

Part 6 — Safety Culture Doesn't Sustain Itself. Leaders Do.



The audit went well. No findings. Positive feedback. A sense of relief across the organization.

In the weeks that followed, safety meetings became shorter. Reports slowed. Conversations gradually shifted back toward efficiency, output, and schedule.

Nothing was announced—but something changed.

Strong safety cultures don't erode during crises. They erode quietly, when attention drifts after the pressure passes.

This is why safety culture cannot be treated as a one-time achievement. It must be actively reinforced—especially when things appear to be going well.

A strong safety culture doesn't appear overnight—and it doesn't sustain itself on policies alone.

In the earlier parts of this series, we explored what safety culture is, how it shows up in daily behavior, and why it plays such a critical role in the effectiveness of a Safety Management System (SMS). In this installment, we turn our focus to the long game: **how leaders actively build and sustain safety culture over time.**

Culture Is What Leaders Reinforce—Every Day

The Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG) defines safety culture as “*the set of enduring values, behaviors, and attitudes regarding safety, shared by every member at every level of an organization*” (SMICG, *Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, Section 2.1).

While everyone contributes to culture, leadership sets the conditions for whether it thrives—or quietly erodes.

Sustaining a strong safety culture requires more than periodic messaging or visible concern after an incident. It demands **consistent leadership behaviors** that reinforce safety as a core organizational value, even when operational pressure is high.

Leaders shape culture through:

- The decisions they prioritize
- The behaviors they model
- The actions they reward—or tolerate

Over time, these signals tell the workforce what *really* matters.

From Reactive to Proactive: The Leadership Shift

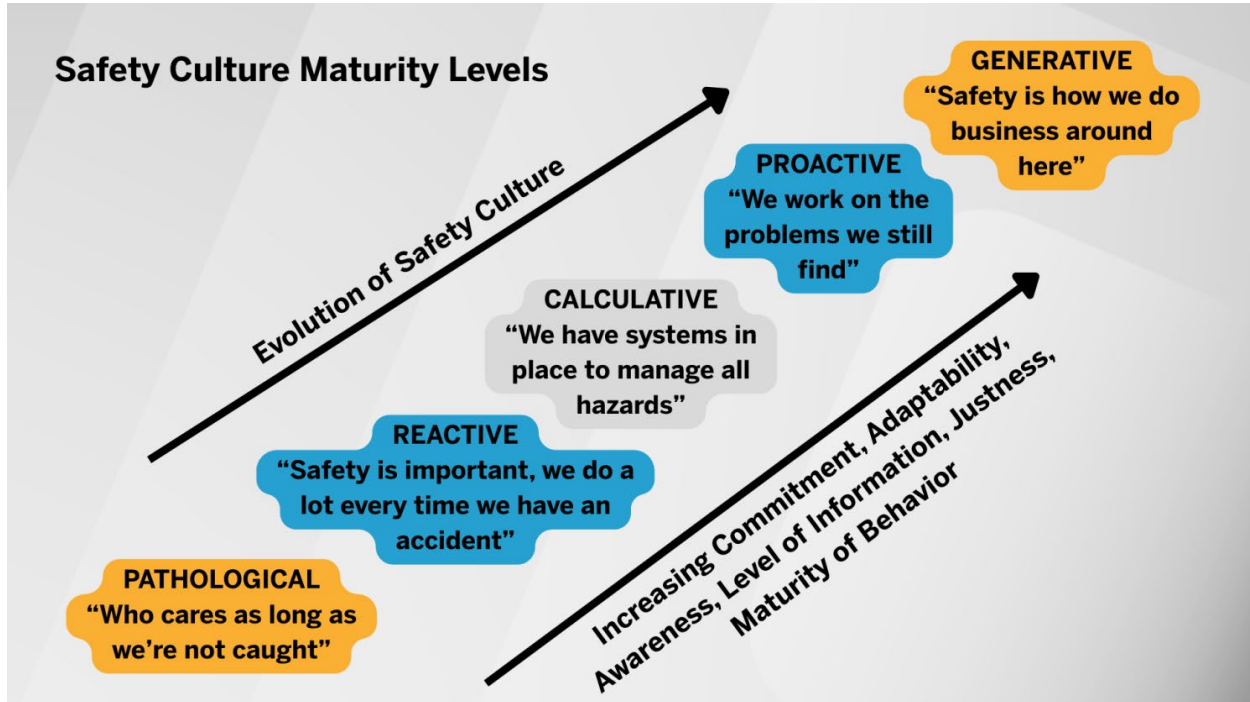
The SMICG framework describes safety culture maturity as a progression—from **reactive**, to **calculative**, to **proactive**—based on Hudson’s safety culture model (SMICG, *Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, Section 2.4; Figure 2).

- In **reactive** cultures, action follows incidents.
- In **calculative** cultures, systems exist—but safety may still compete with schedule and efficiency.
- In **proactive** cultures, safety is a core value that informs decisions *before* something goes wrong.

Leaders are the primary drivers of this evolution. Proactive cultures are sustained when leaders:

- Actively seek safety information, not just compliance data

- Encourage reporting of hazards, near misses, and weak signals
- Treat safety discussions as routine—not exceptional
- Focus on learning and prevention rather than blame



Safety Culture Maturity Levels - Hudson, implementing safety culture in a major multi-national, *Safety Science*, 2007, 697-722

Trust, Justness, and Psychological Safety

A sustainable safety culture is built on trust.

When leaders respond fairly to honest mistakes, clearly distinguish between error and reckless behavior, and involve employees in safety solutions, they reinforce a **Just Culture**—one where people feel safe speaking up.

Over time, this trust becomes self-reinforcing:

- Reporting increases
- Information quality improves
- Risks are identified earlier
- Safety performance strengthens

Without trust, even the most sophisticated SMS will struggle to function as intended.

Sustaining Culture Requires Continuous Attention

Safety culture is not static. Organizational changes, growth, staffing shifts, and external pressures can all influence how safety is perceived and practiced.

That's why effective leaders:

- Regularly engage with their workforce on safety topics
- Monitor how safety decisions are experienced at the operational level
- Look for gaps between “work as imagined” and “work as done”
- Treat safety culture as something to be actively maintained—not assumed

Strong safety cultures endure because leaders continue to *invest* in them—through time, attention, and action.

Coming Up Next

In the final installment of our Safety Culture series, we'll explore **how organizations can meaningfully measure safety culture**—turning values and behaviors into observable, actionable insight. Because what leaders pay attention to—and measure—ultimately shapes what endures.

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Reference

Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG). (2019). [Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance](#). April 2019.