Values/behaviour: cause or consequence?
Two schools of thought when it comes to safety culture

Exceptionally, René Amalberti is bringing us not one but two opinion pieces (*Tribunes de la sécurité industrielle*) on safety culture. In this first opinion piece of the two-part series, René Amalberti, Director of FonCSI, presents the two opposing schools of thought in this area: those who align values and practices, and those who consider that behaviour needs to be changed in order to achieve an optimal safety culture. In the second piece of this series on safety culture, René Amalberti will present a new approach as a way out of this impasse.

Safety culture and human and organisational factors (HOF) are often cited as the final step in achieving an optimum level of safety in a context where everything, from a technical and organisational perspective, has long been planned out, but where the last recurring obstacles are behaviour correction and commitment, on the part of personnel, managers and the company, to a shared people-centred endeavour that truly supports the recommended strategies.

> **"Work on culture must [...], as a priority, correct the inconsistencies between what management says and what it does"**

Those who align values and practices

Some primarily see in this an effort on the part of managers to align the ideal and desired values with the reality in the field and erase any inconsistencies, even if this means shifting the boundaries of these values. James Reason (1997) sums up this challenge as five cultural traits to be combined:

- a reporting culture,
- a just culture that does not start by singling out those responsible and punishing them,
- a flexible culture that adapts to changing contexts,
- a culture capable of learning,
- and a culture that retains its capacity to take stock regularly of its own values.

As a priority, work on culture must therefore correct any inconsistencies between what management says — i.e. what is recommended on paper — and what it does. The approach is asymmetrical, with considerable efforts made especially by management to align a model of ideal values to use as reference, apply it and lead by example — by actually doing what they tell others to do — and possibly adjust

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it according to the realities in the field in order to create a better work climate and ensure everyone feels greater satisfaction in coming to work.

Geert Hofstede's legacy on national cultures, those of his disciples, Robert Helmreich and Rhona Flin, and those of Ron Westrum and James Reason on management cultures, echo this approach.

Of course, this is also the case for Edgar Schein's organisational safety culture, which provides another point of view by stating that the visible (behaviour) underpins the safety climate, but is only a limited artefact of the beliefs and assumptions we do not even dare to express. It is on these beliefs and assumptions that the safety culture is built. According to Schein, the first success in an approach centred on safety culture occurs when management seeks alignment between assumptions, beliefs and artefacts.

Those who want to change behaviour

Others believe — or expect — that improvement of the safety culture primarily requires those working in the field to espouse the values advocated by the company. These values would make it possible to correct some of the remarks, attitudes, practices and non-compliant behaviour observed. This approach is just as asymmetrical as the previous, but those who need to improve, with the help of managers, are primarily the operators working in the field, so that their behaviour model aligns with the values advocated by the company and management — values which, in this case, are not up for discussion. Trust, participation, opening up discussions about any inconsistencies observed, rewarding duly-observed efforts fairly, or enforcing a just punishment following deliberate violations, are cited as essential tools for management and for enforcing the expected compliance — since safety is implicitly linked to this compliance.

> ## "Those who need to improve, with the help of managers, are primarily the operators working in the field"

In this case, a reduction in problems and non-compliant behaviour is the primary goal, which then builds the values to be shared by the group. The 'just culture' approach (in the spirit of David Marx — in other words 'punish violations and tolerate errors'), the behaviour-based strategies approach (the "DuPont Stop" method, for example), or even Lean Management belong more to this second approach.

In the end, it doesn't really matter who is right, even if academics from both sides constantly fight about what is cause and consequence when organising action plans: "must we… can we… first work on the culture and values to change behaviour by targeting management", or "must we… can we… first correct the behaviour of the operators, on the assumption that this correction will in return change the company culture (fear of sanction)."

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In any case, let there be no doubt that both approaches are present in the industrial sector and the regulatory bodies, most of the time simultaneously, "acquired" and "accumulated" over time by departments that obviously had little knowledge of the academic differences, based on a moment in time, personal beliefs, the ease or difficulty with which they thought they would be adopted internally — not to mention the sales person's image and persuasiveness.

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