

## Safety culture means paying constant attention to the 3 pillars

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You may have read or heard about the '3 pillars' of safety. The term refers to: (a) technical safety; (b) the safety management system (SMS); and (c) human and organizational factors (HOF). Together, these 3 pillars are the key components of safety culture. What is there to talk about? Well, it's very **tempting** to manage them separately, while in fact, they work together.

### Setting the scene

The general message is simple: good safety depends on the balance between the 3 pillars. Every industrial sector that maintains a high level of safety performance maintains this balance: namely, HOFs, technical safety, and the SMS work together. However, there is still a long way to go in many sectors. In some cases, misunderstandings can undermine the organization's performance. There are three potential situations:

**1. "From now on, we'll concentrate on HOFs."**

While this view is not without its merits, it can be detrimental to the



organization's future. In practice, better safety performance cannot be reduced to spending more money or making greater efforts. Technical safety and the SMS must be still be managed. Moreover, such a radical reorientation suggests a cultural shift, whose consequences go much further than a simple decree.

**2. "I've invested in my facilities and my SMS is working well. Why do I still have accidents?"**

One explanation is that the HOF component is sometimes reduced to simply managing individual behaviour. However, behaviour is underpinned by organizational choices, and the work



situations that are considered to be 'normal'. Without acting on these deeper issues, good safety is difficult to achieve (1).

**3. "We're working on all 3 of our pillars but our accident rate isn't falling."**

An initial explanation is siloing the 3 pillars and practices, for example by drawing up procedures without consulting the people doing the work. Another explanation is organizational inertia: the cultural factors that underpin the 3 pillars working together change more slowly than practices in each of the pillars taken in isolation.

**So, what can I do?**

One way to progress is to seize opportunities to manage all 3 pillars together (1). Some simple examples will show you what we mean.

In the field of technical safety, one way of making progress is to understand how the configuration of equipment constrains working practices. If there is

little understanding of how things work at the day-to-day level (2), it is likely that unrealistic operating procedures are imposed on operators, which encourages safety violations. An example is operators who cover safety photocells in order to finish their work on time.

With respect to the SMS, obviously, the choice of indicators is important (3), but how they are produced is just as important. In practice, the company's actors may try to meet performance targets rather than manage risk. An example is the manager who makes field visits because they have to meet their annual objectives, but does not pay attention to the working environment.

In the area of HOF, one point to remember is that humans and the organization are levers that can improve performance - rather than a cause of failure.

Safety actions must therefore include the identification and management of the organizational factors that produce failure - and success.

**If it's good for safety, it's good for business**

Safety culture goes beyond the juxtaposition of the 3 safety pillars, and extends to the integration of the underlying processes. At the same time, we must not forget the overall goal: corporate performance. A low accident rate is good for both profitability, and the health of workers. Moreover, using the cultural lever to achieve this objective has beneficial side effects on aspects such as the meaning of work, and quality of life.

There is only one step between safety culture and the health of the business. What are you waiting for?

**Notes**

(1) Icsi (2017). [L'essentiel de la culture de sécurité](#). Icsi, Toulouse.

(2) Santa Maria, D. (2016). [To improve safety culture, managers must know what is happening in the field](#), Thoughts on Safety Culture No. 22, Icsi, Toulouse, France.

(3) Tazi, D. (2014). [Safety indicators tell us nothing about the management of major risks](#) Thoughts on Safety Culture No. 4, Icsi, Toulouse, France.

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