

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Guiding Light: How To Grow A Safety Culture In Your Organisation.

Strategy and Culture expert — Brett Rutledge, Sensemap

Culture is a term used all the time but often misunderstood. When it comes to achieving workplace road safety objectives, growing an appropriate culture is not only critical but, with a bit of thought, easier than many people realise. This Thought Leadership piece briefly outlines some key factors to consider.

Understanding culture

Linguistics expert Brett Rutledge points out that the word 'culture' comes from the Latin 'cultura', which refers to preparing and using land for crops or gardening. The word 'cultivate' has the same origin and meaning.

"So, a culture is always about the steps we take to grow something. That is why something grown in a laboratory is still called a culture," he says.

"In organisational terms, a 'safety culture' is about how we grow safety. A performance culture is about how we grow performance. The key is that a culture is not built, it is not something that is constructed. Culture is grown and that growth takes time."

But what are we growing? According to Brett, we're not growing a thing – we're growing an idea.

"If you want an inanimate object to grow you just add more to it. For example, a fire grows by adding more fuel, a wall grows by adding more bricks. That doesn't work for an organisational culture. The more material we add to an organisational culture, the more confused and fragmented it becomes.

"We're also not growing a living thing because living things change as they grow. None of us look anything like what we did when we were five and, ultimately, all living things die. That doesn't work for a culture either.

"We're not growing a thing, either inanimate or living. When it comes to organisational culture, we're growing an idea – a thought, a concept, a way of thinking and acting that can be shared as a common philosophy."

Brett, from NRSP Partner Sensemap, will present an NRSP webinar in early March that will explore this in more detail and help guide organisations through developing and implementing a workplace road safety culture.

The characteristics of culture

So, how do you grow an idea? More importantly, how does that idea evolve into an organisational culture, a shared philosophy that guides people's thinking and behaviour?

To be successful, your culture must make sense, be compatible, be relevant, beneficial and supported at every level of the organisation.

When any of these factors are missing, culture becomes confused, fragments and dies.

It has to make sense

People gravitate towards ideas they understand. We shy away from the complicated. The idea has to be simple and easily understood to get traction.

"Most organisations aren't clear as to what they even mean by safety. What does 'safe' mean in this environment and in this organisation? If I don't even understand what 'safe' means, how am I supposed to be safe? Taking the time to really understand what 'safety' means is a critical first step."

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Make sure it's compatible

If you want an idea to grow and be adopted as a way of working, it needs to be something your people can identify with.

"A certain level of compatibility with your people's existing view of life is required so that it can be seen as a natural extension of things they already believe or views that already guide their behaviour. If that compatibility isn't there, no one is buying in to the idea.

"That's why paying attention to attitude is so important during recruitment. If my attitude towards safety is incompatible with the culture you are trying to grow, then neither of us are going to get far."



Make it relevant

People need to see how the culture of safety relates to their working life and how the principles that underpin it can be applied to their jobs.

"It sounds obvious doesn't it? But so many of our rules and regulations around safety are often seen as irrelevant by the people they are supposed to apply to. What do you do when something isn't relevant to you? You switch off and ignore it. It's so important to make sure that people see the link between being safe and their day-to-day work."

Make it beneficial

If you want your people to be safer in the workplace, then they need to be able to see how the idea would make things better, make life easier or make them feel good about themselves. The principle of 'what's in it for me' still applies. "If the culture you are trying to grow is seen as a chore, as hard, or as having no upside then it just isn't going to grow."

The culture test – 5 questions to ask

- Does it make sense?
- Does it fit with their world view?
- Is it relevant to your workers?
- What's the benefit to them?
- Are you backing up your words?

Support it...everywhere

Every process, system and policy must reinforce the culture of safety, and remuneration and recognition systems need to reward a commitment to being safe.

"Too many organisations simply put posters on walls and think they are done. If you want to grow a safety culture, then it has to be supported everywhere."

By the way, Brett points out, being supported doesn't mean reducing culture to a regime of compliance.

"Rules and policies might be necessary but they are simply the boundaries within which the culture grows – they are not the culture itself.

"If you really want your people to be safe, then you have to teach them how to make good decisions every day in every circumstance. Policy doesn't do that. Policy dictates decision making and because policy is often poorly written, it can lead to poor outcomes."

Click [here](#) to register for the Growing A Strong Safety Culture webinar on 10 March 2022.

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