change tailored to three very different kinds of organizations.

Type I: Top-Down Strategy

General Motors

A CEO or plant manager perceives a problem in the culture of an organization. S/he calls for change. This is culture change driven in the most conventional way, from the top-down. The General Motors initiative to *make safety matter* is a perfect example.

I worked with General Motors senior leadership as external consultant to their safety culture change process, which the top manufacturing echelon owned from its inception in 1994. The dramatic reduction in injuries was the product of a careful design systematically implemented.

1. Focus on the Culture. When General Motors exchanged benchmarking teams with a company with a world-class safety record, they were told, "You have the best safety programs we've ever seen. You have four-color training brochures and excellent audit systems. You have the program but we have the *culture*." From this and related insights, General Motors manufacturing leadership chose a "culture focus" methodology to create long-term change in safety performance.

2. Enlist Leadership to Shape Culture. General Motors leadership (management and union) next turned their attention to matching the strategy for safety culture change with the company's top-down management style. They wisely adopted the position that since their culture is shaped by

top leadership, the leadership culture had to be the first to change. That meant changing themselves, taking some time to look in the mirror as individuals. We constructed a full-day, first-ever leadership workshop exclusively for senior manufacturing managers to assess and transform their role and behavior in the safety process.

3. Create an Infrastructure to Drive the Change Effort. The manufacturing managers chartered a series of short-term, joint (union/management) Culture Transition Teams, each dedicated to a particular aspect of the overall culture change process. The teams reported their findings to the manufacturing managers, and consistent with the top-down strategy, the buck stopped there.

Type II: Grassroots-Driven Strategy

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories

Although culture change driven from the grassroots level, whether by an individual employee or a team, cannot be accomplished without support from management, the catalyst is clearly located within the rank and file; the momentum spreads through the organization from the bottom up. The critical difference between a bottom-up change process and the more conventional top-down approach is lodged in the sharing of responsibility and power between management and grassroots leaders.

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories (LLNL) is a Department of Energy site. A grassroots initiative to alter the safety culture originated in its Plant Engineering Department-450 crafts people (carpenters, plumbers, electricians, mechanics, welders, custodians, pipe fitters, metal workers) engaged in fourteen different maintenance and operations trades. As consultant to LLNL's fledgling change process, I was guided by the principle of matching the culture change strategy to their management style: our decision to work within the structure of the existing Department Safety Committee derived from the organization-wide advance toward a higher degree of employee involvement.

The radical goal of institutionalizing *active* participation in safety, of involving every member of the workforce in thinking about safety for his/her self and co-workers, of stepping forward to identify things that weren't right and suggest improvements, dovetailed precisely with the foundation of an enduring grassroots culture change, and that is *empowering the workers*. Empowerment is not about titles and charters; it is about bestowing real decision-making power on individuals who previously had little or none.

The LLNL Maintenance and Operations Safety Culture Committee members, all workers (with one non-voting management representative), learned how to conduct effective team meetings, how to elicit safety concerns from their constituent craft areas, and how to tap supervisory and professional support. The numbers proved they were getting results. Once they understood the critical relationship among major accidents, minor accidents and near misses, for example, they embarked on a near-miss reporting crusade that achieved a greater than 75% participation rate. By the third year, accident rates in their department had been markedly reduced, with a decline in lost workdays from 455 to 265 and in restricted workdays from 372 to 42; workers' compensation costs were down 80%, a savings of more than half a million dollars a year.

In grassroots safety, committees have to have teeth, the wherewithal to make things happen, get things done. If workers are simply appointed to teams that management continues to manage, they recognize the same old hierarchy in disguise and resent the hype; their incentive sours and their interest rapidly flags. This doesn't mean that management has to give them a blank check, but it does mean partnering on everyday safety and supplying the resources to follow through. Instead of passing suggestions up the chain of command for possible enactment, workers are mandated to research their ideas and see them through to completion. Scary? Maybe. But when the grassroots strategy fits the ethos of the client system as it did and still does at Livermore Labs, the dividends can be enormous.

Type III: Driven by Process Champion

GE Steam Turbines

In the absence of either a top-down mandate or a grassroots leader, an experienced safety and health professional operating in the context of a mission to manage safety as a people-oriented activity can drive and steadily champion the process of changing an organization's safety culture. Today's safety practitioner, in contrast to yesterday's repository of technical skills, recognizes his/her collateral role as a change agent. S/he welcomes the mandate to partner with line management in leading the organization toward the adoption of new norms, beliefs, and values.

At the GE steam turbine manufacturing plant in Fitchburg, Mass., a safety professional functioned as just such a change agent. Determined to overturn the assumption that productivity is more important than safety, he facilitated individual and organizational rethinking by bringing management, the union and outside consultants together. Guiding the emergence and ascendancy of new cultural assumptions is a key to breaking through to new levels of safety performance.

Before the safety professional at the GE plant presented the culture change initiative to representatives of all parties in the plant, there was nothing in place but "a so-called safety committee made up of people who met all the time anyway-management and union leaders," according to a twenty-year veteran of the rank and file. "Nobody on the floor ever heard anything about anything except that when some group was accident-free for a period of time, each member would receive a gift, like a radio or a home fire extinguisher."

It was not surprising, therefore, that as soon as the safety professional challenged the organization to revamp the safety culture, the union promptly voted to participate in the process. (In fact, every hourly employee on each safety team contributed four to five hours per month.) Management also committed significant time, as well as money, to the effort with the result that, in the words of that same worker, "Now safety is everywhere. It's in meetings, in publications, and especially on the floor." One of the biggest changes has been the end of finger pointing. "It used to be that an accident was always the fault of the people on the floor. Now everyone is more interested in finding the root cause, and fixing it, rather than assigning blame."

The union gave up none of its rights: "We still maintain the safety committee," an official affirms, "and we still file grievances if we see something that's not right. But since we've had the grassroots teams, that happens very rarely. They mostly take care of problems before we have to

get involved. And now, there's no going back. We are no longer willing to accept any practice or tool that is less than safe. Safety is part of the culture."

Two former skeptics, both black belts in GE's Six Sigma Program for quality improvement and also members of the grassroots safety teams, observed that the two initiatives are eminently compatible because working safe and smart results in higher quality work. Speaking in the Six Sigma idiom, one of the ex-skeptics analyzed the reduction in total recordable and lost-time injuries since the inception of the culture change as "statistically significant at greater than the .01 level of confidence. That means there is less than one chance in a hundred that our improvement occurred by happenstance. The year before we had 104 recordable accidents. After the first year of the safety culture initiative we were down to 88, the second year 52, and the third year 49. Our lost workday case reduction was even better. Our membership has a much better chance of going home at night with all their parts."

The safety professional at this GE plant, in his role as process champion of a site-wide culture change initiative, served as catalyst and provider of continuity throughout its four-year duration. He (1) built coalitions among constituents representing all the groups in the plant; (2) communicated a persuasive vision that unified them; and (3) took a leadership role in teaching the principles of culture-based safety. If the safety professional had not acted as driver for the culture change, the process would not have happened. It would not have started; it would not have been sustained.

Summary

Without a supportive culture, even the best designed safety process will fail. But without the right match between the organizational dynamics and the strategy for change, the whole initiative is a matter of lip-service at best and futile at worst. Safety culture is typically a passenger on the train of an overall organizational culture. Behavior-based projects can collapse when the wisdom and effort of fitting the plan to the prevailing culture is bypassed out of allegiance to some pre-fab model. Top-down companies should adopt top-down culture change strategies; lateral organizations should adopt grassroots strategies; and safety professionals should take the lead where other driving forces are missing. Hybrid organizations, of course, should be guided towards a mix of strategies.