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

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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.’

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’ 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 when 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?

Values, Practices and Culture

“A company’s *values* are the core of its culture,” 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.” 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.*

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 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 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 practices. Interestingly

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6 Coleman, loc. cit.
8 See for example: A. Hopkins, Safety, Culture and Risk, CCH Australia Ltd, 2005, pp. 6-11.
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. 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 monitoring to check they are applied as intended. This is a subject in its own right and is not discussed further here.

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)

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.

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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 [website], <http://www.csb.gov/assets/1/7/Wilkinson_Active_Monitoring.pdf> accessed 31 December 2015.
### Annex

Some examples of organisational practices from different domains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Examples of Good Organisational Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Health Care</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Process Safety</td>
<td>The focus placed by companies and the regulator on implementing appropriate standards for safe and effective communications at shift handovers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 HR/Training/Continuing Professional Development</td>
<td>The practice of describing the objectives of training in terms of what trainees will learn and be able to do after attending training.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Managing Organisations</td>
<td>Role clarity: Discussing, defining and documenting the respective roles of team members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Aviation</td>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Any work domain</td>
<td>Formalised checking (active monitoring) that to check that really important rules, procedures, practices and standards are being achieved in practice and not waiting for evidence of failure to manifest itself.</td>
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</tbody>
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Peter Wilkinson is the General Manager Risk at the Noetic Group. Peter’s career spans both government regulation and senior leadership in the corporate sector. He spent 27 years in the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as a regulator including in the North Sea following the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988. He also regulated all of Britain’s onshore oil and gas industry: on one occasion attending a blowout of a coal seam gas well in the grounds of a hospital. His last four years in the HSE were spent in Australia leading the team which developed the (then) National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority (now NOPSEMA).

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.

Since 2011 Peter has 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 the USA’s worst oil spills. Peter also worked on the Montara blow out for the then Resources Minister and is currently working for the Northern Territory Government on the uranium leachate incident which occurred at the Ranger Mine. Peter is a member of the Society of Petroleum Engineers and on the Australian Government’s Nuclear Safety Committee.

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