



HOW WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT  
**SAFETY CULTURE**

*REWRITING THE CONVERSATION*

**GRAINGER**  
|||||



# INTRODUCTION

This white paper builds on the existing idea of safety culture and offers strategies for supporting safe operating actions. We will look at safety culture from a managerial and worker perspective and propose, based on empirical research, safety management values that can guide safety management and technical practices in large and medium-to-small organizations.



# REFRAMING *HOW* WE TALK ABOUT SAFETY AT WORK

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SAFETY AND OPERATIONS

In the past, man-made disasters and occupational accidents were blamed mostly on breakdowns and mistakes. Analysis of safety failures focused on the problems of technical breakdown (in other words, failure to function) and human error (in other words, deviation from intention, expectation or desirability). Later, researchers saw that management and organizational systems can also contribute to safety failures, and they began to consider the way that these systems can help us better understand how and why accidents occur. This line of thinking led to the contemporary understanding of safety culture, which today has become a critical concept for explaining, understanding and preventing accidents. Today, organizational stakeholders in a broad range of industries recognize the importance of safety culture in support of safe operations.



This paper focuses on the operational setting, because operational workers are the most likely to suffer workplace injuries and illness. We will also look at the connection between safety and operations, since these functions share the same space, involve the same workers and production systems, and assume the same risks and contingent liability. Because of their interconnectedness, it's vital to examine the two areas simultaneously.

At the operational level, internal stakeholders (like owners, shareholders, leaders and employees) and external stakeholders (like suppliers, insurers and government and non-government organizations) are able to see the organization's safety management values, practices and outcomes in action. And by taking an operations perspective, we can gain new insights into how safety culture and practices relate to operational practices, helping guide efforts to improve safety and operational outcomes simultaneously.

*In an effort to reframe the conversation about safety culture, we propose a new model of the relationship between safety culture and safety outcomes, and we give safety leaders actionable strategies that will help them move forward.*

# BUILDING A BUSINESS CASE FOR SAFETY

## WHY A SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE MATTERS

Today there is a widely held belief that a company's safety culture has a critical influence on the safety outcomes in that setting. Safety leaders frequently tell stakeholders that safety culture is a prerequisite for supporting safe operating practices and outcomes. But what does that really mean? The notion that safety culture "matters" isn't useful by itself. Many stakeholders already know that safety culture matters, but they struggle to explain the business case for it, and they don't understand how safety culture can play an important role in the overall effectiveness of the larger organization. If safety leaders want to achieve their goals, they should be prepared to offer better information to their organizations' stakeholders, explaining the management, organizational and financial opportunities that open up when a strong safety culture is in place.

*The charts below show a small sample of these opportunities.*

### HOW EXECUTIVES, MANAGERS AND WORKERS BENEFIT FROM A SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE

- 1 At the executive level, senior-level executives will appreciate the bearing that safety culture has on competitiveness and brand reputation.
- 2 At the managerial level, engineers and operations management specialists will be motivated to join forces with safety specialists to protect workers.
- 3 Workers and their representatives will have a better understanding of how safety management and technical practices improve their well-being.

### WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN ACHIEVE WITH A SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE



A better way of determining which safety management strategies and tactics to pursue and deciding what level of investment is needed to improve safety culture.



A method for considering the balance between the direct and indirect costs of a supportive safety culture and calculating the benefits of reduced costs from fewer injuries.



A new way of analyzing investments that makes it a best practice—and a sensible business decision—to improve safety culture.



Sustainable and predictable safety and compliance results, which can have a dramatic influence on how investors and other external stakeholders view the organization, especially in high-risk industries.

# THE ANTECEDENT MODEL OF SAFETY CULTURE

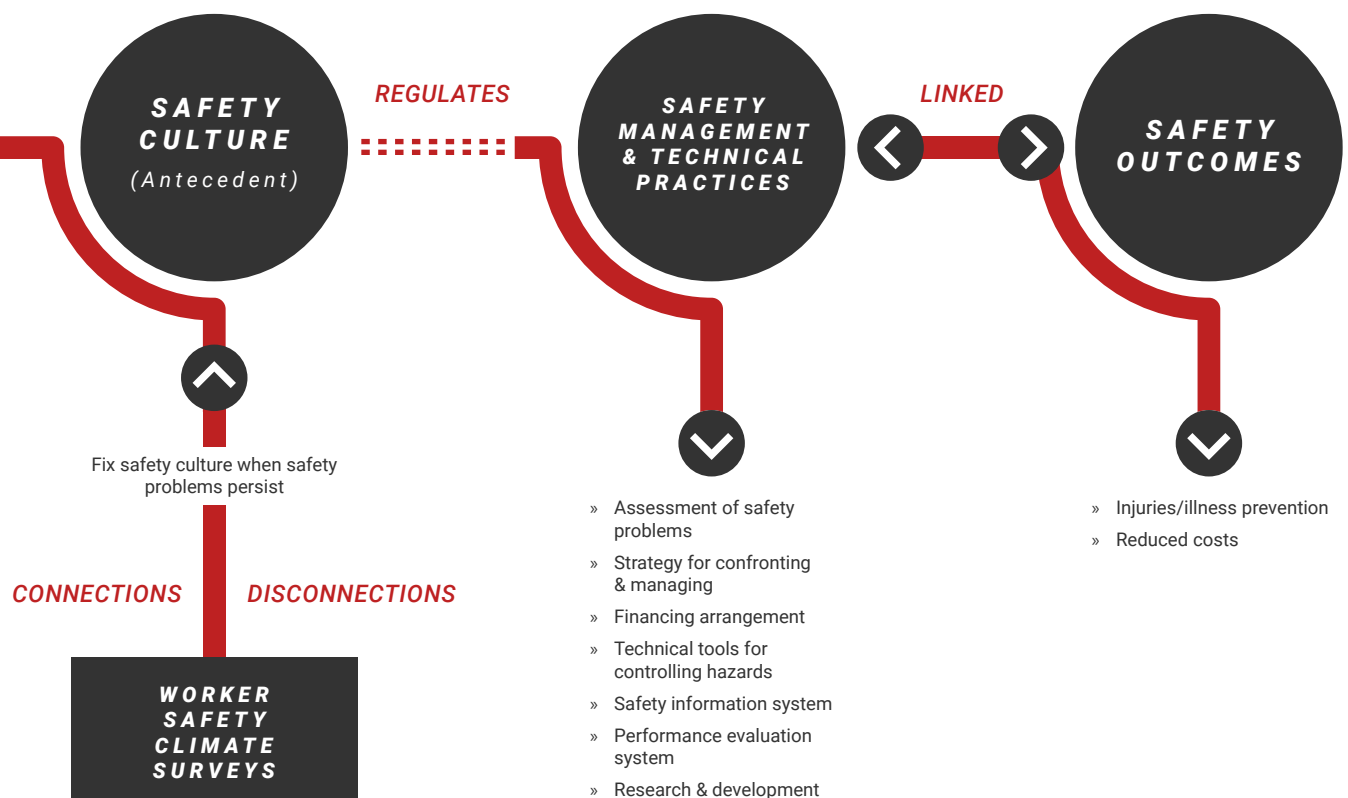
## THE TRADITIONAL SAFETY CULTURE MODEL

If we want to rewrite the conversation, we'll need to look first at the existing conversation. The traditional approach to safety culture is based on the idea that there's a simple, causal relationship between culture on the one hand and practices and outcomes on the other. The idea is that safety culture is the antecedent, the thing that comes first, regulating the safety practices and driving the safety outcomes that follow.

In the Antecedent Model, safety climate surveys offer an assessment of how safety practices are connected (and disconnected) with the existing safety culture. These surveys are worker-centered. (For examples, see Appendix A.) When there are persistent safety problems, safety leaders point to flaws in the culture as the cause and say that "fixing the culture" is the remedy. Despite these efforts, the safety culture tends to be static. We argue this model hinders organizations' ability to improve safety outcomes.

The Antecedent Model is illustrated in Figure 1

FIGURE 1  
ANTECEDENT MODEL

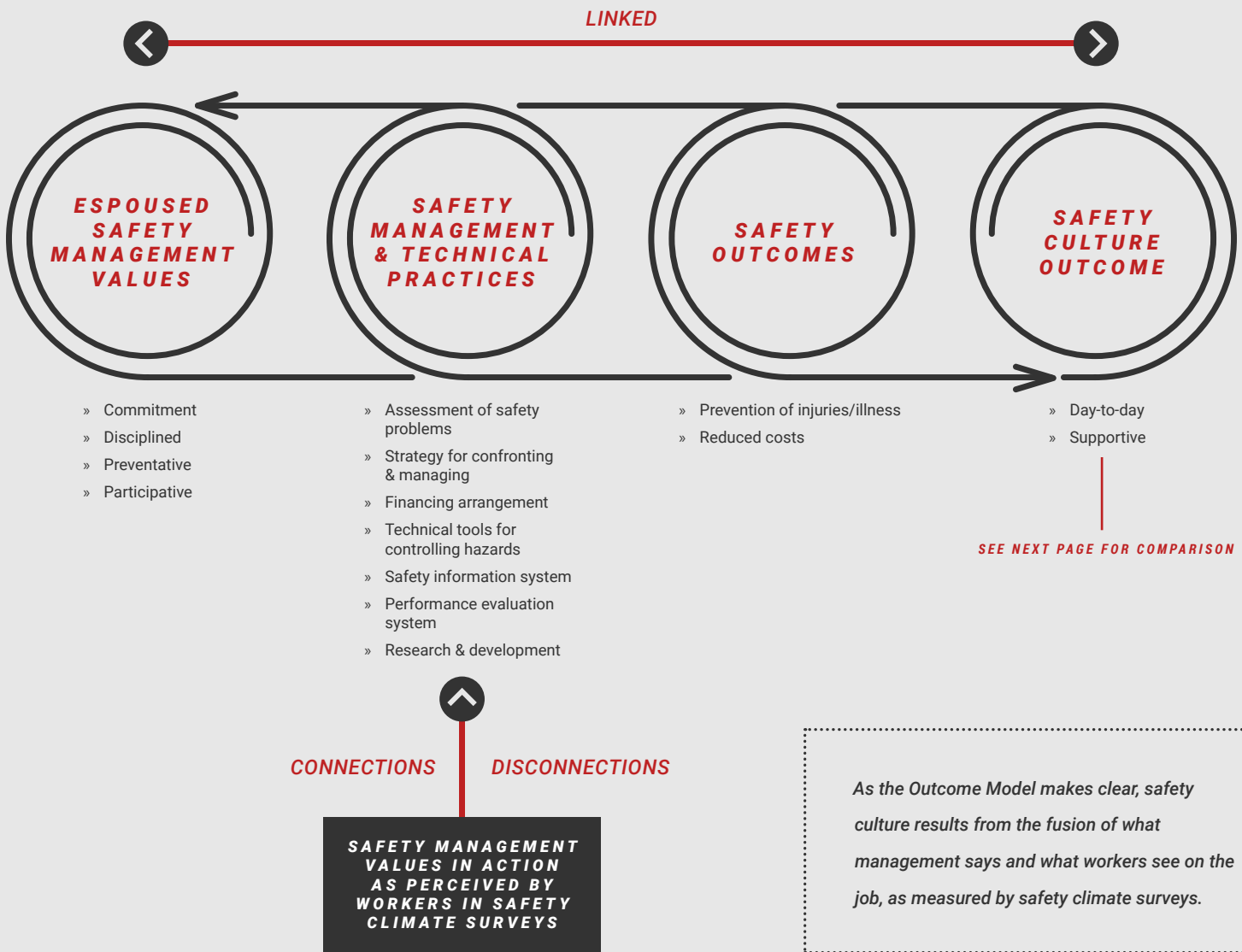


# THE *OUTCOME* MODEL OF SAFETY CULTURE

**ALIGNING  
MANAGEMENT'S  
SAFETY  
VALUES WITH  
WORKERS'  
EXPERIENCE**

We offer another way to think and talk about safety. What if safety culture is not a static antecedent from which outcomes flow? What if safety culture is itself an outcome? **The model shown in Figure 2** looks at safety culture as an outcome of the alignment between what management says about safety—their espoused safety values—and what workers see happening in practice. We believe that organizations struggling to improve safety outcomes will have more success using this second model.

FIGURE 2  
**OUTCOME MODEL**

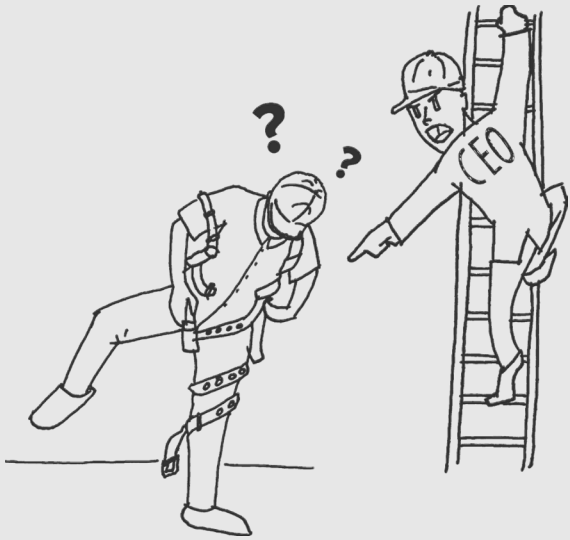


**THE OUTCOME MODEL OF SAFETY CULTURE (CONTINUED):**

However, don't mistake the espoused safety values of management with safety values in action.

For instance, if workers see that management is failing to **"walk the talk"**—if, for example, a safety

**executive fails to wear PPE while touring the production floor**—there is a disconnect between the espoused organizational values and the values in action, and the safety culture suffers.



With the outcome model as a guide, safety leaders can address persistent problems by telling stakeholders that the organization needs to rethink the values and practices that guide its safety management efforts, instead of pointing to unclear problems with the safety culture itself.

*The Outcome Model shows that it's possible for safety culture to evolve in response to disconnects between values and practice.*

## **AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION**

### **DAY-TO-DAY SAFETY CULTURE VS. SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE**

In this give and take between values and practices, organizations have the opportunity to create either a day-to-day safety culture or a supportive safety culture. **A day-to-day culture** is one that's not genuinely committed to safety, that's relatively undisciplined,

that's reactive rather than proactive, and that encourages little or no participation. Organizations with day-to-day cultures have a short-term focus on meeting safety and operational goals, and they are often compliance-oriented. They don't see safety culture as a competitive advantage, and they don't see how it helps their business and operational success.

On the other hand, **supportive organizational cultures** are truly committed to safety. They work with discipline, have a prevention focus and are participatory. The organizations with supportive cultures tend to take a long-term perspective when managing both safety and operations and recognize safety improvement as an economic and competitive opportunity, not as a cost or threat.



# COMMITMENT, DISCIPLINE, PARTICIPATION AND PREVENTION

## THE FOUR PILLARS OF A SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE

The Outcome Model shows one way of changing an organization's safety culture—by influencing the safety values that workers see in practice. The chart below describes four of the most important values that go into creating a supportive safety culture, in the abstract and in action.

For more on these ideas, see "Getting Workplace Safety Right" in the MIT Sloan Management Review in the reference list at the end of this paper.

### FOUR VALUES OF A SUPPORTIVE SAFETY CULTURE



You can use these safety management values to shape routine safety practices. These practices, in turn, **influence both safety and operational outcomes, as shown in Figure 3**, and it's important that workers see them in action. Without this, a supportive safety culture is not sustainable.





# MAKING /T REAL

## STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING THE OUTCOME MODEL

When safety culture, competency and capabilities are strong, employees can feel safe and be highly engaged with their work. But it takes more than ad hoc initiatives to achieve this.

*We recommend that safety leaders start with two strategies: looking at the life cycle and implementing an integrated safety management systems approach.*

### LOOKING AT THE LIFE CYCLE

The best way to begin is by profiling the risks and costs that affect the organization's new and existing products, processes and services, noting how these burdens change over the productive and economic life cycle. To understand the safety life cycle framework, think of the life cycle of a design and production process, which generally involves safety, engineering and operations management specialists.

This third phase focuses on minimizing the effects of accidents when risk and danger control measures are deficient or ineffective. This phase focuses on incident response, recovery and business resumption activities.

Integrate safety into the design phase by mitigating exposures to hazardous materials at the earliest possible stage in the design of products. This will minimize risk and cost burdens later in the life cycle, and it will also allow safety practices to be part of the systems engineering or engineering design practices. The goal during this phase is to identify potential risks in the production process and to "design out" these threats so that they will not materialize and cause accidents (or related injuries and illnesses) in production.



The second phase begins once safety leaders and engineers have exhausted all possibilities to eliminate exposures to hazards in the production process. Integrate safety into this phase by incorporating risk and danger control measures in the production process, with safety personnel working side by side with operations personnel and process engineers.

### TAKING AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

After analyzing the life cycle, the next strategy is to employ an integrated safety management systems approach. This approach helps guide and control operational activities, improve operating capabilities, maximize organizational competitiveness and develop a supportive safety culture. An integrated safety management system approach is one that is:

- » Accommodating both vertically and laterally within the organizational structure and capable of balancing safety and health and economic concerns in transparent ways
- » Supportive of lean management principles
- » In compliance with safety laws, with major risks, liabilities, and impacts properly controlled
- » Both an internal management tool and a way of demonstrating a company's safety culture

# REWRITING THE CONVERSATION

## SAFETY AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF OPERATIONS

It's time to rewrite the conversation about safety culture. Instead of blaming persistent safety problems on hazy ideas about culture, safety leaders can use the thoughts outlined in this paper to develop a more effective framework. Instead of seeing safety culture as an antecedent, they can see it as an outcome—an outcome that they can influence with efforts to improve safety values and practices.

By thinking about safety culture in this way, and by seeing it from an operations perspective, safety culture takes on a whole new level of applicability for stakeholders, leading to improvements in safety and operational outcomes simultaneously.





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