

Part 7 — How to Measure Safety Culture: Turning Values into Evidence



Throughout this series, we've explored what safety culture is, how it forms, and why leadership behavior—not policy alone—determines whether a Safety Management System (SMS) truly works.

The final question is also the most misunderstood:

How do you actually measure safety culture?

Not through accident rates alone. Not through audits or compliance findings. And not by asking whether people *feel* safe.

According to the Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG), safety culture cannot be measured directly or quantitatively; instead, it is **evaluated qualitatively** through observable behaviors, leadership decision-making, and organizational responses to safety risk (SMICG *Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, pp. **7–11, 14–16**).

What Measuring Safety Culture Is — and Is Not

SMICG is explicit that safety culture evaluation is **not an audit** and is **not intended to produce findings, scores, or grades**. Rather, it provides insight into how safety is actually valued and practiced within an organization at a given point in time (SMICG *Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, p. **7**).

In other words, safety culture measurement is not about proving success. It is about revealing **how decisions are made—especially when tradeoffs exist**.

So, How Do You Measure Safety Culture?

SMICG guidance shows that safety culture is measured **indirectly**, using a structured and repeatable approach built on three core elements.

1. Measure Defined Culture Dimensions

Safety culture is evaluated across **six core characteristics**, each supported by observable indicators:

- **Commitment** – How leadership demonstrates safety as a core value
- **Justness** – How fairly unsafe behavior and reporting are handled
- **Information** – How safety information is shared and acted upon
- **Awareness** – How well risks are understood at all levels
- **Adaptability** – How the organization learns and improves
- **Behavior** – Whether actions align with stated safety values

These characteristics are drawn directly from SMICG’s safety culture framework and are assessed through behaviors and organizational practices—not policy statements alone (SMICG *Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, pp. **9–11**).

2. Use Structured Qualitative Assessment

SMICG emphasizes that safety culture is best evaluated through **structured dialogue**, not surveys or metrics alone.

This includes:

- Interviews with both **management and frontline personnel**
- Questions designed to identify **perception gaps**
- Observation of how safety issues are discussed, escalated, and resolved
- Examination of how decisions are made under normal and pressured conditions

SMICG notes that differences between leadership and workforce perceptions are expected and should be treated as **valuable diagnostic information**, not deficiencies (SMICG *Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, pp. **14–16**).

3. Evaluate Leadership Response and Follow-Through

Safety culture measurement only has value if it informs leadership action.

Effective organizations:

- Compare management intent with workforce experience
- Identify patterns that influence safe—or unsafe—behavior
- Review whether safety concerns lead to meaningful change
- Reassess periodically to monitor improvement or cultural drift

This aligns with SMICG guidance on safety performance measurement, which stresses that organizations cannot directly measure safety outcomes and must instead evaluate the **systemic and organizational enablers** that support safe performance (SMICG *Measuring Safety Performance – Guidelines for Service Providers*, pp. **3–4**).

What “Good” Measurement Reveals

Rather than producing a score, safety culture evaluation helps leaders answer questions that rarely appear in dashboards:

- Where do we unintentionally trade safety for convenience?
- Where do policies say one thing, but behavior says another?
- Where does trust exist—and where does it break down?
- How quickly do we change behavior after identifying risk?

SMICG cautions that focusing solely on lagging indicators can give a false sense of security in low-frequency, high-consequence systems like aviation, reinforcing the need for qualitative cultural insight (SMICG *Measuring Safety Performance*, pp. **3–5**).

Culture Maturity: Understanding Progress, Not Perfection

SMICG describes safety culture maturity as a progression:

- **Reactive** – Action follows events
- **Calculative** – Systems exist, but safety competes with pressure
- **Proactive** – Safety is embedded in everyday decision-making

Most organizations span multiple levels at once. Measurement helps leaders understand **where improvement is needed**, not where blame belongs (SMICG *Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*, pp. **11–12**).

Why This Is a Leadership Tool

Here is the defining insight behind meaningful safety culture measurement:

Safety culture is measured to reveal leadership blind spots—not to confirm good intentions.

Used correctly, culture measurement:

- Challenges assumptions
- Prevents complacency
- Strengthens trust
- Improves decision-making before risk becomes harm

That is why SMICG positions safety culture assessment as a complement to SMS—not a replacement for it.

Closing the Series — From Insight to Action

Across this series, one truth has remained constant:

Safety culture doesn't sustain itself. Leaders do.

Measuring safety culture is not about counting events—it's about understanding behaviors. Not about compliance—but about consistency. Not about scores—but about insight.

How WYVERN Supports Meaningful Culture Measurement

For organizations ready to move from understanding to action, WYVERN provides structured, practical ways to evaluate and strengthen safety culture over time.

WYVERN Premium PLUS members can take advantage of a **complimentary Annual Safety Culture Analysis**, designed to help leadership teams:

- Assess safety culture using internationally recognized principles
- Identify perception gaps between leadership and frontline personnel
- Understand cultural strengths and areas of vulnerability
- Establish a baseline for continuous improvement

For organizations seeking additional guidance, WYVERN's **Virtual Safety Officer (VSO) Program** provides ongoing support to help:

- Interpret safety culture insights in the context of daily operations
- Strengthen reporting, risk management, and leadership engagement
- Reinforce behaviors that sustain a proactive safety culture—not just an SMS

Together, these services help organizations move beyond measuring culture to **actively managing it**—before risk becomes consequence.

That's where measurement delivers its greatest value.

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Reference

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

Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG). (2013). [*Measuring Safety Performance Guidelines for Service Providers*](#). July 2013.