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# Towards a model of safety culture

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## Abstract

Organisational culture is a concept often used to describe shared corporate values that affect and influence members' attitudes and behaviours. Safety culture is a sub-facet of organisational culture, which is thought to affect members' attitudes and behaviour in relation to an organisation's ongoing health and safety performance. However, the myriad of definitions of 'organisational culture' and 'safety culture' that abound in both the management and safety literature suggests that the concept of business-specific cultures is not clear-cut. Placing such 'culture' constructs into a goal-setting paradigm appears to provide greater clarity than has hitherto been the case. Moreover, as yet there is no universally accepted model with which to formulate testable hypotheses that take into account antecedents, behaviour(s) and consequence(s). A reciprocal model of safety culture drawn from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986. *Social Foundation of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.) is offered so as to provide both a theoretical and practical framework with which to measure and analyse safety culture. Implications for future research to establish the model's utility and validity are addressed. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Organisational culture; Safety culture; Goal-setting; Reciprocal determinism; Triangulation; Safety climate; Safety behaviour; Safety management systems; Levels of measurement; Levels of analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Many industries around the world are showing an increasing interest in the concept of 'safety culture' as a means of reducing the potential for large-scale disasters, and accidents associated with routine tasks. Publicly stated aims of achieving homogeneous worldwide safety cultures in the offshore (May, 1998), nuclear (Rosen, 1997) and shipping (Payer, 1998) industries testify to its growing importance. Although well intentioned, such aims also illustrate the confusion that

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surrounds the concept. This confusion appears to emanate from fragmented and unsystematic empirical efforts using underspecified theoretical concepts (Kennedy and Kirwan, 1995), that is perhaps due to a lack of an underlying integrative framework (Flin, 1998) which can be used to guide examinations of the safety culture construct in a wide range of contexts.

## 2. The concept of corporate culture

In response to the recognition that its structure has limitations in providing the 'glue' that holds organisations together, much management thinking over the last two decades has focused on the concept of corporate culture. Some of the writings on the topic (e.g. Peters and Waterman, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; Pascale and Athos, 1981; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Hofstede, 1990) have been extremely influential among practising managers, mainly via its assumed relationship with organisational performance. It is generally thought that a well-developed and business-specific culture into which managers and employees are thoroughly socialised will lead to stronger organisational commitment, more efficient performance and generally higher productivity (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Graves, 1986; Hamden-Turner, 1990). Usually based upon a blend of visionary ideas, corporate culture appears to reflect *shared* behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and values regarding *organisational goals, functions* and *procedures* which are seen to characterise particular organisations (Furnham and Gunter, 1993). The maintenance of the dominating corporate culture within any organisation, therefore, is supported by ongoing analyses of organisational systems, goal-directed behaviour, attitudes and performance outcomes (Fry and Killing, 1989). However, due to a general lack of information on how culture works, or how it can be shaped, changed or otherwise managed in practise (Furnham and Gunter, 1993), there is no consistent definition of what corporate culture might be (Williams et al., 1989). The main difference between such definitions appear to reside in their focus on the way people think, *or* on the way people behave (Williams et al., 1989), although some focus on both the way people think and behave (e.g. Margulies and Raia, 1978; Uttal, 1983).

Williams et al. (1989) take issue with the notion that organisational culture reflects *shared* behaviours, beliefs, attitudes and values. They argue that not all organisational members respond in the same way in any given situation, although there may be a tendency for them to adopt similar styles of dress, modes of conduct, and perceptions of how the organisation does, or should, function. Beliefs, attitudes and values about the organisation, its function or purpose can vary from division to division, department to department, workgroup to workgroup, and from individual to individual. Thus, although an organisation may possess a dominating 'cultural theme', there are likely to be a number of variations in the way in which the theme is expressed throughout the organisation (Williams et al., 1989; Hamden-Turner, 1990; Furnham and Gunter, 1993). For example, one department may put safety before production, whereas another department may put production before safety. In the former, risk assessments might always be conducted prior to starting every job,

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