

# Transforming Your Safety Culture

## How You Can Start to Make It Happen

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*Transforming a safety culture is a process, not a program. When the process is undertaken systematically and with authentic commitment – in organizations large or small, enterprise-wide or in individual locations -- qualitative change produces dramatic measurable improvements. The process has yielded outstanding results:*

- *The General Motors safety culture change process started in 1994. From 1994 to 2008, total recordable and lost-time injury rates were reduced by more than 95%.*
- *New Jersey's state-wide utility, PSE&G, embarked upon a systematic safety culture journey in 1999. Over the next ten years, its recordable rate dropped to 1.41 and its lost-time case rate to .33.*

*Case studies of how General Motors and PSE&G accomplished these results will follow.*

*Transforming a safety culture is not like designing and then implementing a safety program. Changing the culture means changing norms, assumptions and perceptions, not just behavior, and not just policies, procedures, training, and equipment. And the process takes years, not months. With the right tools and some patience, the culture change process is a manageable sequence of concrete activities. But before we talk about how to make change happen, we have to be clear on what culture is.*

### WHAT IS A SAFETY CULTURE?

Every organization has a safety culture. Culture matters because it strongly influences how we think, what we feel, and how we behave. A formal definition of culture is the set of basic assumptions, perceptions, values, and beliefs a group makes about their reality in their particular universe. An informal definition of culture is “what happens when no one is watching.” Will an employee avoid wearing protective eyewear if no one is around? Will a supervisor pencil-whip the end-of-the-month safety audit if he does it alone?

There are at least two things you have to know about culture.

- 1. The most important part of a safety culture is the part you can't see; that's where the cultural hazards are.**

Culture can be compared to an iceberg, with only ten percent of its mass visible above the water. Behavior is the visible part. The invisible culture – the other 90 percent of the iceberg -- consists of the norms and assumptions (unspoken rules or beliefs) that guide everyone's behavior. These are known only to “insiders” of the culture.



The Culture Iceberg®

It is that 90 percent, that unwritten code of behavior, that cues us as to how to answer questions like: How safe is safe enough? Is it okay to remind someone to wear a hard hat, or would that result in being told to mind your own business? Should we rush to meet this deadline, or is it okay to stop and take safety precautions?

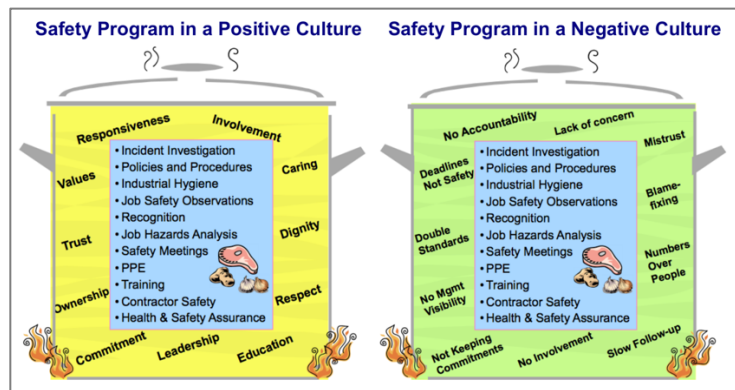
We distinguish between visible and invisible culture because change in the *invisible* culture (change in basic assumptions and norms) is what brings about long-lasting change in behavior. Behavior change without an underlying culture change will not last. Which brings us to:

**2. Your safety program is not your safety culture. Your safety culture is the context in which you carry out your safety program.**

In order to impact behavior in a sustained way, the part of culture that needs to be fundamentally changed are those underlying assumptions and beliefs, not the policies and procedures. That is because the shared norms and assumptions underlying the specific policies and procedures are what actually influence behavior.

Typically, groups resist changing their fundamental assumptions. Our assumptions stabilize our worlds even if they are wrong. So giving them up often means dealing with anxiety until new ones take root. But anxiety is disruptive: we have difficulty concentrating on primary tasks while assumptions are in transition. It is not, then, surprising that we resist change. Changing profound individual and organizational assumptions is, however, the work of truly transforming a safety culture.

To achieve safety excellence takes both a good safety program *and* a good safety culture. It’s a two-factor theory: having good safety programs alone is not enough. We use the analogy of a stew and its broth to explain the relationship between safety programs and safety culture: the *programs* are the ingredients (the meat and the vegetables) and the *culture* is the broth.



The Stew & Broth Analogy™

A positive safety culture or wholesome broth is characterized by factors such as caring, leadership, trust, visibility and integrity; it brings out the best in the safety program components. But in a negative culture or rancid broth the programs will produce poor results, because they cannot make up on their own for underlying double standards, lack of caring, low management visibility, mistrust, prioritization of production deadlines or focus on numbers instead of people.

If some of those underlying elements sound familiar, then it’s time to improve your broth. What needs to be added to yours to make sure people go home safe at the end of the day, to shape up your safety culture? Addressing that inquiry is a game-changing proposition: the leaders of the organization need to spend as much effort working the culture side of safety, the soft side, as they do enacting the safety program, the hard side.

## WHAT IS YOUR SAFETY CULTURE? – THE CULTURE ASSESSMENT

Before undertaking to transform a given safety culture, it is imperative to understand it. The principle is “Diagnose before you prescribe.” Don’t tamper with the culture until you find out what its strengths and weaknesses are. The usual vehicle for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a safety culture is a Culture Assessment. When done properly, a **Safety Culture Assessment** is much more than just another measurement tool; it is a resource for launching successful culture change.

The culture assessment process that becomes a catalyst for organizational transformation is not to be confused with the popular, off-the-shelf product referred to as the “culture perception survey.” Perception surveys merely scratch the surface of an organization’s culture: the quantitative data they yield, while meaningful, cannot stand alone.

Only through talking to the “members of the tribe” directly is it possible to understand why some perception survey scores are high, why some are low, and why there are significant discrepancies among others. This kind of dialogue is typically achieved through one-on-one interviews as well as in focus groups of four to six people, conducted in all departments and at all levels. Interviews and focus groups with an organization’s own employees provide the qualitative context necessary for proper interpretation of the quantitative data from perception surveys.

In order for the assessment to be truly transformative, quantitative and qualitative findings about the safety culture must be consolidated and presented, and not to the safety department alone but to an organization-wide leadership group that will “own” them. An organization’s willingness to hold a mirror up to its strengths and to areas that need improvement is often experienced as a significant emotional event. The motivation for, and momentum of, such self-reflection can trigger a strong change impulse in companies where previous attempts to overcome inertia have failed.



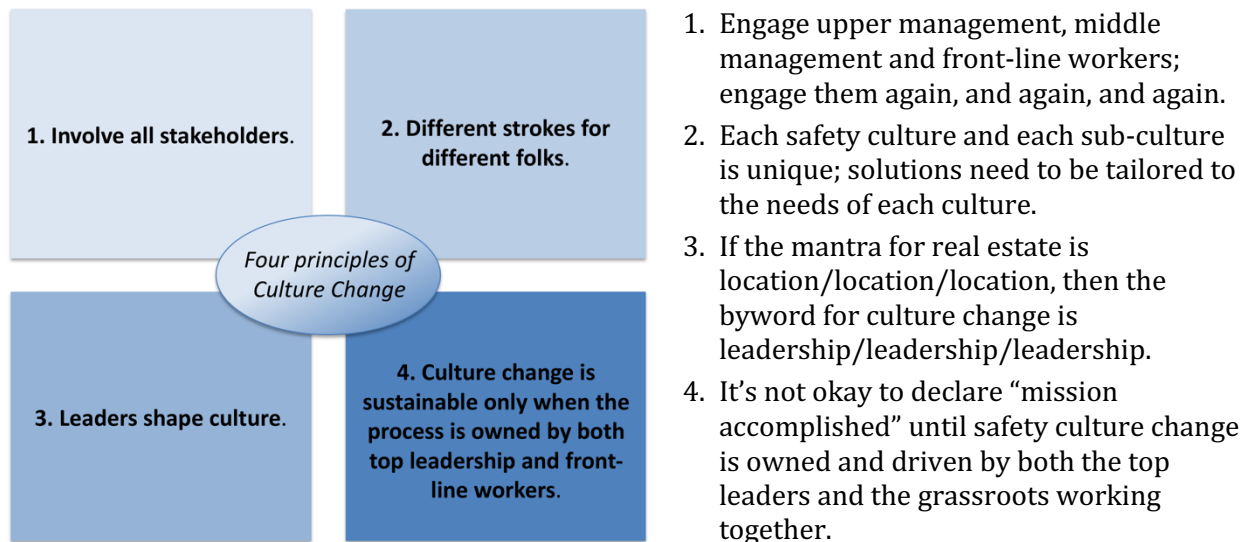
The CCC Safety Culture Assessment®

In keeping with that identifiable emotional component of the impulse to create and sustain change, the findings of a culture assessment have optimum transformative power when presented in a live feedback session. In-person sharing of the results helps to validate the assessment findings by facilitating agreement on the nature of the baseline safety culture (“Yes. That’s us. The baby may be ugly but he’s ours”); also, it maximizes opportunities for honest self-examination and informed commitment to change. In sum, **a feedback session with management personnel, union leadership, and informal leaders of the organization is an invaluable jumping off point for the collaborative action necessary to effect a positive safety culture change.**

## HOW DO YOU TRANSFORM YOUR SAFETY CULTURE?

The culture assessment is part of the overall change process. Once your assessment tells you what you need to know about your organization's safety culture – your relevant strengths and weaknesses – then you're ready to target areas that need improvement.

Whether you're trying to bring about change at the enterprise-wide level, throughout an entire business unit, at a single site, or in a particular department, **four principles** must be heeded:



Two case studies will illustrate this last principle.

### Case Study I: Enterprise-Wide: Top-Down Model – General Motors



In 1994, General Motors set out to transform the safety culture for all its North America operations, at the time comprising 160 manufacturing plants and several hundred thousand employees. Safety culture change at General Motors started at the top and worked its way downward. Any other approach would have gone against company structure, style and culture, therefore, making successful change less viable. The cascading implementation was systematic and transparent:

Engaging Senior Leadership. General Motors leadership (the Manufacturing Managers Council or MMC) wisely adopted the position that since their culture is shaped by top leadership, their own top-of-the-house safety culture had to be the first to change. In fact, they recognized that their efforts would stall, or, worse, be regarded by employees as lip service unless and until top management executives were visibly perceived as leading the transformation.

Transforming themselves meant starting by taking time to look in the mirror at their own individual leadership behavior. They did this in a full-day workshop exclusively for themselves, the senior manufacturing managers, to assess and transform their role and behavior in the safety process.

Dedicating Infrastructure. Managing a large-scale, long-term organizational safety culture process requires a dedicated infrastructure for change. The MMC recognized this need and chartered a series of transitional task forces, called Culture Transition Teams, to identify activities to help them move forward on a continuing basis. The Culture Transition Teams drafted a blueprint for culture change

that engaged successive layers of management and employees, one at a time, slowly and in sequence, cascading downward from plant leadership through supervision and ultimately to hourly workers.

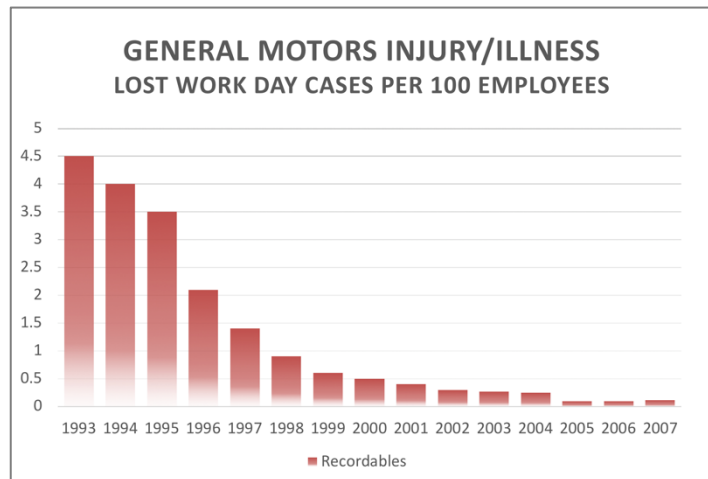
***Training Leaders.*** This blueprint was structured in a recommendation asking the MMC to authorize two separate safety leadership training courses: one for the plants' top-tier managers and union officials (which was delivered during Years Two and Three of the safety culture process at all manufacturing sites); and one for supervisors and union safety committee persons, conducted in the same plants for the next tier during Years Three and Four -- after the top tier had started to apply the lessons of their training. A joint team consisting of UAW representatives and GM safety professionals participated in the development of both courses.

***Engaging Plant Leadership.*** At General Motors, plant leadership meant a group called The Key Four: the plant manager, the human resources manager and two top union officials at each facility. They stressed that safety was to be management's highest priority—above production, quality, cost

and schedule – and that leaders were expected to model behavior that showed that safety was their highest concern. They emphasized the need to realize that it was possible to run an accident-free plant through caring about people, not just through compliance. They were to address unsafe acts or conditions immediately. Ultimately, they were responsible for the safety of themselves and those who worked for and around them. Plant safety leadership training also included area managers and department heads; a factor critical to its success was that every class was launched by a member of senior management.

***Engaging Supervisors.*** The plant leadership class was developed by an outside consultant group. But when it came to planning the safety leadership training course for plant supervisors and union safety committee persons, the decision was made to develop and teach it internally. Just as each of the plant management classes was launched by a member of senior management, so also each supervisory/union safety committee person class was in turn launched by plant management. That commitment cemented the plant leadership's stake in changing the safety culture; at the same it ensured credibility with the participants.

***Engaging the Grassroots.*** Over the past fourteen years of the culture change process, GM and the UAW worked together to reduce serious injuries and OSHA recordables by over 95% percent. What accounts for this sustained improvement? In the beginning, it was certainly top leadership's fervent commitment. What continued to drive it beyond the top? Early successes encouraged them to cascade the process through the ranks. The company and its unions thereafter worked together to create fourteen straight years of continuous improvement, and safety performance numbers today rival and in some cases surpass those of the great companies that were benchmarked in 1994. As a result, when it comes to safety, management and employees now work with a common purpose toward a common goal—an injury-free safety culture.





## Case Study II: Site-Specific – Grassroots-Led/Management-Supported Model – PSE&G



# PSEG

When New Jersey’s Public Service Electric and Gas embarked on a journey to transform the safety culture, PSE&G addressed a series of questions, each reflecting a key issue in building a positive safety culture.

*First, what is the scope of the safety culture change process? System-wide or site-by-site?* Initially, PSE&G management advocated for a utility-wide culture change. But recognizing the importance of its many different site-specific subcultures, each with different needs, management decided to adopt an implementation strategy of going through the organization “village-by-village,” customizing interventions to fit each individual site.

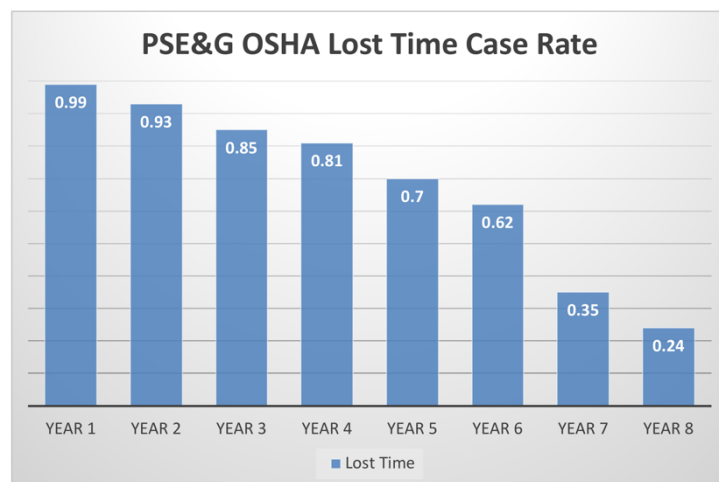
*Second, how will the organization drive the change? From the top down, from the bottom up, or in hybrid fashion?* In keeping with the principle of matching the culture change strategy to the management style of the organization, the strategy PSE&G adopted was “grassroots-led, management-supported.” PSE&G wanted to drive the safety culture change process through grassroots leadership because they had recently reconfigured their safety council so it was based on a higher degree of employee involvement. But inasmuch as culture change driven by the grassroots cannot realistically be accomplished without support from management, the decision was made that it was vital to enlist safety culture leaders from management ranks as well.

*Third, how will grassroots leaders be engaged?* By empowering them. The existing Local Safety Councils were structured so that bargaining unit associates lead them. These grassroots leaders all learned how to conduct effective team meetings, how to elicit safety concerns from their constituent areas, and how to tap supervisory and professional support. 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 suggest improvements, dovetailed precisely with the foundation of an enduring grassroots safety 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.

*Fourth, how will management support the safety culture change process?*

*What is its role in the “grassroots-led, management-supported” approach?*

The time and attention of both managers and supervisors had been taken up “managing” the safety program rather than devoted to “leading” the journey to safety excellence. Consistent with the decision to drive the culture change journey from both the top down and the bottom up simultaneously, management at all levels decided to accelerate their own transformation into becoming effective safety culture leaders. This meant in part learning how to coach and support front-line workers to be effective leaders at the grassroots level.



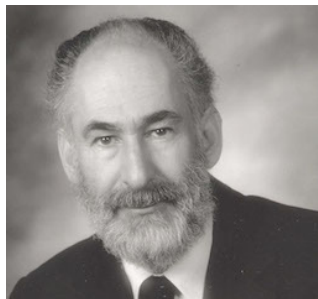
## IN CONCLUSION...

Transforming a safety culture is a process. General Motors and PSE&G are just two examples of organizations that built successful safety cultures, and as the case studies illustrate they did so in different ways. As you develop a systematic strategy consistent with your organization's culture and sub-cultures, you will confront the key implementation issues identified here for how to start the process of building a successful safety culture. How you actualize these principles of culture change will reflect your own approach and the unique needs of your own organization. Since a safety culture is a living dynamic that is constantly evolving, it can always be improved and the journey toward excellence is always ongoing.

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## MEET THE AUTHOR



**STEVEN I. SIMON, Ph.D.**, President of Culture Change Consultants, Inc., as well as Culture Change International, is a pioneer and nationally recognized leader in guiding companies through successful culture change to improve safety performance. Using the Simon Open System Model™ to analyze influences on organizational culture, Dr. Simon has been designing and implementing culture change processes to reduce injuries in the workplace for the past 30 years.

Employees at GE, MillerCoors, Solar Turbines, General Mills, Consumers Energy, Toyota, Illumina and many more companies have adopted Dr. Simon's approach of improving safety performance through behavioral and cultural change.

In addition to directing an international consulting practice with major corporations, Dr. Simon is a frequent speaker at the National Safety Congress, ASSE's Professional Development Conference and company meetings. He co-authored the four-book Grassroots Safety Leadership™ series, a comprehensive guide for implementing organization-wide safety culture change. Dr. Simon is a member of the American Society of Safety Engineers, Safety Executives of New York and is listed in "Who's Who in the Safety Profession."

Amongst Dr. Simon's keynotes include the first ASSE Safety Culture Symposium with his talk: "Transforming Your Safety Culture: You Can Make It Happen." And, he keynoted the NSC Executive Edge Conference with his presentation on the role of middle management in culture change.

Dr. Simon holds the Ph.D. degree in Clinical Psychology from Harvard University.

### **Selected Recent Publications**

- Simon, Steven I. and Cistaro, Peter "Powering Up for Safety: Implementing Grassroots-Led/Management Supported Culture Change at PSE&G," Professional Safety, April, 2009.
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