What is a Safety Culture and Why Do You Need One?



The words “safety culture” gets bandied about a lot. But it’s also a term that nobody quite understands. What exactly is safety culture? And what, if any, impact does it have on a company’s liability risks?

What Safety Culture Is

Safety culture is one of those fuzzy concepts like “obscenity” that nobody can precisely define but everybody knows when they see. Safety culture is first and foremost a mindset, a set of shared values and thinking among all the members of an organization.

When we say a company has a “good safety culture,” we basically mean that people who work there care about and accord high priority to safety—that safety is a part of the company’s DNA that gets transmitted to all progeny.

Probably the best way to identify safety culture is by looking for the characteristics it’s associated with. Thus, according to a study from the University of Illinois, in a workplace with a safety culture, everyone at every level of the company places enduring value and a priority on safety and:

- Is committed to personal responsibility for safety;
- Acts to preserve, enhance and communicate safety concerns;
- Strives to actively learn, adapt and modify their behaviour based on lessons learned from safety errors and incidents; and
- Is rewarded in a manner consistent with these values.

Safety culture generally yields safe performance. Although accidents and injuries can still happen at companies with strong safety cultures, such mishaps tend to be more the product of bad luck than carelessness, neglect or lack of adequate safety resources.

How Safety Culture Affects Liability

Safety culture also has an important—albeit indirect—impact on a company’s liability risks. OSHA laws don’t say employers need a good “safety culture.” In fact, they don’t mention the term at all.

Nevertheless, safety culture is a concept that OSHA officials embrace and refer to in enforcing regulatory requirements. An organization’s safety culture, or lack thereof, is a factor considered by:

- OSHA inspectors in determining whether to issue citations and how to classify them, e.g., as “serious” or “willful”;
- OSHA inspectors and administrators in deciding how much to fine the organization for a particular violation; and
- Courts and administrative tribunals like OSHRC in deciding whether to uphold OSHA fines and penalties on appeal.

Bottom line:

- The existence of an active safety culture is a mitigating factor likely to result in lesser penalties or no penalties at all;
- Lack of a safety culture is an aggravating factor likely to lead to more severe penalties, as well as targeted follow-up enforcement under programs like the Severe Violator Enforcement Program (SVEP).