

Positive Safety Culture – Quick Guide

What is a positive safety culture?

A positive safety culture is the shared attitudes, values and beliefs of the people within your business, as they relate to safety. A culture where you promote safety and involve everyone in your business is an essential part of an effective Safety Management System (SMS). Developing a positive safety culture will help ensure the people in your business can make a difference and positively impact the level of safety.

You can achieve a positive safety culture by consistently sharing your safety message, teaching safety values and showing a real commitment to safety. Safety culture further improves when you:

- share safe work practices
- have a low tolerance or acceptance of risk
- eliminate or minimise hazards and risks to as low as is reasonably practicable
- investigate and deal with incidents and near misses with the aim of improving the safety of your transport activities.

Signs that a positive safety culture exists in your business are when your employees all share your commitment to safety and everyone can say that operating safely is ‘the way we do things around here’.

A positive safety culture encourages open and honest communication and relies on trust between employees and management. Direction from senior management, where employees can easily see safety is a priority, encourages everyone to be involved. Business owners and executive officers who lead by example through their actions, behaviours and decisions reinforce that safety is important to the business.

Why is a positive safety culture important?

You want your SMS to make a difference. Getting your positive safety culture right will help you achieve this. Employees’ attitudes, values and beliefs towards safety can influence the decisions they make and whether or not they hold safety in high regard. If your employees place a high value on safety, they are less likely to act in an unsafe manner and more likely to participate in your SMS activities.

How to develop a positive safety culture

If everyone in your business is trained to do their job in a safe manner, and is proactively looking for hazards and reporting incidents and near misses, then you will be approaching a level of safety that is behaviour driven. All the components of a positive safety culture must be actively demonstrated by managers on a regular basis to encourage everyone to participate, if this level of safety is to be achieved.

The five interconnecting components of a positive safety culture

There are five interconnecting components that make up a positive safety culture. Figure 1 below provides a brief description of each component.



Figure 1: The five interconnecting components of a positive safety culture¹

Keep in mind that there are inter-relationships between the components of a positive safety culture. For example, an informed culture relies on a good reporting culture, which in turn depends on a just culture.

Following is a detailed explanation of the five interconnecting components of a positive safety culture.

¹ Adapted from James Reason’s Safety Culture Model.

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Just culture

A business that embraces a just culture understands the importance of establishing an atmosphere of trust, where its employees are encouraged to report essential safety-related information and issues. Employees need to be assured that if they're involved in or report an incident, they won't be blamed for honest mistakes or for circumstances beyond their influence or control.

Employees also need to understand that wilful violations and gross negligence are unacceptable behaviours and won't be tolerated in your business. It's important that employees are informed about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The following are some points to consider when developing and maintaining a just culture in your business. You could:

- document a just culture policy, either as a stand-alone document or as part of your safety policy
- encourage the reporting of safety issues and incidents as an opportunity to learn and improve safety outcomes
- deal with the facts when investigating Incidents and consider equipment, systems, leadership and training failures, instead of blaming the individuals involved
- explain what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour
- clearly explain that disciplinary action will be taken if wilful misconduct or unacceptable behaviour is identified.

Informed culture

A business that has an informed culture wants to understand its safety systems and use the data it collects to better influence how the safety of its transport activities will be managed. It wants to analyse and use the data it collects to be better informed so it can actively inform those involved and improve safety outcomes. The data you collect can come from many sources and can include:

- hazard reports
- risk assessments and risk registers
- incident and investigation reports
- toolbox and safety meetings
- internal and external audits
- safety survey results
- industry safety information.

A business that has an informed culture will also want to understand and keep up to date with better and safer ways of doing things. It will also consider and use equipment and technologies that will improve operational safety outcomes.

Reporting culture

Businesses that have a reporting culture will not only have a reporting system in place but, more importantly, have a culture where their employees openly report hazards, risks, incidents, near misses and safety concerns without fear of blame or disciplinary action. If you ignore reported safety concerns and blame is your initial response to honest mistakes and errors, people will be reluctant to report in the future. Some tips to encourage a reporting culture in your business are to:

- clearly explain the benefits of reporting hazards, incidents, and near misses
- keep your reporting systems as easy to complete as possible
- provide feedback to the person who completed the report as soon as practicable
- clearly communicate the safety improvements and actions taken as the result of investigating the report
- implement a just culture policy and clearly explain it to your employees.

Learning culture

Businesses with a learning culture have a willingness to improve safety based on new and more informed information. They collect and measure safety-related data with the specific aim to improve the safety of their transport activities. To develop a learning culture in your business you could:

- identify hazards, assess the risks and put controls in place that either eliminate or minimise the risks so far as is reasonably practicable
- continually review the hazards and risks recorded on your risk register with the aim to further reduce the level of risk
- investigate near miss and incident reports with the aim to understand what happened and improve safety and safety processes
- communicate agreed actions and lessons learned to employees and relevant third parties to ensure everyone is informed.

Flexible culture

Businesses with a flexible culture have the ability to adapt to change and don't get put off by challenges and issues that appear out of the blue. They prepare for change and plan to involve people with the necessary expertise to deal with whatever challenges arise. Having a flexible culture means you put a plan in place to manage change that:

- identifies the people and areas of your business that will be affected
- involves the right people with the necessary expertise and skills to deal with the change
- considers and identifies the risks associated with the change
- assesses the risks associated with the change with the aim to eliminate or minimise those risks to as low as is reasonably practicable
- identifies and communicates the effects of the change as early as possible so there are no surprises.