

SOCIAL SYSTEMS & PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY Add New Meaning to Safety Culture

By Rosa Antonia Carrillo

Having spent 25 years using safety culture concepts to design and implement leadership and employee engagement programs. I have concluded that the OSH profession has gotten many things wrong about safety culture, perhaps most significantly that it can be controlled and managed.

This led to the mistaken belief that a leader could get others to place a high value on work safety without interacting with them in deep and meaningful ways. Workers are asked to make personal changes in thinking and habits that might go against a lifetime of experience. Such change is too difficult and complex to convey in any way other than personal communication.

Another important aspect the profession has gotten wrong is that fixing the safety culture is the cure for messy emotions such as mistrust that produce unwanted results. We cannot get rid of it and we do not know how to deal with it, so we contain it with an ambiguous label and put it away. I want to open that container so that we can address its contents and transform it in a practical manner.

Safety culture is ensconced. I have been contributing to it since developing the model for safety as an open system with culture at its center (Simon & Simon, 1995). I hesitate to declare that it is time to move on to a more actionable model. Yet, there are significant reasons to move the focus to social systems and psychological safety to prevent disasters, fatalities and serious injuries. Most importantly, social systems and psychological safety do a better job at helping us understand what people need from leaders so they can do what needs to be done to prevent these tragedies.

New Research on Human Relationships & Emotions

In *The Relationship Factor in Safety Leadership* (Carrillo, 2019), I describe the neurological and behavioral science that led me to understand why relationships are important to performance. It is through relationship that all communication takes place. It includes how we treat each other, come to agreement on what something means, what to do about it, and who is included or excluded. These social interactions determine the

quality of communication and organizational outcomes (Garton, 1995). My conclusions are based on two parallel areas of research.

First, neuroscience established that the human need for relationship, belonging and inclusion is as strong as the need for food and shelter (Rock, 2009). By mapping brain reactions through MRIs, scans and electrodes, scientists discovered that the brain perceives exclusion and ostracism as a threat of harm ranging from physical to fatal (Eisenberger et al., 2003). Thus, failing to meet employee needs for belonging is as severe as not paying employees. Employers do not see the negative effects as quickly, but employees with the option of moving on to another job will do so.

Second is the study of psychological safety, a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. It can be defined as “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career” (Kahn, 1990). Creating conditions of psychological safety is also essential to learning (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson, 1999; 2002). Google’s People Operations followed up on Edmondson’s research and validated that the company’s highest performing teams reported that “fear of ridicule” was absent (Rozovsky, 2015). Finally, abusive supervisor behaviors were found to lead to lower safety performance in studies with airline pilots and industrial workers (Yang et al., 2020).

Practical Applications of Social Systems

As the implications of these insights kicked in, I began to explore how meeting or not meeting the need for inclusion, belonging and psychological safety could impact workplace safety and overall performance. I also talked to successful leaders to gain practical knowledge about how we could go about implementing these ideas.

Psychological Safety

Let’s start with one of the most desirable attributes of a mature safety program: Employees willing to speak up and stop the unsafe actions of others. Edmondson’s (1999; 2002) research shows that correcting others would be difficult for any person to do. Each personal interaction is fraught with anxiety due to the risk of losing face. We save face for ourselves when we do not ask a question because everyone else in the room seems to know what something means. We save face for others when we do not question them if we think they are making a mistake.

Causing someone to lose face is a big reason that some people retaliate or get angry when they are told about a mistake. Their natural instinct is to feel a threat to their standing in the community. Of course, this causes tremendous problems and stress in the workplace. It leads to not sharing or asking for the information we need to be successful and avoid incidents. In short, psychological safety is the condition that must exist in the workplace for people to speak out or admit a mistake without fear of losing face.

Social Systems

My research on social systems indicates that assessing the quality of social interactions in the workplace is a better way to improve performance. It points to where the problems typically assigned to safety culture begin so that we can address them at the root.

Within social systems there are other systems such as cultural, economic, demographic and organizational systems (Burns et al., 1994). Social systems are fields that influence members’ decisions about the right and wrong way to do things. They also influence the type of social interaction that takes place. These social interactions include collaboration, conflict, competition, coercion and social exchanges (e.g., people form relationships based on self-interest). Power relations are also played out in these interactions (Bourdieu, 1980/1990; Merrill, 1957).

Social structures and cultures are founded upon social interactions. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they

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seek to live (Carpentier, 2015). It makes sense that social interaction lies at the core of developing organizational culture.

Sociotechnical Systems

Emery and Trist (1965) coined the term “sociotechnical systems.” One of the earliest experiments that led organizational researchers to identify the connection between worker relationships and productivity took place in British mines. It showed that the way workers interacted had a definitive influence on productivity and safety.

The work groups had been accustomed to sharing tasks and taking care of each other’s families if one person was unable to work. To improve efficiency, the mine owners disbanded the groups and assigned people to do one repetitive task all day. Production plummeted, while absenteeism and conflict grew. Emery and Trist noted that disrupting the relationships was detrimental to productivity because it damaged their social system.

Culture as a Social System

Culture is a subsystem of social systems. After Chernobyl, the concept of safety culture emerged. It made a powerful connection between leadership and the level of priority that safety held in the organization. The idea of safety culture remains strong, but we have lost the original social systems connection to relationship: the importance of well-being and belonging. We are now in a position to rethink social systems and to pursue psychological safety.

The Relationship Factor in Transformational Safety Leadership

While doing 360° assessments, I found that successful leaders use 1-hour weekly conversations with upper-level direct reports and frequent field or floor visits with employees. Supervisor-employee personal interactions happen daily. This is where leaders find out what is going on in the lives and work of direct reports. The easiest time to fix or prevent problems is when they first happen. It is also where relationships are built as leaders support personal development or encourage innovation. That is how leaders create the conditions that allow employees to stop or fix unsafe conditions, report mistakes, and share information.

Unfortunately, the dominant management social system does not place a priority on one-on-one conversations. Management education does not focus on understanding and embracing the need to belong. U.S. culture supports individualism where it is hard to admit that you feel excluded without losing face.

Conclusion

People say to me, these ideas are nothing new. I agree. Is there such a thing as an original thought? I have an idea and the next person builds on it. Now the idea belongs to them. But the words are new. I am trying to say it in a way that might help others understand, adopt and use them.

Nothing can alter the human need to belong. Baked into humanity’s DNA, it will drive our response to social interactions. Now we know why an act perceived as disrespect can elicit a violent response. It triggers the fear of death. All leaders instinctively know this, at times unconsciously. Unless the organization meets social needs, any efforts such as organizational design, goal tracking systems and big data have limited value. Meeting the need to belong leads to buy-in.

What will it take to put these ideas into action? Continual learning and assuming the responsibility to foster inclusion and belonging in every interaction is a leadership mindset. We cannot force or demand that managers and supervisors be leaders. To be a leader, you have to volunteer. It is not a job; it is a calling. Having said that, a calling does not always show up as, “I want to be a leader!” It might begin as a quiet dissatisfaction with the way things are and an idea to make things better. Then we have to decide if we choose to lead the effort for change. **PSJ**

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