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# What is essential for an organisation to be described by its employees as having a Positive Safety Culture

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**Description**

The thesis questions aims to establish advanced opportunities for Positive Safety Culture improvement, through understanding the essence of a first person lived experience from the shop floor to the boardroom in an industrial demographic.

**Location**

iC - SBS Teaching Facility

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**What is essential for an organisation to be  
described by its employees as having a Positive  
Safety Culture**

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**Conference 2010**

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## **1. Aim**

The thesis questions aims to establish advanced opportunities for Positive Safety Culture improvement, through understanding the essence of a first person lived experience from the shop floor to the boardroom in an industrial demographic.

## **2. Objective**

1. Identify the essence of the lived experience in a Positive Safety Culture
2. Identify if there are differences and commonalties between the essence of Positive Safety Culture with Managers, Supervisors and Workers
3. Provided academic clarity to the definition of Safety Culture

## **3. Introduction - Occupational Health & Safety**

From a historical and ideological viewpoint, there has been a dramatic transformation in the nature of work and working style (Higashi & Inui 2006).

Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) roots were created in the 19th century as part of social measures to counterbalance the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution.

Globalisation of trade and increasing market pressure have led to a change in work, and work-related health effects and such Froneberg (2006) argues for an adaptation of current practices in OHS.

## **4. The Cost of Organisational Safety in Practice**

Naquin's (1975) iceberg analogy discusses the 'direct' costs of Safety as showing above the surface, but where a far greater amount, representing numerous factors associated with the occupational injury in an 'indirect' or 'hidden' way, is lurking beneath what is visible. The common view is that occupational injuries represent a far greater economical problem than what is immediately obvious (Larsson & Betts 1996).

## **5. Industrial Work Environment**

The Manufacturing or Industrial Work Environment employs 1,064,000 people representing 11% of the Australian workforce. This substantial Australian industry is currently situated as the leading contributor to Workers Compensations claims in the country (Australian Safety Compensation (Council) 2010).

The Industrial Work Environment and its male dominant demographic follows an incredibly hierarchical structure and can be broken down into three target groups; Managers, Supervisors and Workers (Cheyne et al. 2002). This structure and its internal functions have often contributed to decades of similar process and operation, so that when viewed internally within an organisation they become sub-cultures within the broader organisational culture.

## **6. Organisational Culture**

Kennedy and Kirwan (1998) suggest the work environment is a mixture of physical components (e.g. equipment, premises), the organisational structure, and the attributes of the employees working in the organisation (e.g. skills, knowledge, attitudes).

Studying Culture means searching for what is shared by organisational members, the basic assumptions, values, norms and knowledge that defines membership of a social group or an (Schein 1992).

Further, Culture is viewed as a group, not an individual, phenomenon; efforts to change culture should in the first instance focus on changing collective practices (the practices

of both managers and workers) and the dominant source of culture is what leaders pay attention to (Borys, Else & Leggett 2009). However considering all of the above, every organisation has some common internal characteristics that could be called its Culture.

## **7. Safety Culture**

The concept of Safety Culture has become increasingly important for the understanding and the management of Health and Safety at work (Cox & Flin 1998). Yet Hudson (2007) puts forward that organisational Safety Culture is a complex phenomenon. Guldenmund (2007) suggests there is no clear cut definition of the term Safety Culture, with most literature reviews concluding that the concept usually refers to a set of Safety related Attitudes, Values or Assumptions that are shared between the members of an organisation.

Davies et al. (2003) highlights the broad organisational applications by stating: *“Safety Culture has been bandied about and is a common figure of speech in many organisations with limited reference to, or knowledge of, any of its various definitions”*. He adds that it conceptually appears to be an entity independent of any actual person or act.

Nevertheless there is solid a consensus in the broader academic community that OHS has had a profound impact on individuals, families, communities, and societies (Sokas, Sprince & Kris 2008).

## **8. Safety Climate**

Safety Climate is referred to as the people's perception of the value of safety in the work environment (Ghosh, Young-Corbett & Fiori 2010). Zohar (1980) argues Safety Culture is

somewhat different from that of Safety Climate, with Climates approach concentrated upon the perceptions of employees by defining it as: *“perceptions held by employees about aspects of their organisational environment, summarised over individual employees”*. He continues by suggesting that Culture defines the setting within which the Climate operates.

Therefore, in a practical application Safety Climate reflects the symbolic (e.g. posters in the workplace, state of the premises, etc.) and political (e.g. managers voicing their commitment to safety, allocation of budgets to safety, etc.) aspects of the organisation which constitute the work environment. However Safety Climate may or may not be a tangible manifestation of the underlying beliefs and values embodied in the organisational Safety Culture, though as Kennedy and Kirwan (1998) argue it should be related to it.

### **9. Safety Management Systems**

Safety Management Systems are regarded as the documented and formalised version of how Safety is managed within an organisation, and can take the form of paper-based and or electronic systems of policy, procedures and instructions. However, the way the Safety Management System exists is not necessarily the way that it exists in reality (e.g. actual shop or even board room practices), and may not follow the espoused policies explicitly and the implicitly laid out official company documents.



## **10. Gaps in Research**

Relatively little previous research has investigated the mechanisms by which Safety Climate and Culture affects Safety Behaviour (Neal, Griffin & Hart 2000).

Issues of power and conflict in organisations are rarely addressed in Safety Culture research. With much of the Safety Culture research resting upon a harmony model of organisational life. It is argued, that this is a fundamental shortcoming of the existing research. With Antonsen (2009) arguing that in addition to asking what is shared, it's important to ask what is not shared.

Current advanced organisational Safety Culture models focus on the integration of total management systems (Hudson 2007), with the emphasis on systems to support lasting changes in attitudes and beliefs and to promote an increased personal feeling of control when considering Safety. These approaches are valid, but do not necessarily consider the lived experience of the first person in such a complex phenomenon.

## **11. Research Approach**

### **11.1 Insider Research**

Robson (2002) defines 'insider' as a researcher who conducts a study that is directly concerned with the setting in which they work, as the researcher is undertaking an explicit research role in addition to their normal functional role. Fundamentally, the insider researcher has knowledge and experiences of a familiar setting in terms of their own organisation, community, culture, or gender upon which they reflect (Geller 2009), thus providing opportunities of rich and candid insight into organisation phenomena.

In the context of the 'insider' to the research proposal it is characterised by a member of the organisation who has previously been immersed in the organisation with developed understanding and awareness of its functions.

### **11.2 Qualitative Phenomenology of Essences**

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, as it's being directed toward something as it is an experience of or about some object (e.g. Safety Culture).

Phenomenology of Essences - involves probing through data to search for common themes or essences and establishing patterns of relationships shared by particular phenomena (Spiegelberg 1975).

### **12. Leading Summary to the HDR Conference Presentation**

Insider research as an approach to researching organisations is gaining acceptance as a credible research pursuit. Its contribution to scientific literature is valuable as it provides rich insights into various disciplines that would otherwise not be acknowledged.

There is overwhelming evidence that OHS at all organisational levels can reduce accidents and injuries in the workplace. The proposal suggests that to achieve high levels of OHS performance personal beliefs and commitment to safety must align within the broader organisation for a common language.

Understanding and articulating the complex phenomena of Safety Culture through the first person, while spring boarding off the current bench mark of high performance within integrated Safety Management System, may provide opportunities for continues Safety improvement. Or at least provide insight into previous unconsidered dimensions of Safety Science.

Therefore, for their voices to be heard they must be empowered to speak, when they truly speak, that is when the Safety Culture can be developed or change.

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