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Defining safety culture for Manitoba workplaces and workers: Final report



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Overview

The term “safety culture” is widely used, yet there is little consensus on how the term is defined and understood. This report provides a definition of “safety culture” to be used in Manitoba. This definition may inform prevention efforts and provide the foundation upon which to build an evaluation framework to assess progress in improving the safety culture in Manitoba.

This document is written with a focus on the workplace, on the understanding that safety culture is most often expressed and learned within workplaces. However, the document recognizes that many institutions with direct ties to the workplace (e.g. schools, industry-based safety programs, SAFE Work Manitoba education programs) can also have a direct impact on safety culture.

The report also provides information on the background, research and process considered in developing the definition of “safety culture,” as well as the definition’s alignment with SAFE Work Manitoba programs, including its certification, industry-based, prevention incentive, training and social marketing programs. This report does not include a simplified definition of “safety culture” for use in promotion and communications programs.

Defining a strong safety culture for Manitoba

Safety culture snapshot

Safety culture is a set of shared values and beliefs we have regarding workplace safety and health. Safety culture is part of larger organizational culture. Safety culture influences how workplace safety is prioritized, as well as the decisions and actions taken surrounding it. A safety culture should serve as the rudder of an organization, steering it through both normal and turbulent events. Safety culture is usually reflected through workplaces, but can also be reflected through institutions that connect to workplaces (e.g. education, youth employment, unions) acting collectively to establish a set of shared values and beliefs about safety culture in the community.

Safety culture should be defined from a positive perspective, meaning **a strong safety culture**. A strong safety culture is an aspirational goal of all Manitobans and Manitoba workplaces.

In consideration of the above, the definition of safety culture includes:

- the values and beliefs that underpin a strong culture of workplace safety and health;
- the dimensions by which these values and beliefs are reflected within workplaces; and
- the dimensions by which these values and beliefs are reflected in the broader community relative to those constructs that directly affect Manitoba workplaces.

Values and beliefs: The underpinnings of a strong safety culture

Underpinning safety culture are values (i.e. what we consider important) and beliefs (how we achieve our values). Values and beliefs are primarily expressed in workplaces, but all Manitobans can understand what is important in workplace health and safety and how, as a province, it is to be achieved. Thus, school programs, families, immigration programs, literacy programs or SAFE Work Manitoba programs (e.g. industry-based safety programs, education programs and social marketing practices) can support learning values and beliefs and express them in their daily activities. The following values and beliefs should serve as the standard for a strong safety culture.

Values:

- People expect safety and health in the workplace.
- People in the workplace are our most valuable resource.
- Safety and health is valued with productivity, quality and pay.

Beliefs:

- Workplace injuries and illnesses can be prevented.
- Leaders drive improvement.
- We all play a part in building healthy and safe workplaces.

These values and beliefs are the foundation of a strong safety culture.

Practically describing a strong safety culture in Manitoba workplaces

The following six dimensions help organize how we understand whether a strong safety culture exists within a workplace. Some dimensions are more easily observed and measured than others, but all can be measured to allow for demonstrating improvement. While six dimensions are presented, they are inter-related. A strong safety culture is typically present when all six dimensions exist in a workplace. Together, they represent how the three values and three beliefs are being enacted in a workplace.

1. **Safety and health hazards and concerns are addressed.** Hazards potentially affecting safety and health, including all facets of work (e.g. jobs, equipment, machinery, worker activities, work processes and on-site conditions) and all types of hazards (e.g. physical, chemical, biological, environmental, psychological, psycho-social and musculoskeletal) are promptly identified, fully evaluated, and promptly addressed or corrected commensurate with their significance. It is not only known hazards that are addressed, but also worker concerns about hazards as well. Hazard prevention and control activities should be part of daily operational conversations. Safety and health are integrated into all workplace operations as part of work processes, production, quality, purchasing of new equipment, and human resource practices (including management performance and training). Training in hazard identification and control is essential. Workers and supervisors are provided with the training required to work safely and perform their work competently. Knowledge and experience are shared throughout the organization, through training programs, workshops, lunch and learns, and more.
2. **Leaders demonstrate a commitment to safety and health.** Safety and health starts at the top and relies on organizational leaders who demonstrate a commitment to safety values through their actions. Leaders demonstrate commitment by allocating resources, communicating and making decisions in a way that indicates safety and health is prioritized equally with production and quality. Leaders show how they value safety through their practices supporting a respectful work environment and a work environment where workers are free to raise concerns. Leadership in safety and health extends to all levels in a workplace, and all workers throughout the organization are

encouraged to demonstrate leadership qualities (e.g. reporting, decision-making, looking out for others, etc.).

3. **Trust and respect permeate the work environment.** Communication is open and reflects an environment in which trust, fairness and respect matter in daily interactions and, especially, in resolving conflicts and solving problems. Workplace activities can increase the visibility of safety in operations and support building a respectful work environment conducive to safety and health (including, importantly, the ability to raise safety and health concerns without fear of negative actions). Formal and informal feedback loops are built through discussion. Workers are expected to question occupational health and safety (OHS) in work practices as part of everyday conversations without fear of negative actions.
4. **Everyone in the organization is held accountable for health and safety.** All people are responsible and committed to health and safety within the organization. Roles and responsibilities are assigned and understood, and individuals in the workplace feel both personally accountable and committed to their own safety and health and that of their peers. Workers know that their safety and health, and the safety and health of all workers, is a priority. Workers recognize they have an important role in safety and health.
5. **The work environment is inclusive.** All workers matter. Contract, temporary and other non-traditional workers are respected equally. There is a commitment to reach out to all workers to participate and be involved in safety and health, and to value the input of all workers. There is typically a workplace focus on teamwork, collaboration and shared decision-making around safety issues. Diversity is welcomed and seen as an asset. Workplaces and leadership recognize that different learning approaches will be more or less successful with different workers, and that multiple training methods should be used to reach workers with different language or literacy levels.
6. **Continuous learning is a hallmark of the organization.** An inquiring attitude permeates the workplace. Opportunities to learn about new or improved ways to ensure safety and health are sought out and implemented. The workplace strives towards maintaining and improving best practices.

Practically describing a strong safety culture external to Manitoba workplaces

SAFE Work Manitoba is seeking to improve the culture of workplace health and safety beyond workplaces and extend it more broadly throughout the province, particularly in those institutions with direct influence on workplace safety and health (e.g. SAFE Work Manitoba, secondary education institutions, technical schools, job training programs, youth employment programs and immigrant support programs).

The following four dimensions represent a consensus approach for understanding whether a strong provincial safety culture exists. Together, they represent how the safety culture values and beliefs are being enacted outside of workplaces. Some dimensions are more easily observed and measured than others, but all can be measured to allow for demonstrating improvement.

A strong safety culture exists when both the six dimensions within a workplace and the four dimensions within the broader community are present.

1. **All institutions are invested in education and training.** A commitment to support learning about occupational safety and health exists within institutions both with and without designated responsibility for health and safety in Manitoba. Learning about occupational health and safety does not start when a person enters the workforce. It is a lifelong process. Educational programs that prepare individuals for the workplace (i.e. high schools, apprenticeship programs, universities and colleges) provide safety and health training. Educational institutions and educators understand their role in, and impact on, students' lives, and ensure students have received the required training.
2. **The public demands workplace safety and health as a community norm.** In family and community discussions, there is an expectation that workplaces and workers who engage in positive workplace health and safety practices are rewarded and those that do not are encouraged to make efforts to adopt safer practices. Parents and families help educate their children about their workplace rights and responsibilities, provide guidance and act as role models in safe work practices. The broader community expects workplace safety and health and is outraged by workplace injuries and illness. Expectations are built into systems, such as hiring contractors who have

safety and health programs and questioning workplace safety and health as a condition of employment.

3. Provincial leaders support and invest in occupational safety and health.

Leaders throughout the province support providing safety and health services, resources and training that are accessible to all workplaces and workers. Provincial leaders invest in building Manitoba’s capacity to sustain safe and healthy workplaces that promote the economic competitiveness of the province. Government, industry, labour, workplaces and other workplace safety and health stakeholders collaborate as partners in building safe and healthy workplaces. Stakeholders work together and leverage each others’ strengths to achieve common goals, as opposed to working in silos or in competition. This includes a landscape of industry-based safety programs, unions, professional associations, and private and community service providers who can support the expertise and specialized needs of workers, workplaces and sectors.

4. Laws and standards are progressive and enforced. Robust laws and standards support quality workplace safety and health programs, including training programs that are understood and complied with. Laws and standards are progressive, and proactively address emerging workplace safety and health issues. Enforcement is effective and has an impact.

IWH recommendations

The above definitions of a strong safety culture expressed as values and beliefs in workplaces and provincial institutions that support workplaces were developed through a stakeholder engagement process. The approach to defining safety culture aligns with current research and practice and has been used by other expert groups.

It is recommended SAFE Work Manitoba adopt the above definitions.

Given SAFE Work Manitoba’s twin goals of building a strong safety culture and reducing injuries and illnesses, having a clear set of definitions for safety culture can provide a foundation for planning strategic activities, developing metrics to monitor progress, and implementing evaluation plans to support continuous improvement efforts to build a strong culture of safety.

It is recommended SAFE Work Manitoba develop, implement and evaluate a plan to support the growth of a strong safety culture in Manitoba.

Project background

SAFE Work Manitoba is committed to preventing workplace injury and illness in Manitoba. The 2013-2018 Provincial Five Year Prevention Plan emphasizes the need to build a culture of safety as central to key principles: making Manitoba a leader in workplace injury and illness prevention, improving services where they are most needed, ensuring systems are accountable, balanced and fair, and ensuring a strong role for all workplace stakeholders. To achieve these goals, SAFE Work Manitoba is involved in several targeted initiatives that include:

- the expansion of industry-based safety programs;
- building a safety and health certification program open to all employers;
- developing a prevention incentive to reward the genuine prevention efforts of employers;
- offering free safety and health workshops;
- employing social marketing practices; and
- building partnerships.

With this mandate, SAFE Work Manitoba recognizes the need to establish a consensus understanding of what a culture of workplace safety and health is, as well as a practical evaluation and measurement framework to assess safety culture at the provincial, sector and organizational levels.

In July 2016, SAFE Work Manitoba contracted with the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) through Research and Workplace Innovation Program (RWIP) Special Funding. The IWH is an independent not-for-profit organization whose mission is to promote, protect and improve the safety and health of working people by conducting actionable research that is valued and shared with employers, workers and policy-makers.

Through the RWIP partnership, IWH and SAFE Work Manitoba worked to develop a definition of safety culture to be used in program evaluation and assessment to

measure progress being made in improving safety culture in Manitoba's workplaces and society overall.

Project process: Developing consensus

As part of a consultation process, the following groups met and discussed a draft version of this document:

- ChangeMakers - SAFE Work Manitoba Agency of Record
- Construction Safety Association of Manitoba
- Heavy Construction Association - Work Safely
- Made SAFE - Manufacturing Safety for Manitobans
- Manitoba Federation of Labour
- Manitoba Federation of Labour - Occupational Health Centre
- Motor Vehicle Safety Association of Manitoba
- Risk Professionally Managed (RPM) Trucking Industry Safety Program
- SAFE Workers of Tomorrow
- SAFE Work Manitoba staff
- Westman Association of Safety Professionals
- Workplace Psychological Health and Safety Coalition Advisory and Strategy Advisory Group

Each group was engaged around the following core questions:

1. Should a basic value be "we value being healthy and safe"?
 - a. The consensus was "yes."
2. Should any definition of safety culture also include health?
 - a. The consensus was "yes, for now."
3. Should the definition of safety be less positive?
 - a. The consensus was "no."
4. Should the focus be beyond the organization encompassing homes, communities and schools?
 - a. The consensus was "yes, for those directly affected by workplaces."
5. Is there anything missing from the dimensions describing a strong safety culture?

- a. The consensus was “no, the list of dimensions is complete.”
6. Is “culture” the wrong thing to focus on, and should we consider “safety climate” instead?
 - a. The consensus was “no, we want to focus on culture.”

In addition to the initial consultations, several follow-up stakeholder meetings were held to confirm the values and beliefs that underpin safety culture and to confirm/identify the dimensions of a positive safety culture both within workplaces and external to workplaces.

The basics of safety culture

Safety culture term and foundations

The term “safety culture” is widely used, yet there is little consensus on how the term is defined and understood. The use of the term “safety culture” is sometimes criticized because it can potentially be misinterpreted to be a construct that exists in isolation and/or that can be reduced to a set of explicit rules to follow or comply with. Despite these criticisms, a vast amount of literature uses the term “safety culture” to mean the culture, which exists relative to workplace (occupational) safety and health. As such, our definition begins with an agreement to use the term “safety culture” based on the following foundations:

- Safety culture does not exist in isolation. Within workplaces, safety culture is a subset of organizational culture and is influenced by the broader community and institutions that directly influence workplaces (e.g. education, family, legal, etc.).
- Safety culture includes health. In a safety culture, the focus is on risk identification and control using engineering, personal protective equipment and administrative controls. Health is frequently used to augment safety and indicate potential exposure to chemical, noise, dust, vibration or other toxic environmental conditions. A safe workplace seeks to eliminate exposures and, therefore, there is global consensus that the use of safety culture refers to both occupational safety and occupational health.
- Safety culture is highly complex and enduring. Safety culture cannot be managed, but it may be influenced and interpreted. The implication is that

activities and assessment of safety culture must involve a number of different factors and approaches.

- Safety culture includes the shared values and beliefs about workplace safety and health that exist within the broader culture of individuals, organizations and communities. Defining these values and beliefs, and how they are manifested within workplaces and within the broader community, provides a framework to assess the strength of safety culture in Manitoba.
- A strong safety culture is required to meaningfully reduce workplace injuries and illnesses and sustain prevention efforts.

Safety culture: From the scientific literature

In this section, the historical roots of safety culture are discussed, followed by an explanation of how safety culture differs from safety climate.

A safety culture represents the unwritten assumptions (often referred to as tacit assumptions) for how we act safely in a workplace (Schein, 2010). How we act reflects social, psychological, physical and ethical norms. The assumptions reflect exposed beliefs about how things work and values about what is important, as well as unconscious values or taken-for-granted values and beliefs. Values and beliefs are learned by groups of workers as they solve problems created by internal needs (e.g. balancing operational efficiency with safety) and external requirements (e.g. accurately reporting injuries) within the workplace. They represent what workers feel are important for the organization.

Safety culture is one aspect of the larger organizational culture. Organizational culture is not static, but dynamic. It is a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds workers at all times. Workers are constantly sustaining culture through their interactions with each other, shaped by leaders' behaviour and organizational structures, routines, rules and norms (Schein, 2010; Blazsin and Guldenmund, 2015).

Safety culture reflects the extent to which an organization's culture understands and accepts that safety comes first (Vogus et al., 2010). A safety culture guides the workforce's choice between being efficient and being safe (Guldenmund, 2000). Multiple meta-analyses indicate safety culture consistently influences increased compliance with safety rules and participation in safety efforts, as well as reduced accidents and injuries (Clarke, 2006; Christian et al., 2009; Beus et al., 2010). Safety

culture does not change overnight, and most researchers suggest it takes from six to nine years to completely change and build a strong safety culture (Guldenmund, 2000; Simmons, 2013).

There are several commonly used definitions of safety culture. The U.K. Health and Safety Commission (HSC, 1993) defines safety culture as “the product of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organization’s health and safety programs.” The U.S. Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) defines safety culture as “the core values and behaviors of all members of an organization that reflect a commitment to conduct business in a manner that protects people and the environment” (BSEE, 2013).

Safety culture: A misunderstood term

The term “safety culture” is often misunderstood and confused with rules for behaviour or with safety climate. Discussing these potential confusions is helpful to guard against misguided activity that can hinder momentum in building a strong safety culture.

Safety culture entails organizational members viewing safety as intrinsically important. Culture does not emphasize simply following rules. Instead, safety culture is characterized by managers and workers choosing to do work the safe way every time, even under difficult environmental conditions and time constraints or when no one else is around. Safety culture is not developed or sustained solely through formal means (e.g. punishment of individuals for incidents of non-compliance and rewards for compliance, CEO public declarations, or obligatory discussions of safety in formal notices or safety minutes). Safety culture must be fully embraced by leadership, and the entire organization must commit to engage in and execute safe and healthy practices every day.

Strengthening safety culture (i.e. placing a priority on safety relative to efficiency) results from careful practice, leadership attention and sustained effort. DeJoy (2005) has cautioned against bottom-up behavioural change programs as approaches to improve safety culture. These programs often shift the responsibility for safety from management to workers. Behavioural change programs cannot be a substitute for investments to make facilities and operations safe (Baram and Schoebel, 2007; Silbey, 2009).

Often, the words “climate” and “culture” are used interchangeably, but they are not the same. Culture is often contrasted with climate. Climate is explained as the specific and identifiable practices that capture the “surface features” of culture (Denison, 1996; Flin et al., 2006). Culture is the value and beliefs that underpin our actions; what we do and how we do it. Climate captures the shared perceptions of a group of workers in the context of formal policies and practices at the organizational level and the informal policies and practices at the work group level; i.e. among a group of workers with the same supervisor or same set of supervisors and managers. Safety culture requires workers to value safety prior to any event happening, thus influencing their thinking and activities. Safety culture is observed not only in behaviours, but also in how people think about what safety means in the organization. Safety climate is what a worker does to work safely. Thus, safety climate is an enacted behaviour. However, when safety culture and climate are aligned, researchers suggest that a measure of climate also assesses culture. Safety climate is very context-dependent and tends to change, while culture is more stable. Building a strong safety culture is more sustainable than building a strong safety climate.

Aligning with SAFE Work Manitoba programs

Safe Work Manitoba programming aligns with efforts required to build a positive safety culture. The details of this alignment and evaluation of same will be outlined in the safety culture evaluation framework report.

Safety certification program

In a safety certification program, three inter-related dimensions together create a safety and health management system. Below, we propose an alignment of the three certification program dimensions with the six dimensions of a strong workplace safety culture.

- **Leadership commitment:** leadership commitment, inclusiveness, respectful work environment, accountability
- **Worker participation:** inclusiveness, respectful work environment, accountability

- **Hazard identification and risk control:** safety and health hazards and concerns addressed, continuous learning, accountability

Industry-based safety programs

SAFE Work Manitoba is seeking to expand the current number of industry-based safety programs (IBSPs). IBSPs are core agents of change in Manitoba when it comes to building a strong provincial safety culture as defined in the document. IBSPs enhance safety culture by:

- **Providing safety certification.** The safety certification programs of IBSPs directly align with the definition of a strong workplace safety culture as described above.
- **Investing in the education and training of students—the province’s future workers.** IBSPs are positioned to partner with other training institutes, including high schools, technical schools, colleges, universities and continuing education providers.
- **Supporting and investing in OHS.** IBSPs reflect the support and investment of leaders. IBSPs are also positioned to work collaboratively to engage provincial leaders in the support of, and investment in, OHS through innovative partnerships and advocacy.
- **Building the public demand for workplace safety and health as a community norm.** A landscape rich in IBSPs that are partnering with local business and community associations will help develop and support community norms and expectations about workplace health and safety. As well, IBSPs can encourage their members to demand certification as part of their procurement and tendering processes.
- **Ensuring OHS laws are progressive and enforced.** IBSPs work with stakeholders to set best practices and training standards, and to advocate for progressive legislation and policies.

Prevention incentive program

The prevention incentive program (PIP) is designed to reward companies that have stronger occupational health and safety performances, as defined by their certification status, level of risk and historical performance. This program will support the development of a strong safety culture largely through its focus on the

certification process as part of the rewards structure; that is, it will encourage companies to become certified and sustain their certification, thus keeping them closely aligned with the workplace safety culture definition. This creates a positive upward spiral: a strong safety culture will prevent injuries and illnesses and make companies more resilient to upswings in injuries and illnesses in turbulent economic times, thus improving their OHS performance and increasing their rewards under the prevention incentive program.

Training programs

Most training programs are offered by IBSPs or SAFE Work Manitoba, and are also available through non-profit organizations, labour groups, OHS consultants and businesses. These programs provide the basics for understanding occupational health and safety, creating and sustaining leadership commitment, building a strong safety culture, and engaging in hazard detection and risk control activities. These are the pillars of both safety certification and building a strong safety culture. Through partnerships and outreach training programs targeting new workers or Manitobans about to enter the workforce, these programs can directly influence the values and beliefs each person has about occupational health and safety and, thus, directly influence the safety culture.

Social marketing

SAFE Work Manitoba has a strong commitment to social marketing and maintains a website of resources and promotional materials. Current social marketing programs are loosely aligned with the IWH-OPM measure of safety culture, and with values and beliefs of a positive safety culture as defined in this document. Going forward, social marketing programs have the opportunity to more directly and purposefully promote the safety culture values and beliefs articulated in this report to further support building a strong provincial safety culture

Next steps

SAFE Work Manitoba has taken the first important step of reaching consensus on a definition of safety culture. The safety culture definition provides a framework upon which to target efforts and evaluate progress. Next steps include confirming the

SAFE Work Manitoba framework for evaluating progress in improving safety culture. This will include, but is not limited to:

- confirming opportunities to use the Institute for Work & Health Organizational Performance Metric (IWH-OPM) tool;
- completing an evaluation framework of the SAFE Work Certified Program, which includes safety culture;
- assessing and making changes to SAFE Work Manitoba and Workers Compensation Board survey to capture safety culture information; and
- confirming a safety culture evaluation framework that can be embedded in a SAFE Work Manitoba dashboard.

No great examples are available from other Canadian provinces showing how to build a strong safety culture. The next steps will support building consensus around (1) a transparent evaluation framework that allows for continuous improvement through an open dialogue with all partners, and (2) the implementation of the evaluation to initiate the journey and brand Manitoba as a world leader in occupational health and safety.

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