Questioning safety culture: From control-oriented models to emergent organizing

13th International Conference Working on Safety (WOS), Limassol, Cyprus

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23.9.2026

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SAFETY CULTURE WITH PASSION

INTRODUCTION

- This presentation extends and elaborates the arguments presented in my book “Safety in Complex Organizations”
- However, the focus in this presentation is on one concept in particular: safety culture



Finalizing of the book and participation in this conference were supported by the Finnish Work Environment Fund (TSR)

DEVELOPMENTS IN SAFETY SCIENCE CHALLENGE THE TRADITIONAL SAFETY CULTURE VIEW

- When safety culture was introduced after the Chernobyl nuclear accident, it highlighted the importance of *organization* to safety.
- More recent developments in safety science highlight the importance of *organizing* to safety.
  - Building on ideas developed by Weick, Turner and others since the 1960s–1970s
- Understanding of safety has moved toward a systemic view whereas safety culture often has retained its focus on measurable attributes and dimensions
- Understanding of culture and social systems in general has also developed
- The safety culture concept has not kept pace
- There have been proposals to abandon the concept altogether

➢ There is a need to reframe the concept of safety culture rather than abandon it

See also Weick (1969); Turner (1978); Rasmussen (1997); Tsoukas & Chia (2002); Reiman & Rollenhagen (2014).

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THE SAFETY CULTURE CONCEPT HAS BEEN USED IN VARIOUS WAYS

- To explain
  - Culture is often invoked to explain behaviour, safety performance, or accidents
- To intervene
  - Culture is often assessed, diagnosed, and changed to improve safety
- To manage
  - Culture models often define desirable attributes and guide attention, decisions, and interventions

What assumptions about culture and safety are embedded in these uses?

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ASSUMPTIONS OFTEN BUILT INTO DOMINANT SAFETY CULTURE USES

- Safety culture can be measured
- Safety culture explains behavior
- Safety culture is a tool to manage and control the organization and its people
- People are the challenge – safety follows if we can control the people
- Safety culture enables safety
- Safety culture is relatively stable and homogenous (especially if it is a healthy safety culture)
- Safety culture development targets mainly employee attitudes and behaviors.

➢ Ultimately, in this view, safety culture is about people and their behavior

See Guldenmund (2000, 2007); Silbey (2009); Churruca et al. (2021); Bisbey et al. (2021); Alvesson & Sveningsson (2024).

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THE DOMINANT APPROACHES MAY REPRODUCE THE EXACT CULTURE THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO CHALLENGE

- Models determine what we look for
- Measures make some phenomena visible and others invisible
- Findings direct attention and interventions
- Existing assumptions about how safety should be managed may therefore be reinforced rather than questioned

Can safety culture challenge taken-for-granted assumptions if those assumptions are already embedded in our models and tools?

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PROPOSAL FOR REFRAMING

- To add value, the concept of safety culture should focus on issues that go beyond the safety management tools, methods and approaches
- Safety culture should not be seen as another safety mechanism, but as a way of looking at the safety mechanisms already in place

- Culture develops around the work people do, the risks they recognize, and the constraints they must manage => *culture refers to relatively enduring patterns emerging through organizing*
- Reframing safety culture in this manner allows us to understand *organizing* rather than control *organizations*

Building on Weick (1969); Weick et al. (2005); Tsoukas & Chia (2002); Elder-Vass (2010); Reiman & Rollenhagen (2014); Reiman (2026); Antonsen (2009); Alvesson & Sveningsson (2024)

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UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF SAFETY CULTURE REFRAMED

- Culture is a system property, not an individual trait
- The same processes that bring us success can also cause accidents
- One cannot directly control safety culture - or safety itself
- Culture always both enables and constrains
- A culture is rarely unified – and this can be either a strength or a weakness from a safety perspective
- Safety is the challenge – in complex environments we form assumptions and meanings concerning safety and risks that are the essence of culture

➢ Target of intervention when developing safety culture is the process of organizing and the structures, practices, tools and technologies through which it takes form

➢ Ultimately, safety culture is about sociotechnical systems and their relatively enduring yet continuously evolving patterns

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REFRAMING SAFETY CULTURE AS A META-TOOL

	Control-oriented safety culture	Safety culture as a meta-tool
Purpose	To **control** the organization To **improve** safety by changing behavior and attitudes.	To **inquire** about organizing and its patterns, to **understand** organizing
Focus of intervention	**Culture** directly, often in the form of front-line employee behaviors	**Organizing** and ways of leading, steering, constraining and enabling it.
Proof of usefulness	Demonstrable **improvement** in behaviour or quantitative scores	Better **understanding** and better questions

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WAYS OF USING THE REFRAMED SAFETY CULTURE CONCEPT

- **Assessment:** From measuring “the culture” to using evidence to understand how safety is produced through organizing.
- **Development:** From culture-change programmes to shaping work, structures, interactions and conditions for learning.
- **Leadership:** From trying to control culture to noticing and influencing patterns of organizing.

All three uses require a cultural perspective: attention to how relatively enduring patterns emerge, are reproduced, and change through organizing.

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CONCLUSIONS

- Safety culture risks becoming a self-reinforcing management tool that reproduces prevailing ideas about safety rather than revealing where those ideas themselves may have become part of the problem.
- However, used as a tool for inquiry rather than control, safety culture can reveal how assumptions, power, incentives and norms shape everyday trade-offs.
  - It can help leaders manage culturally rather than manage culture.
- Its value is not as an answer, but as a way of asking better questions.

➢ Safety culture should not be another object of control; it should be a lens for understanding how safety emerges through organizing.

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Thank you!

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