 

Safety Culture

## I.-Definition

Safety Culture is **the way safety is perceived, valued and prioritized in an organization. It reflects the real commitment to safety at all levels in the organization.** It has also been described as "how an organization behaves when no one is watching".

Safety Culture is not something you get or buy; it is something an organization acquires as a product of the combined effects of [Organizational Culture](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Organisational_Culture), Professional Culture and, often, National Culture. Safety Culture can therefore be positive, negative or neutral. Its essence is in what people believe about the importance of safety, including what they think that their peers, superiors and leaders really believe about safety as a priority.

## II.-Why is Safety Culture Important?

Safety Culture can have a direct impact on safe performance. If someone believes that safety is not really important, even temporarily, then workarounds, cutting corners, or making unsafe decisions or judgments will be the result, especially when there is a small perceived risk rather than an obvious danger. However, a typical and understandable first response to Safety Culture is:

### "We already have an SMS, why do we need Safety Culture too?"

A [Safety Management System](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Safety_Management_System) represents an organization's competence in the area of safety, and it is important to have an SMS and competent safety staff to execute it. But such rules and processes may not always be followed, particularly if people in the organization believe that, for example, ‘moving traffic’ is the real over-riding priority, even if risks are occasionally taken. Where would people get such an idea? The answer, ultimately is from their peers, but more so their superiors, including the person at the helm of an organization, namely the CEO. To ensure the required commitment to safety, organizational leaders must show that safety is their priority.

So, organizations need both a SMS and a healthy Safety Culture in order to achieve acceptable safety performance. But with aviation, there is the problem that it is generally very safe, with serious accident outcomes occurring only rarely. This means that almost all organizations will assume they are already safe. There may be few incident reports, and these may be of low severity; safety cases may be well in hand for current operations and future changes. Real aircraft accidents are usually complex and multiple causes can be identified, so it is not always easy to see them coming. Even harder to see are contributing situations which affect an organization's ‘forward vision’ in safety. For example, under-reporting of incidents due to fears of recrimination or prosecution; people running risks because they believe that is what they are supposed to do; different sub-groups not sharing information due to a lack of mutual trust; etc.

### If you want to remain safe, you have to know the realities of safety in your organisation

How could a CEO be sure if such undermining factors were evident in their organization? By asking their directors? By touring the workforce and asking? The alternative, and more robust approach, is to carry out a [Safety Culture survey](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Safety_Surveys) which attempts to 'measure' Safety Culture in a way which can be repeated subsequently for comparative purposes.

## III.-How do You Measure Safety Culture?

Safety Culture, like culture, is sometimes hard to see from the inside. It is like a fish swimming in water - the fish does not really think too much about the water. Therefore, usually Safety Culture surveys in most industries are a combination of internal and external perspectives: the ‘outsider’s view is used to help make objective the insider’s viewpoint. That being said, however, it is useful to have a ‘champion’ inside the organization who can act as an interface between the survey findings and the staff at all levels. This champion is typically the Safety Director or [Safety Manager](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Safety_Manager) of the organization.

A typical Safety Culture Survey might proceed as shown below:





Safety Culture Survey

It is a tried and tested process starting with ‘prelaunch’ discussions to explain the process, decide the breadth and copy of the survey, and to reassure the [ANSP](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/ANSP) that the approach is:

* Anonymous
* Confidential to the organization
* Independent - not favoring any particular group

The survey process must lead to clear and concise actions being developed by the organization to address any deficiencies identified. These may related to either particular employee functional groups or to specific business or operational processes.

The overall timings of the approach are illustrated below:





Safety culture survey timings

A typical of Safety Culture includes the components illustrated below:





Safety Culture components

## IV.-What Does Safety Culture Deliver

An optimum Safety Culture will delivers a clearer and more comprehensive picture of operational risk, one that takes in all aspects of the activities of the organization. This is possible through the achievement of a better information flow and the maintenance of an effective dialogue within the organization about safety performance as priority.

## V.-Why Safety Culture Awareness matters

As well as the ‘macro’ effects already described, a focus on knowing what the level of safety culture is and striving to achieve a level which is adequate brings a better focus on incident recording, incident analysis, staff training and the integration of maintenance safety and operational safety priorities.

Safety Culture must be seen as a key business target so that the people at the ‘sharp end’ feel empowered to act in the interests of safety in the knowledge that the management will support them. This enhancement of mutual trust is invariably accompanied by a positive impact on productivity.

Any doubts about the validity of a Safety Culture Survey as a means to benchmark [organizational culture](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Organisational_Culture) can be resolved, if resources allow, by carrying out two independent surveys in parallel, which in the past has produced comparable results from both surveys.

Each organization is different and each will also have its own national culture as a business environment, so the both the methods and the opportunities for achieving organizational safety culture will vary. However, the insights achieved by regular measurement of safety culture and the use of the results to identify where improvement effort must be targeted is essential.

## VI. What Does Safety Culture Measurement Cost?

In all but very large organizations, it will often be necessary to pay for a specialist outside agency to design and undertake a survey. For [ANSPs](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/ANSP) in Europe, support from EUROCONTROL may be available and EUROCONTROL is also building a web-based ‘Safety Culture Toolbox’ which will help access potential survey resources. Alternatively, it may also be possible to achieve a full survey by engaging with academic institutions which are interested in the concept of business culture measurement.

In addition to this, there will be an internal cost in staff time for employees to participate in a survey and for a ‘champion’ to campaign for participation. There may also be an administrative cost of organizing survey participation. Completion of each individual questionnaire might take 20-30 minutes and group meetings or workshops might be needed, especially for a first-time survey. Implementation of safety improvements indicated by the findings of the survey is also an internal cost. However, most of this resource requirement is not onerous and much of it can be carefully timed to minimize real extra cost.

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