



CULTURE
Values and Practices
– Can you have one
without the other?*

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From 2005–09 Peter was a senior executive on the leadership team of Caltex Australia, as General Manager Operational Excellence and Risk. His international consulting career includes corporate and government clients, mainly in mining and oil and gas, in New Zealand, China, South East Asia, UK, Canada and the USA.

At Noetic, Peter routinely provides advice to governments and companies in the resources sector on strategies to manage high consequence operational risks. This has included working on the Montara blow out for the then Resources Minister and the Northern Territory Government on the uranium leachate incident that occurred at Ranger Mine. From 2011 to 2016, Peter provided support to the US Government's Chemical Safety Board in their investigation into the BP Macondo/Deepwater Horizon Gulf of Mexico disaster in 2010, which resulted in the deaths of 11 men and was one of USA's worst oil spills. Peter's support included the provision of this paper, which can also be found on the US Chemical Safety Board's website.



INTRODUCTION

I was recently asked why I recommended a focus on practices as a means to improving an organisation's culture. I was also asked to give some examples of practices (see Annex). The same question was raised a couple of months ago as well, after a public presentation I gave in Perth entitled 'SMS – Safety Management Shelfware'.¹ I suggested that implementing good safety practices is an essential (and very practical) route to developing a good organisational culture. Emeritus Professor Andrew Hopkins, who gave the key note address at the conference, talked about the inherent problems with the term 'safety culture'² and defined culture as "...the collective practices of the group – the way we do things around here."

We had not colluded but Hopkins' presentation strongly reinforced my argument about the value of a focus on practices to develop a suitable organisational culture. He provided intellectual heft and rigour to my practitioner's opinion. I was encouraged because much of my work as a safety practitioner tends to focus on improving critical controls intended to reduce the probability or consequences of major accidents. 'Critical controls' is just another way of saying those important organisational practices that reduce the chance of a risk occurring. Hopkins' presentation supported my focus on critical controls.

Hopkins' defined culture as the way we do things around here – or to put it another way the practices used in an organisation. Yet in day-to-day conversations talking about safety culture, I frequently come across senior leaders talking about the importance of a values-led approach to improving safety culture (and safety performance).

So what are the links between values, practices and culture?

1 Peter Wilkinson, 'SMS – Safety Management Shelfware', IFAP Fluoro Conference, 10/11 November 2015, <http://www.ifap.asn.au/fluoro>.

2 There is controversy with the whole concept of safety culture. See Safety Institute of Australia, OSH Body of Knowledge: Organisational Culture. In particular, the Abstract²

VALUES, PRACTICES AND CULTURE

“A company’s values are the core of its culture,”³ according to John Coleman writing in the Harvard Business Review. Values are said “...to offer a set of guidelines on the behaviours and mindsets to achieve... [a company’s]...vision.”⁴

In the context of ethics they are sometimes said to provide a moral compass for an organisation. Companies often have a safety value, amongst other values. For example, BP has as one of its five values as safety:

*Safety is good business. Everything we do relies upon the safety of our workforce and the communities around us. We care about the safe management of the environment. We are committed to safely delivering energy to the world.*⁵

But what is the value of such a “value” statement without the means to deliver?

Actions speak louder than words – so says the old proverb. John Coleman in his Harvard Business Review agrees. He says, “...values are of little importance unless they are enshrined in a company’s practices.”⁶

What is meant by the term practices? In this context a practice is defined as:

*A method, procedure, process or rule used in a particular field or profession; a set of these regarded as a standard.*⁷

For example, a not untypical safety value could be expressed in the following terms: nothing is so important that it cannot be done safely. What would constitute a practice that reflected the above quoted value? If a company is handling a hazardous fluid such as high pressure hydrocarbon gas in a piping system and on occasion needs to isolate one part of the system from another for maintenance, is a single valve isolation acceptable? Alternatively, should they require a double

3 J Coleman, ‘Six Components of a Great Corporate Culture’, Harvard Business Review, May 6 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/05/sixcomponents-of-culture> accessed 23 December 2015.

4 Ibid.

5 Safety is one of 5 values of BP Global. See: ‘Our Values’, BP Global <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/peopleand-values/our-values.htm>, accessed 23 December 2015.

6 Coleman, loc. cit.

7 See: ‘Practice’, Online Business Dictionary <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/practice.html>, accessed 31 December 2015.

block and bleed, i.e., two valves closed in series? The second method is a higher standard with less chance of a release of fluid and is a practice which would more accurately reflect the value. Of course the actual isolation standard would depend on many factors not discussed here but the key point is that workplace practices must match the espoused values. We cannot articulate safety values and then adopt practices which are seen as incongruent with the espoused Value. Any discrepancy is quickly detected and not just by the workforce. As a former regulator I have experienced countless induction videos on arrival at facilities which express fine sentiments only to find that out on the plant, the practices did not match those sentiments. Such a situation is unlikely to foster positive feelings about an organisation's approach to safety. I conclude from this that any discussion on values in an organisation should also ensure that organisational practices are consistent with the values.

This is not a new idea. Hopkins discusses this in *Culture, Safety and Risk*,⁸ and quotes from a number of other well-known academics in this area, providing examples of the links between values and practices both in safety and academic organisations. Having practices which match values is important. But there is another characteristic of practices compared to values which is also significant. Practices are more easily measured than values. If we decide to change the way we do things, (for example by changing from a single valve isolation to double block and bleed) we can measure the changes to the practices in a way we cannot measure what people think about the values. I can say what I want about values and who can prove me wrong? However, practices are usually more easily observed and thus measured. I can say I respect my colleagues but persistently arrive late for meetings. My late arrivals can be observed as something inconsistent with the espoused value.

In a sense it may not matter too much if people (in private) do not accept the values as articulated – so long as they follow the required

8 See for example: A. Hopkins, *Safety, Culture and Risk*, CCH Australia Ltd, 2005, pp. 6-11.

practices. Interestingly Hopkins has pointed out that repeated practices become ‘how we do things round here’ and that these then represent features of the culture of that organisation.⁹ This suggests that so long as the practices are good ones then their effective adoption would help develop a positive culture, even if people did not personally sign up to the relevant company’s articulated value. Implementing practices is a leadership responsibility and requires great care to avoid unintended consequences and active monitoring¹⁰ to check they are applied as intended. This is a subject in its own right and is not discussed further here.

CONCLUSION

I conclude from this that practices are at least as important as values in terms of developing an acceptable culture in a workplace. Both are important but not on their own. Values must be supported by appropriate practices. Furthermore, practices repeated by a group become part of an organisation’s culture. Critical controls to prevent a major incident are just another way of describing important organisational practices. In this sense it could be said that a focus on practices is more useful than a focus on values – at least practices can be measured. Ideally of course, we should have both.

As Frank Sinatra could have sung in relation to a slightly different type of social construct:

Values and practices
Go together like a horse and carriage
This I tell you brother
You can’t have one without the other.

(From ‘Love and Marriage’ with apologies to Songwriters: James Van Heusen, Sammy Cahn)

⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰ For a description of “Active Monitoring” in the context of major accidents, although the principles have wider application, see: P. Wilkinson, ‘The role of active monitoring in preventing major accidents’, US Chemical Safety Board, http://www.csb.gov/assets/1/7/Wilkinson_Active_Monitoring.pdf accessed 31 December 2015.

ANNEX

Some examples of organisational practices from different domains.

DOMAIN	EXAMPLES OF GOOD ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES
Health Care	So called “Red Rules” (practices which must be followed). For example it is compulsory for relevant clinical staff to participate in briefings before invasive procedures in some health care environments. ¹¹
Process Safety	The focus placed by companies and the regulator on implementing appropriate standards for safe and effective communications at shift handovers.
HR/Training/ Continuing Professional Development	The practice of describing the objectives of training in terms of what trainees will learn and be able to do after attending training.
Managing Organisations	Role clarity: Discussing, defining and documenting the respective roles of team members.
Aviation	Using checklists in the cockpit which require (at critical times – e.g., prior to taxiing, take-off and landing) a question from one pilot and a check by the other that the appropriate action has been taken.

¹¹ See for example: C. Lekka, ‘High reliability organisations – a review of the literature’, Health and Safety Executive 2011, <http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr899.pdf> accessed 31 December 2015.

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