

# Safety Culture in Contexts of Toxic Work Environment and Risk Justification

Harbans Lal Kaila\*

## ABSTRACT

*It is crucial reviewing safety culture in the context of work toxicity and risks justification and suggesting suitable action plans for organizations. About 85 percent of HSE professionals agree that the toxic workplaces and justifying risks lead to increasing difficulties towards zero-harm objectives. Some observations are raised about, is it lack of understanding the risk or lack of caring of employees? We can mitigate risk to some extent but not bring zero harm. People who justify risks are the main culprits. Risk Justification has four positions of psychosocial risks matrix. Work toxicity and reactive safety culture impact risk positions. An action plan to manage workplace toxicity and risk justification is required. Ten Golden rules of positive safety culture are listed to manage work toxicity and risk justification. These golden rules must become a norm which is possible when leaders emphasize it routinely and review it often. It is observed that organisations are negative and justify risks when there is an absence of right understanding about the impacts of risks and suitable methodology to rectify them. This article is based on the literature reviews and field visits to 12 project sites across India during the years 2023-24 and interactions with a sample of 210 managers.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Safety, Work Toxicity, Risks Justification

## INTRODUCTION

A toxic workplace with dimensions such as bullying, incivility, harassment, and ostracism, is quite prevalent, and the organizations must eradicate the factors of toxic workplace environments to ensure the safe workplaces,

\* Professor of Psychology (Retd.) - SNDT Women's University, Director - Forum of Behavioural Safety, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.  
Email: [kailahl@hotmail.com](mailto:kailahl@hotmail.com); ORCID: 0000-0003-4675-7431

and the top management, leaders, and managers must adopt policies for the same (Anjum et al., 2018). A toxic work environment harms employee performance and the work outcomes, to overcome this problem, organizational leaders must support employees by acknowledging their problems and helping, especially for more stressful jobs (Haeruddin, et al., 2022).

Many safety risks are faced by employees and workmen in industry due to nature of their job. The culture of organization influences, how well safety regulations and procedures are followed within an organization. In sociotechnical systems theory it is acknowledged that there are interactions between social and technical factors in organizations. The safety culture and risk-taking is based on the five categories. The internal and external conditions, an interplay between these factors affect risk-taking. Significance of communication, it is needed for safety actions to be effective. An act of balancing between safety and productivity, these are conflicting entities, wanting to produce as well as work safely. Individual responsibility for safety, the responsibility for following procedures rests to a large extent on the individual. Risk acceptance, one simply has to accept the safety risks of the work environment (Nordlöf et al., 2015).

There is a need to understand a toxic workplace, the kinds of toxic worker behaviours, abusive supervisors and workplace mobbing and how do toxic workplaces adversely impact employees and can turn into aggressive environments. It is crucial to know about how such kind of behaviours and attitudes are perceived by the employees in organizations. The types of toxic behaviours include destructive gossip, worst politics, tearing others down, aggressive leadership, a lot of negativity, abusive supervision, unfair policies, and aggression. There are two categories of toxic workplace environment named as behavioural toxics and contextual toxics which consisted of toxic behaviours of coworkers, toxic behaviours of managers, toxic social-structural factors and toxic climate (Taştan, 2017).

The risks of physical illness, mental stress, and of workplace accidents increase while working in stressfully toxic work environments. There remains a limited guidance on occupational psychosocial risks, but some guidelines are available for risk assessment of physical hazards. The risk management approach to workplace stress evaluation offers practical guidelines for the assessments, audits as well as management of workplace stressors. Case studies, provide practical information for

managers responsible for workplace safety, which include job stress evaluation methods, psychological stress factors, environmental stress factors, and work-related accidents (Clarke & Cooper, 2023).

Workplace toxicity is a widely spread issue that affects all levels of employees worldwide. Lost productivity, high employee turnover rates, and decreased organizational performance are the negative effects of workplace toxicity on individual employees and overall organization. Factors such as discrimination, micromanagement, harassment, unrealistic expectations, bullying and lack of communication lead to toxic work environments. It is important to examine the degree of toxicity in the workplace and its effects on employees and organizations, and how it can be recognized and addressed. The role of management in creating and addressing toxic work environments including emotional, physical, and psychological toxicity, the underlying causes like organizational culture, leadership, and communication and also, the legal implications of workplace toxicity, are very relevant issues. Leaders can promote a positive work environment, prevent toxic behaviours, and respond to challenges of addressing workplace toxicity. The legal and human resource departments address workplace toxicity and ensure compliance with relevant laws, communicate legal rights of employees and highlight the potential consequences for organizations that fail to address toxic behaviours, and importance of addressing workplace toxicity and the benefits of creating a healthy work environment. Promoting safe and a positive work culture are significant for risk and safety management (George, 2023). Irresponsible, insensitive, unaccountable, passive leaders would add to a toxic environment.

## **OBJECTIVE AND MEASURES**

To explore safety culture in the contexts of work toxicity and risks justification and suggest suitable action plan toward an objective of developing safer organizations. This article is an interim paper extracted from a longitudinal action survey on nation-wide implementation of zero-harm culture in organizations. The sampling method utilized was random sampling. Site locations were the industries spanning across India, such as steel, construction, chemicals, oil, gas, and electricity. Executives, supervisors, department heads, professionals, leaders, directors and EHS/HR specialists from the private and public sectors of industry constituted

the research sample. To gather primary data, twenty interviews, ten training seminars and ten focused group discussions were conducted. The literature reviews, field visits to 12 project sites in India during 2023-24 and interactions a sample of 210 managers brought out the following results of the qualitative data categorized here below into 6 themes.



**Fig. 1: Site Location Example of Data Collection**

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Why do we require a sustainable and safe design of innovative advanced materials? The present scenarios serve as a compelling reason to prioritize activities in accordance with the needs outlined in this roadmap, with a focus on avoiding a future situation where we are constantly playing catch-up due to past knowledge or ignorance. Instead, we must attempt to achieve a toxic-free world by successful transformation toward sustainable and safe workplaces (Casseo et al., 2024).

The present qualitative survey identified a set of six themes (Fig. 1) as below:

- Toxic workplaces and justifying risks lead to increasing difficulties.
- Is it lack of understanding the risk or lack of caring of employees.
- We can mitigate risk to some extent but not bring to zero harm.
- People who justify risks are the main culprits.
- Four positions of risk Justification in organisations.
- Work toxicity and reactive safety culture impacts risk positions.

## **Toxic Workplaces and Justifying Risks Lead to Increasing Difficulties Towards Zero-Harm Objectives**

Nearly 85 percent of HSE professionals agree to this statement.

Pankaj, HSE Head of Afcons site, observed that the toxic workplaces and justifying risks can indeed lead to increasing difficulties in achieving zero-harm objective. A toxic work environment can lead to a culture of fear, intimidation, and prioritization of productivity over safety, which can result in an increased stress and anxiety, decreased employee well-being, reduced reporting of safety incidents, decreased motivation to follow safety protocols, and increased risk-taking behaviour.

Justifying risks can also lead to a culture of complacency, where potential hazards are downplayed or ignored, further increasing the likelihood of accidents and injuries. To achieve zero-harm objective, it's essential to foster a safety-first culture, prioritize employee well-being, and encourage open communication and boost reporting of safety concerns.

## **Is It Lack of Understanding the Risk or Lack of Caring of Employees?**

It is easy to find faults, but it is easier to provide care, as a basic principle of positive safety perspective. Most companies suffered fatalities, losses of property over the years, much before launching safety culture intervention, as they followed the blaming and fault finding - reactive safety culture loaded with hierarchies. One of the most important causes of industrial incidents, of which 90% are related to human factors, is to refuse to accept errors because of fear of blaming and concealing them. KK Sharma, EHS director of DCM Shriram, observed that there is further deep dive to be done as to what lead to toxic workplace and why there is need to justify risks. Is it lack of understanding the risk or lack of caring of employees? If answer is yes, then there would be increased difficulties in achieving zero-harm objective.

Ten factors that promote negative safety culture are the poor communication between departments, cost cutting and profit maximization, underreporting and misreporting, lack of leadership buy-in, lack of employee engagement, negative feedback from employees, high accident rates, double standards in place, traditional and conservative mindsets, stubborn employees or managers (Rigid Lifelines, 2023).

### **We Can Mitigate Risk to Some Extent but not Bring to Zero Harm**

MK Agarwal ex-Director of Factories stated that the toxic and hazardous workplace can't be termed as absent from risk. Risk analysis by different methods may mitigate risk to some extent but not bring to zero harm. We share, forward WhatsApp messages daily, instead, we may all do the same on a purpose of spreading safety culture messages, thus inching closer to our 'Zero-harm Culture First' objective. Evaluating the just culture, the safety culture of employees of an organization can be predicted with a high level of certainty, which shows direct relationship between the just culture and the safety culture. So, increasing the just culture directly contributes to the development of the safety culture (Shabani et al., 2019).

### **People Who Justify Risks are the Main Culprits**

Guru Pratap of Vasudha pharma finds that 100% culprit is justifying the risks instead of reducing its risk levels. Harman Singh, Vardhman's HSE Head stated that people who justify risks are the main culprits, having an opinion that the person who got injured was the culprit putting hands in dangerous operations and revolving machinery is the worst thought process that a person or an educated technically qualified person can have. We can never leave our fellow workmen on the mercy of unguarded, unprotected machineries and think that they shall follow the SOP 100%. Affixing Poka Yoke on every potential hazard and eliminating the chances of access to unsafe conditions is the foremost responsibility of a Manager under whom the team members are employed. But it is sorry to say that mentality of the people is such that they keep on blaming the innocent injured persons that he did it wrong.

Avinash Shinde, GM EHS Galaxy Surfactants, quoting Expert Kletz who says, if you think safety is expensive, then try an accident. If we try to justify, then safety gets compromised. Even toxic workplace is worst for safety culture (Personal Communications, 2024).

## **Four Positions of Risk Justification**

Ok and not-ok positions of risk help understand psychosocial risks matrix as below:

- When observers feel that risk is ok, and workmen also believe that risk is ok. This is high risk zone for incidents to happen any time. This position is in 100% incident probability.
- When observers feel that risk is not ok, and workmen believe that risk is ok. The chances of incidents in this position is 50%.
- When observers feel that risk is ok, and workmen also believe that risk is not ok. This position also carries 50% probability of Incident occurrence.
- When observers feel that risk is not ok, and workmen also believe that risk is not ok. This is best positioned safety culture in which the probability of incident is almost 0%.

Practically, organizations must bring all workforce into 4<sup>th</sup> position of risk justification.

How psychosocial risks should be properly evaluated, it can be debated. At European and national level, amendments in health and safety regulations oblige employers to conduct psychosocial risk assessment. Understanding psychosocial risks is still missing as similar to physical risks. Methodological assessment in psychosocial risk is required. Employees must rate already existing procedures of psychosocial risk evaluation that allows matrix for assessing probability and severity of psychosocial risks. The relation between psychosocial hazards and work stress is applied for hazard identification. The risk matrix helps organizations understand psychosocial risk evaluation (Taibi et al, 2022).

## **WORK TOXICITY AND REACTIVE SAFETY CULTURE IMPACT RISK POSITIONS**

Work toxicity and reactive safety culture impact risk positions causing increase in incidents probabilities. The safety culture maturity of the industry was found to be primarily reactive (Kirkegaard et al., 2020). Cultural maturity before positive intervention is mostly reactive and dependent. Cultural maturity after positive safety intervention gradually turns towards independent and interdependent over a period (Lal, 2021).

Work toxicity resulting in stress would put off people's mind and they are confused to make difference between the risk and non-risk perceptions. Work toxicities can be referred to as negative experiences of the workplaces including fears, too many pressures, stressful relationships, undue targets. Varying degrees of risk justification and toxic environment lead to increasing difficulties towards risk control and zero-harm objective of the organisations.

It is important that employees know the difference between toxic and positive behaviours to implement them for their colleagues as depicted in Table 1. Managers need to unlearn reactive behaviours, emphasize positive behaviours, and intervene if anyone is reactive to others.

**Table 1: Difference between Toxic and Positive Safety Behaviours**

<b>Behaviours that Imply Toxic Culture</b>	<b>Behaviours that Imply Positive Safety Culture</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● hurting</li> <li>● blaming</li> <li>● fault-finding</li> <li>● bossing</li> <li>● punishing</li> <li>● shouting</li> <li>● disconnect</li> <li>● uncaring</li> <li>● unsupportive</li> <li>● not listening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● brotherly</li> <li>● connecting</li> <li>● appreciation</li> <li>● actively caring</li> <li>● correcting</li> <li>● conversation</li> <li>● supporting</li> <li>● affection</li> <li>● human touch</li> <li>● understanding</li> </ul>

Risk taking behaviours and risk propensity positively predicted both pro-social rule-breaking behaviours and counterproductive work behaviours. There is also an indirect effect of risk propensity on organizational citizenship behaviours and an increased willingness to take risks at work. Risk takers are more likely to engage in pro-social and counterproductive behaviours, particularly those that are rule-breaking or have elevated risks due to an increased willingness to take risks at work (Zhang et al., 2023).

For ensuring sustainability, safety is the key, and it is vital to examine effects of toxic leadership dimensions on safety performance of organisations. Abusive supervision negatively impact on safety performance, and leaders' commitment dampens the negative impact of abusive supervision on safety performance (Saleem et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is observed that organisations are negative and justify risks when there is an absence of right understanding about the impacts of risks and suitable methodology to rectify them. Nearly 85 percent of HSE professionals agree that the toxic workplaces and justifying risks lead to increasing difficulties towards zero-harm objectives. In this regard, Table 2 includes the action plan to manage workplace toxicity and risk justification.

**Table 2: Action Plan to Implement Zero-Harm Culture**

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Planned long-term awareness to all manpower by HODs about risks they are exposed to.</li><li>2. SOPs education and their execution by area and section In-charges.</li><li>3. Audits and reviews by plant head and company directors.</li><li>4. Implementation of ten Golden rules of positive safety culture.</li></ol> |
|--|

Safety at workplace is of great importance in industries, where occupational illnesses and accidents result in huge human and economic costs. Developing an action plan is must and gather insights and opinions on safety priorities in order to improve safety standards, and also assess the current safety antecedents, develop safety solutions and identify challenges. The emphasis must be on reducing workplace incidents by 30-40% annually, progressing towards zero accidents in the following years. The role of company leadership in terms of their commitment to safety and motivating individual units within the company to budget, plan proactively, and implement safety measures following their responsibilities. Mass mobilization campaigns, application of science and technology in safety and occupational health and collaborating with relevant state agencies, would contribute to enhancement of safety at workplace (Nguyen et al., 2023).

It is crucial reviewing safety culture in the contexts of work toxicity and risks justification and suggesting suitable action plan for organizations. Importantly, all managers must take insights for managing risk justification positions:

- What positive actions are they doing for observers who control the at-risk behaviours? Are they regularly rewarding them to sustain such behaviour?

- What positive actions are they doing for observers who do not control the at-risk behaviours? Are they doing mass-communications, reverse TBT, BBS pledge for reinforcing their behaviours?

The perception of psychological safety is shaped by the reactions of other employees in positive/proactive behaviors. The level of psychological safety perception is low when other employees react negatively to the constructive suggestions and feedback of the employees. The psychological safety perception is based on interpersonal trust and support in the organization. At times, employees have felt psychologically unsafe, alienated, helpless, psychological loneliness, and so on (Siddiqui & Sangwan 2022). There is a need to shed negative behaviors, such as, don't react, blame, shout, reprimand.

Organizational climate and culture play a crucial role in employees' performance due to the positive work environment, and effective leadership strategies as measures of overcoming toxic work behaviour. When an organization has a toxic work environment devoid of psychological safety, open communication, innovation, trust, and motivation, that organization is bound to have a higher safety incident. Toxic work environments are common in Nigeria and are an increasing concern for workers in many different sectors. Organizational toxicity include toxic supervisors, leadership, and employees. A toxic organizational culture creates an unsafe and unhealthy work environment by disregarding safety policies, practices and norms, and thus overlooking employees' well-being, safety and health. How supportive and safe a work environment must be, is a function of an employee's voices and positive leadership strategy. Through effective leadership strategies, toxic work behaviour can be managed, and organizations can enhance the well-being of their employees and also increase success and productivity (Konyefa et al., 2024).

Ten Golden rules of positive safety culture to manage work toxicity and risk justification: golden rules as described below must become a norm which is possible when leaders emphasise it routinely and review it often (Lal, 2023).

- Every employee spends five minutes daily in correction of at-risk behaviours.
- Every manager conducts a BBS Mass-communication daily.
- Every engineer In-charge holds a Reverse-TBT daily.
- Every month steering team holds a review meeting of safety culture.

- Every quarter, board of directors reviews safety culture status.
- All contractor supervisors hold TBT daily.
- Every week, HOD holds a mass-communications for safety culture.
- Every fortnightly, business head holds a conversation with employees.
- Every month, steering teams hold rewards and recognition for safety culture improvement.
- Cross-functional team of HODs identifies and rectifies barriers in the plant's safety culture every month.

The resilience safety culture involves psychological, behavioural, and managerial capabilities, which are inter-related. Companies that can convey care, compassion, and a desire for everyone to go home safe would have a better response than those that solely deliver a message of punishment or restrictions for missing the target marks (SSOE, 2021). Having a resilient safety culture means continuously improving processes by committed staff who systematically cope with the complexity and unpredictability of business environments (MDPI, 2023). Safety culture works only if advocated by HODs and top management.

There is a significant role of employee engagement in promoting a positive safety culture, which has the potential to develop sustainable economies and business success in enterprises, particularly given the high rates of work-related injuries in developing countries (Abeje & Luo, 2023).

In the safety context, an indicator of a toxic work culture is a high rate of safety incidents. For addressing a toxic work culture through safety management, encourage a reporting culture where employees feel safe reporting safety issues without fear of being questioned, emphasize that safety-first is a core value, and all employees share responsibility of securing a workplace, and ensure that leaders are visibly committed to safety (Rehman, 2023).

## REFERENCES

- Abeje, M., & Luo, F. (2023). The influence of safety culture and climate on safety performance: Mediating role of employee engagement in manufacturing enterprises in Ethiopia. *Sustainability*, 15, 11274. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/su151411274>

- British Standards Institution (2022). *How an organization's values impact food safety culture*. Retrieved from <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-NZ/blog/food-industry-blog-news/safety-culture-values/>
- Anjum, A., Ming, X., & Siddiqi, A., & Rasool, S. (2018). An empirical study analyzing job productivity in toxic workplace environments. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(5). doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15051035>
- Cassee, F., Bleeker, E. A. J., Durand, C., Exner, T., Falk, A., Hristozov, D.,...Groenewold, M. (2024). Roadmap safe and sustainable advanced and innovative materials 2024-2030. *Computational and Structural Biotechnology Journal*, 25. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10876679>
- Clarke, S., & Cooper, C. (2003). Managing the risk of workplace stress: Health and safety hazards. *Managing the Risk of Workplace Stress: Health and Safety Hazards*, 1-197. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203644362>
- George, A. S. (2023). Toxicity in the workplace: The silent killer of careers and lives. *Partners Universal International Innovation Journal*, 1(2), 1-21. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7852087>
- Haeruddin, M. I. M., Akbar, A., Dipomatmodjo, T., Kurniawan, A., & Abadi, R. (2022). The Toxicity of our city: The effect of toxic workplace environment on employee's performance. *International Journal of Social Science and Business*, 6, 183-190. doi:<https://doi.org/10.23887/ijssb.v6i2.45297>
- Konyefa Dickson, R., & Stephan Isaiah, O. (2024). Overcoming toxic work environment through effective leadership strategies. *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Review*, 7, 182-202. doi:<https://doi.org/10.35409/IJBMER.2024.3559>
- Kirkegaard, M. L., Kines, P., Jeschke, K. C., & Jensen, K. A. (2020). Risk perceptions and safety cultures in the handling of Nanomaterials in academia and industry. *Annals of Work Exposures and Health*, 64(5), 479-489. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/annweh/wxaa022>
- Lal, H. (2021). Behavioural economics of safety culture management in companies. *WSJ*, 30(4).
- Lal, H. (2023). Strengthening a positive safety culture despite underlying fear and peer pressure. *World Safety Journal*, 32(1), 57-64. doi:<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7770080>

- MDPI. (2023). *Special issue - Resilient safety culture*. Retrieved from [https://www.mdpi.com/journal/safety/special\\_issues/resilient\\_safety\\_culture](https://www.mdpi.com/journal/safety/special_issues/resilient_safety_culture)
- Nguyen, N., Nguyen, D. T., Le, C., Chien, L., & Pham Kien, T. (2023). Enhancing workplace safety: A comprehensive action plan for Duong Huy Coal Company (2021-2025). *Journal of the Polish Mineral Engineering Society*, 2(52), 205-208. doi:<https://doi.org/10.29227/IM-2023-02-31>
- Nordlöf, H., & Wiitavaara, B., Winblad, U., & Wijk, K., & Westerling, R. (2015). Safety culture and reasons for risk-taking at a large steel-manufacturing company: Investigating the worker perspective. *Safety Science*, 73, 126-135. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2014.11.020>.
- Personal Communications. (2024). Interactions with industry experts and professionals.
- Rehman, A. U. (2023, December 7). *Identifying signs of a toxic work culture in the context of safety management system*. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/identifying-signs-toxic-work-culture-context-safety->
- Rigid Lifelines. (2023, March 27). Retrieved from <https://www.rigidlifelines.com/blog/10-signs-that-your-organization-might-have-a-negative-safety-culture/>
- Shabani, A. M., Tabatabaei, S., & Mansouri, N. (2019). Prediction of safety culture based on of dimensions of just culture in of one of the industrial sections of Tehran. *Iran J Ergon*, 7(1), 63-72. Retrieved from <http://journal.iehfs.ir/article-1-543-en.html>
- Saleem, F., Malik, M. I., & Malik, M. K. (2021). Toxic leadership and safety performance: Does organizational commitment act as stress moderator? *Cogent Business & Management*, 8, 1960246. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2021.1960246>.
- Siddiqui, S., & Sangwan, A. (2022). The catalytic role of perceived psychological safety on the relationship between ‘support from supervisor’ and ‘workplace loneliness. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(6), 8401-8412.
- SSOE. (2021, November 1). *Creating a positive safety culture*. Retrieved from <https://www.ssoe.com/creating-a-positive-safety-culture-2/>
- Taibi, Y., Metzler, Y., Bellingrath, S., Neuhaus, C., & Müller, A. (2022). Applying risk matrices for assessing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 10. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.965262>

- Taştan, S. (2017). Toxic workplace environment in search for the toxic behaviours in organizations with a research in healthcare sector. *Postmodern Openings*, 8, 83-109. doi:<https://doi.org/10.18662/po/2017.0801.07>
- Zhang, D., Barratt, C., & Smith, R. (2023). The bright, dark, and gray sides of risk takers at work: Criterion validity of risk propensity for contextual work performance. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 39. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-023-09872-0>