

# Sustain Leadership Inspiration in Supportive Safety Culture for Grass-Root Change

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## Abstract

Leaders who do not learn new aspects of doing business in terms of positive safety culture shall be automatically rendered out of business by their world competitors and they would learn in a hard and expensive ways to adapt to a new order of safe work culture. Understanding the core principles of positive safety culture as a behavioural science intervention, the president operations of a group of chemical plants felt and urged all leaders in a meeting that they must relook and review the company HSE policy. While the director operations responded that he would convince his board of directors in this direction, and be very supportive to all plants for the resources required in terms of manpower, finance or infrastructure, etc. This article discusses the challenges and solutions to sustain leadership inspiration in supportive safety culture for grass-root changes. The recommendations are made based on the field visits to 10 site locations and interactions with 257 managers and 250 contractors workmen. Major conclusions are: a) Indian employers have to aim high to be global in safety standards and culture to be global in business. b) Safety culture board team need to be a solution provider at the ground. c) Corporate leadership looks at the larger socio-familial context of their own employees that no one gets injured on any single working day. d) Leadership visible presence on the ground for inspiring positive safety culture. e) The finer role of corporate leadership is to seek inspiration from grassroots leadership and also support for change. f) Human errors often hurdle the safety culture which can be managed by the concept implementation of a totally safe organisation. In a safety culture, human errors are not punished, as they are seen as opportunities to improve and learn from underlying system problems. A sustained safety culture is not only behaviour-based, but also value-based, a corporate value which is a long-term intervention.

**Keywords:** Safety, Culture, Corporate, Managers, Workmen

## Introduction

Culture impacts the grass-root change. Almost forty years down since Bhopal and Chernobyl incidents, the industry has moved from the term 'safety' to 'safety culture'. Nevertheless, the clarity and methodology about its implementation varies from the perspectives of an employer, a manager, a researcher, contractor and EHS professional.

This is very critical issue as the fatalities numbers are still unacceptably high when seen through the promise of the OSH Act, which entitles every worker to safe and healthful working conditions and makes all employers and employees responsible to provide a work area free from recognised hazards (Lundell et al., 2021). Eliminating fatalities and serious injuries is the main challenge for the global industry. Focus is to provide the industry with actionable recommendations and guidance to create safer and healthier workplaces (World Steel Association, 2022).

Almost every third person in workplace or any other place is engaged in an at-risk behaviour, which is why there are fires and fatalities each day, as all incidents are behaviour based. A fire erupted at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi in the morning January 4, 2024. There were no casualties reported from the incident and the cause of the fire is yet to be determined (Livemint, 2024). Fire broke out at a factory in Delhi's Bawana Industrial Area. A total of 25 fire tenders rushed to the site (Roushan, 2024).

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Like a Japanese lecturer says, ‘there is nothing more important than life’. As corporates, our ethics have to be very loud and clear to one and all, which is not. The ‘just and fair culture’ is on article, not on ground. The production-safety balancing act needs to be communicated repeatedly by all leaders down the levels every day. The effectiveness of positive safety culture initiatives can sustain for many years (Spigener et al., 2022).

Safety culture is becoming an indispensable forecasting factor in achieving sustainable development (Jasiulewicz-Kaczmarek, 2022). A strong safety culture is predicted by the fact that leadership is clearly committed and involved in safety (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2017). Leaders deliver change through the safety of cultural intervention and their commitment, passion and time (Lal, 2022).

Safety culture transformation doesn’t get sustained until it is initiated by the safety professionals, adopted by the HODs, monitored by the site/top management and reviewed by the company Directors. Most top managements give verbal commitments in speeches but don’t involve in ‘daily safety culture implementation and monitoring’ which fails the safety culture progress and lead to incidents. Management must talk of business as well as risks while they interact with plant managers in terms of planning and implementation (Kaila, 2021).

## Objectives

To explore challenges and solutions to sustain leadership inspiration in supportive safety culture for grass-root changes.

## Methodology

### Measures

Both primary data (interviews, and discussions) were collected to explore concerns and solutions over corporates’ readiness to re-build positive safety culture. Interviews based on open-ended questions, focus group

interviews and personal in-depth discussions were conducted during 2023-2024.

## Sample and Procedure

Field visits to 10 site locations and interactions with 257 managers and 250 contractors workmen comprised a sample of this research. Industry professionals participated in the study as part of an action field survey with the researcher. These research participants had been implementing behavioural safety compliance culture at their work sites. The research participants included the Directors, Managers, Heads of Departments and EHS/HR Professionals belonging to the public and private industrial sectors, including chemicals, construction, gas, power and steel, across Indian locations. The sampling method used was random sampling.

## Statistical Analysis

The responses to the relevant questions were collated. Thematic analysis was performed and themes were identified from the qualitative data.

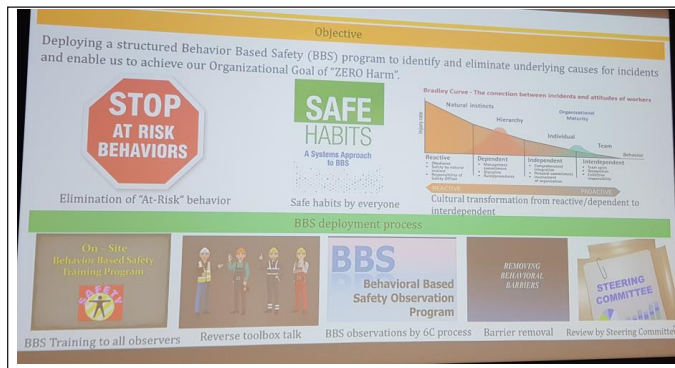
This article is an extract of a national research program of the Forum of Behavioural Safety under Bharat Bane Surakshit (BBS) mission (Figs. 1 and 2). The study results and implications are reflected below from a rigorous review of safety culture literature and experiences / case studies shared by industry leaders across Indian organisation.



Source: Author.

**Fig. 1: Sample Picture of National Research Program**

## Results and Discussion



Source: Author.

**Fig. 2: Sample Picture of National Research Program**

Changing company culture requires a movement, not a mandate. Culture is like the wind. It is invisible, yet its effect can be seen and felt. When it is blowing in your direction, it makes for smooth sailing. When it is blowing

against you, everything is more difficult. For organisations seeking to become more adaptive and innovative, culture change is often the most challenging part of the transformation. But culture change can't be achieved through top-down mandate. It lives in the collective hearts and habits of people and their shared perception of 'how things are done around here. To create a movement in your organisation, start by framing the issue in terms that stir emotion and incite action; then mobilise more supporters by demonstrating quick wins. Broadcast these wins to an even wider audience by leveraging employees' social networks and using symbolism and pockets of innovation to keep momentum going. It's important to start with actions, not new mission statements or company structures, because culture change only happens when people take action (Walker & Soule, 2017).

Table 1 highlights below important challenges and solutions to sustain leadership inspiration for grass-root change.

**Table 1: Important Actions to Sustain Leadership Inspiration for Grass-Root Change**

<b>Challenges:</b>
• Safety culture intervention slows down as some leaders leave and join other organisation.
• Contractors workmen are left unsupervised
• Building positive safety culture is a team game.
• Positive safety culture is care, care and care.
• Understand what can go unsafe at their work areas.
• Some seniors come with closed mindset.
• New joiners need to be tackled with utmost care for risks.
• Top management/site leaders/HODs need to be accountable for supportive safety culture.
• Leaders who do not learn new aspects of doing business in terms of positive safety culture.
• Leaders must relook and review the company HSE policy.
• Human errors in safety culture.
<b>Solutions:</b>
• Make an organisational case study, a story out of your own BBS successful journey.
• Top management reinforces the positive safety culture
• Companies have to have a very strict culture around standard operating procedures.
• Leaders visible presence on the grounds.
• Safety culture board need to be a solution provider at the ground.
• Employers have to aim high to be global in safety culture to be global in business.
• Corporate leadership looks at the larger socio-familial context of their own employees.
• An unconditional love for your employees and associates just for 5 minutes every day.
• Building insights that the positive safety culture is about working towards the greater good.
• Leaders must challenge and offer competition to each other in the safety culture board.
• Leaders can achieve positive safety culture if he/she does it with a true heart and honesty.
• Implementing the concept of totally safe organisation (TSO).

## Challenges

- Safety culture intervention slows down as some leaders leave the organisation, or it loses excitement what it gains at the time of being rolled out.
  - Most of the major fires and fatalities occurred while contractors workmen were not supervised. Even company engineers or contractors supervisor left workers on their own fate, as because these supervisors are also not safety conscious.
  - Remember, building positive safety culture is a team game where the entire organisation is gradually brought to a singular dimension of observation and immediate care, correction and conversation. If that organisational culture doesn't take place (which obviously takes time), organisations remain under threat of incidents.
  - Positive safety culture is care, care and care. Everyone cares and no one gets injured. Pleasing people is contrary to positive safety culture. Caring and pleasing are not same. Caring and compulsive caregiving are not be same. Some employees tend to please their managers by being extra by giving gifts or agreeing every time to what they opine.
  - All employees and associates must understand again and again from their seniors and colleagues that what can go unsafe at their work areas and what they must do to immediately control the risk without looking the other way.
  - Some seniors come with closed mind-set, they are not open to what best others may be saying. Hence these people can be very risky to organisations, as they don't update and sit with fixed ideas.
  - New joiners need to be tackled with utmost care for risks around them as they come from different cultures. They take time to understand the norms and values of the workplace.
  - Top management/site leaders /HODs need to be accountable for supportive safety culture in terms of their own actions as to what support have they extended down the levels while being on BBS rounds weekly/monthly/daily, more specifically in terms of their safety time, resources, manpower, equipment, approvals, difficulties with customers/seniors and so on.
- Leaders who do not learn new aspects of doing business in terms of positive safety culture shall be automatically rendered out of business by their world competitors and they would learn in a hard and expensive ways to adapt to new order of safe work culture.
  - Understanding the core principles of positive safety culture as a behavioural science intervention, the president operations of a group of chemical plants felt and urged all leaders in a meeting that they must relook and review the company HSE policy. While the Director operations responded that he would convince his board of directors in this direction and be very supportive to all plants in terms of resources required in terms of manpower, approvals or infrastructure etc.

## Solutions

- You need to make an organisational case study, a story out of your own BBS successful journey, for which everyone has to work hard like GAIL, SEIL, Galaxy Surfactants, and others (Lal & Choueiri, 2023).
- Safety culture board group fails in its duty, if it doesn't work successfully. So the responsibility as group of top management is to reinforce the positive safety culture.
- Companies have to have a very strict culture around standard operating procedures.
- Corporate speeches and documents are very risky as they don't save people from incidents, they only mean business safety, not human safety. Hence let's ensure that we as leaders can reinforce safe behaviours by our visible presence on the grounds.
- Top leadership team of safety culture board need to be a solution provider at the ground, policy reviewer to integrate safety culture and also importantly internalise BBS actions. More importantly, the personal commitment to communicating down the levels, thinking beyond his/her units, provide support for barriers like infrastructure assurance, getting approvals for resources like safety funds/manpower, making time to visit plants for behavioural aspects of safety in addition to process safety.

- India is perceived as not very safety friendly industry. We wait till global scenario changes, then we take safety initiatives in our organisations, which is too late, by then we have already incurred losses to our assets and manpower. Indian employers have to aim high to be global in safety standards and culture to be global in business.
- Let leadership look at the larger context, in which each corporate has an almost ten thousand employees and their families that ought to be part of positive supportive EHS culture. That's excellent really to be a visible leadership on a larger canvas that no one gets injured on any single working day.
- If I ask you to remember who do remember in your life: you would recall persons who connected and cared for me. That's what is BBS, which calls for an unconditional love for your employees and associates just for 5 minutes every day to ensure that he/she doesn't get injured. Become a family to your employees and associates and ensure like parents do that no one gets hurt or injured. Make it happen daily by connect and care actively.
- Building insights that the positive safety culture is about working towards the greater good, understanding that no one wins alone, it is inclusion of people that brings results that we look for "no one gets injured" around me.
- Leaders must challenge and offer competition to each other in the safety culture board. Leaders would be an excellent task master of safety culture, yet be very appreciative of safety contributions, like Dr Howard (an Australian clinical psychologist) and U Shekhar (a managing director of a multi-national) who would be very keen and critical observer, yet highly appreciative and friendly for others best performance.
- "Leaders can achieve positive safety culture if he/she does it with a true heart and honesty so that no one gets injured" (Ashok Oza, best BBS poet and observer from Galaxy Surfactants).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The leaders must seek clarity to understand that safety culture is sustainable only when it is perceived as an

integral reinforcer in other functions like production, health, quality, environment, maintenance, all of which play a key influencer to become emotionally accepted by the workforce in any workplace. That is how safety culture is an organisational behaviour and not only safety behaviour or safety culture. It must be a work culture. Safety culture is an essential aspect of any organisation, shaping its commitment to protecting employees, assets and the community (The safety master, 2023).

The managements must consider a few recommendations mentioned here below to sustain leadership inspiration for grass-root change. They advocate a perspective on leadership that gains its inspiration from the grassroots leadership that upholds the traditions and values of an organisation.

Positive safety culture journey gradually expands from individual behaviour to organisational behaviour, from safety culture to work culture, from individual to society and beyond. Positive safety culture is sustainable in positive organisation, not otherwise. In this regard, a research analysis found four factors with a significant impact on safety culture: safety informing by operations managers; safety caring by employers; and safety coordination and safety regulation by safety professionals (Wu et al., 2010).

The top management must continuously monitor and evaluate their strategies while delivering multifaceted interventions to be more specifically focused and to motivate workers to be enthusiastic in sustaining safety culture (Wong et al., 2021). Sustainable safety culture considers contractual employees as 'own employees' with respect to safety. We strongly believe in it and strive to involve our critical mass, including contractors, in our transformation journey (Tata Steel, 2021).

Organisations must set up a multidisciplinary steering team coordinated by a safety culture initiative leader (Manufacturing Safety Alliance of BC, 2022).

Leaders, at all levels, must understand the range of health and safety risks in their part of the organisation and to give proportionate attention to each of them (Health and Safety Executive, 2022).

The managements must emphasise the positive relationship between a sustainable corporate safety

strategy and stakeholder perceptions that brings advantages to business performance (Hristov, et al, 2022).

It is recommended that companies must build safety by stop-passing the buck (CISA, 2023). It never helps to pass the buck. Accept total responsibility for the outcome (Hyatt, 2023). The biggest hurdle of safety culture transformation is dumping down the levels by leaders, and then asking for a monthly report, not being available for any support or reinforcement. Hence there is a need that the leaders' daily safety time is to be fixed and logged in. Make safety an easy and a supportive culture for all units. Change is a by-product of the leaders' personal commitments which can be sourced and sustained by the inspirations they get from the results that are consistently nurtured by their supportive actions and motivational mechanisms set at the grass-roots levels across plants/sites.

Human errors often hurdle the safety culture. Human errors are cognitive complexities involving unclear perceptions and thinking about workplace dynamics disallowing or disempowering people to take safety initiatives, decisions and actions necessary for creating positive safety cultural transformation towards zero-harm zero-blame perspective. Organisations are often surrounded by some types of human errors as follows: a) Managers not knowing the cost of silence for not correcting at-risk behaviours and barriers. b) Insufficient communication between with senior management and lower levels on developing safety culture. c) Top management being in comfort zones and not perceiving the effect of poor safety culture on company business in terms of incidents and d) Employers and director's mindset to only maximise profits, not safety culture. All these errors can be managed by the concept implementation of a totally safe organisation which is like a totally safe family, in which everyone feels connected, safe and is empowered to talk about all issues with transparency and without any fear. In a safety culture, human errors are not punished, as they are seen as opportunities to improve and learn from underlying system problems (Jay & Jay, 2020).

Defining safety culture is a challenge and must be deeply explored by leaders. The definition of safety culture must include safety perceptions and practices, beliefs

and behaviours (Abeje & Fan, 2023). Positive safety culture is a humanity interaction beyond age, education, designation, nationality and experience. Safety culture is not only in systems, processes and policies; it is in emotional reflection of leaders. Safety culture must be enforced first as rules and regulations and then reinforced by all people. Safety culture is a correction in culture and a cultural improvement from a certain percentage of safe behaviour to 100% safe behaviours by day-to-day positive conversations among workers. The safety culture can only be nurtured and sustained by common people of an organisation, while the managements inspire and support in every possible way. Leaders inspire workforce while they seek inspiration from the feedback of their stakeholders. The safety culture is sustainable when it is also discussed and reinforced in every boardroom meeting, like profit and production are always first and foremost. Safety culture must also be internalised by board members, as safety incidents do happen even amongst directors own family members. But a deeper query remains unresolved as to why the directorial pitch all across the board is falling short of reinforcing positive safety culture, whether they are company directors or directors of factories, who practically don't connect with workers, is a big challenge in achieving zero-harm culture.

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