

Safety Culture:

An Effective Approach
to Continuous Improvement



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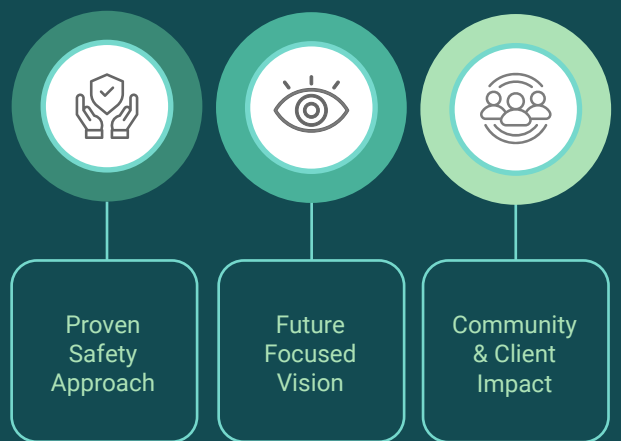


Introduction Summary

01

The Importance of Safety Culture for Better Care

Improving safety culture saves lives. For years, the healthcare industry has published toolkits, hosted forums, formed organizations, and issued alerts about the harm caused by poor cultures. Despite all this attention, few organizations have achieved meaningful improvement.

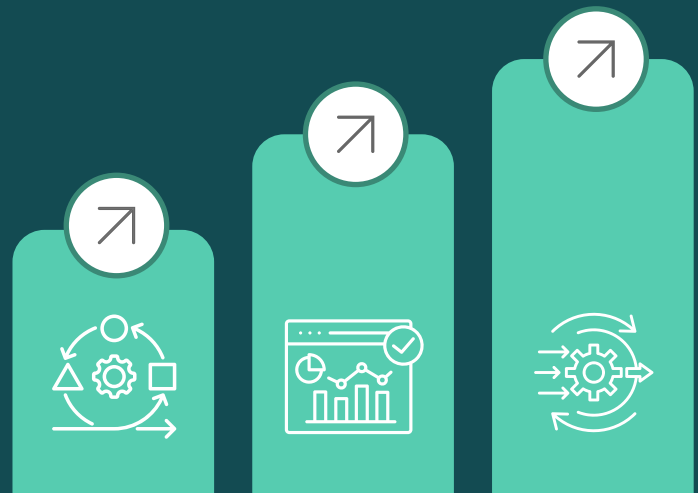


At Beterra, we believe we can help organizations succeed where they have failed before. We have worked with over 300 organizations worldwide to measure safety culture. Of these organizations, many were successfully transforming culture, while others were stuck in cycles of stagnation or decline. Our day-to-day experience in the trenches with our high-performing and struggling clients has taught us a very valuable lesson: improving is not about what we do, it's about how we do it.

In this white paper, we lay out a proven approach for improving safety culture. Our vision at Beterra is a "world where health and care are better than today." We hope this will be a valuable tool for our clients and the improvement community.

Building an Improvement Organization

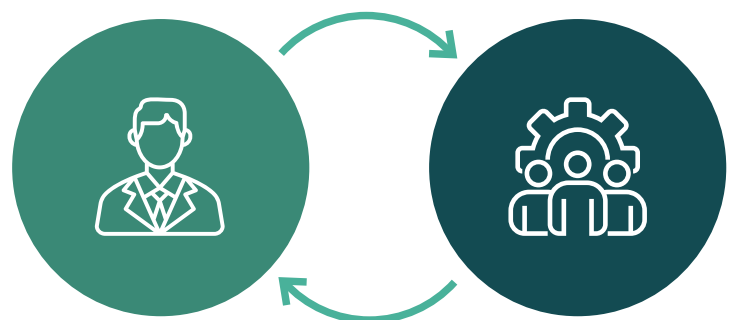
There is no perfect way to improve safety culture. As we collectively learn from the unique improvement journeys across our clients, some common tenets have emerged. The following is a list of statements we believe provide a foundation for any safety culture improvement system.



“We believe that lasting culture change requires engaged staff working with equipped local leaders supported by senior leaders. We reject that simple top down or bottom-up approaches yield lasting results.”

The Cycle That Sustains Culture Change

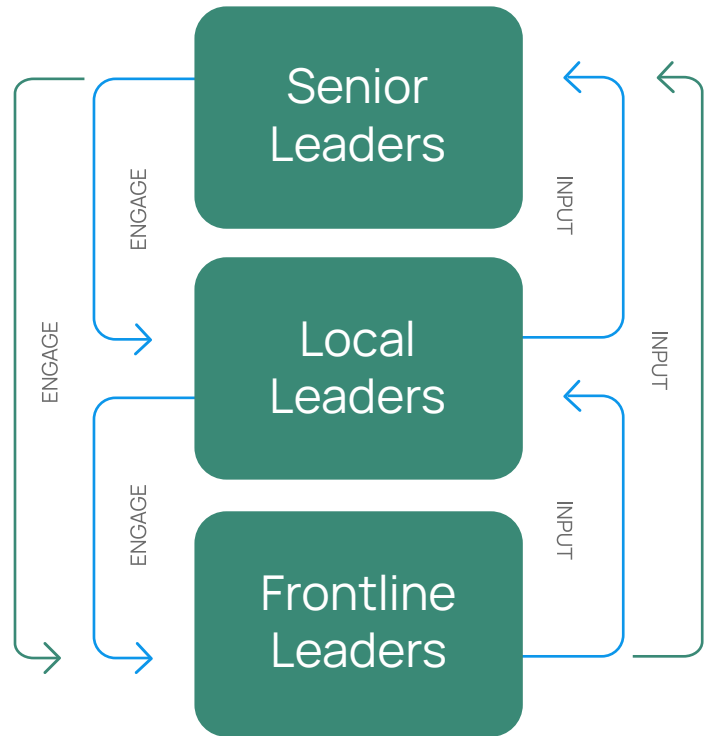
Safety culture improvement requires leaders to engage their teams, and teams to provide input to their leaders on an ongoing basis. This continuous dialogue (the engage - input cycle) requires special attention and structural maintenance, however, it yields far more return than traditional approaches to safety culture action plans.



Leaders must initiate the engage - input cycle by establishing the framework for success: a clear operational structure, a detailed improvement process, and concrete desired outcomes. But leadership engagement doesn't stop at a framework. Without an ongoing engagement across multiple layers of leadership, survey response rates are often low, and action plans have little or no follow-up. Safety culture, unlike other metrics sets, cannot be addressed only by leaders.

The transformation to a robust culture of safety requires the consistent engagement of frontline teams by their local leaders and senior leaders.

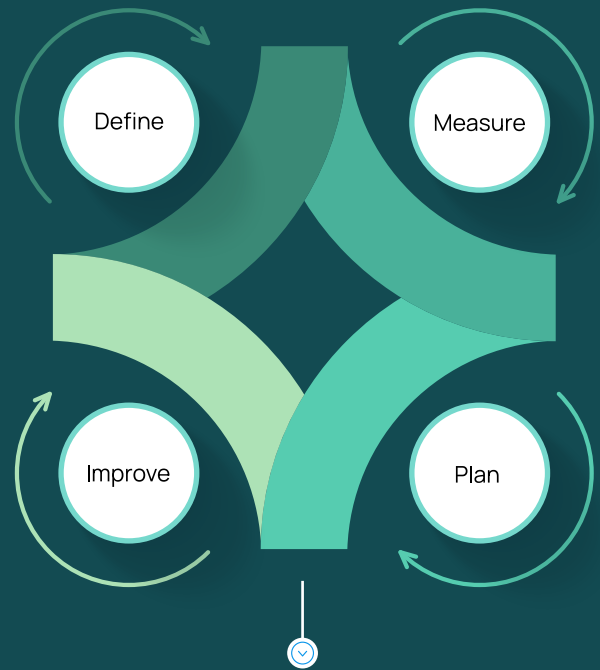
Finally, since strong safety cultures require the flattening of hierarchy in matters of safety, senior leaders must develop direct ways of receiving input and participation from frontline staff. These direct methods, such as surveys, town halls, and leadership rounding, should augment efforts by local leaders to improve safety culture, not replace them.



“We believe that safety improvement plans should be monitored and analyzed for accountability and efficacy measurement. We reject that the initial development of action plans is sufficient for connecting actions to outcomes.”

“We believe that Local leaders must be equipped through resources, time, and direct communication with senior leaders through programs like executive rounding. We reject that simply providing safety culture data sufficiently equips local leaders.”

We’ve made the case that an organization’s safety culture foundation is organizational identity, staff engagement, and team member performance, but how is that culture implemented? We propose a 4-stage framework for iterative and safety culture improvement closely related to widely adopted methodologies such as PDCA and DMAIC.



Our 4 Stage Framework

Most organizations address safety culture in improvement cycles based on the administration of safety culture surveys. For ease of discussion, we will consider a safety culture improvement cycle based on a standard period of 18 months between the administration of surveys.

Define



The initial stage of a safety culture improvement cycle, “Define”, is often the weakest stage in the improvement journey. Senior leaders rarely meet on the topic of safety culture prior to a survey being administered, and specific structures and aims for using safety culture data are rarely established. When the Define stage is properly executed, it creates a foundation for the remainder of the improvement cycle and greatly increases the likelihood of success.

The core activities of the Define stage are:

- Establish an organizational strategy regarding safety culture
- Establish an improvement infrastructure
- Develop messaging that clarifies purpose, timelines, and expectations

● Establish an organizational strategy regarding safety culture

For the past decade, work around safety culture was primarily done to satisfy regulatory requirements from the Joint Commission and others. New research and best practices have led top organizations to prioritize safety culture as a key performance metric. Senior leadership teams must articulate how safety culture aligns with the organizational strategies and values. Finally, senior leadership teams should set quantifiable goals around survey response rates, improvement pace, and overall performance.

● Establish an improvement infrastructure

Far too little time and attention is paid to the organizational improvement infrastructure. To drive local improvement, data must be collected at the appropriate local level and mapped to local level leaders. This requires a clear review of the organization's units, departments, divisions, and leaders. For a true safety culture improvement system, senior leaders should be paired with local leaders to provide coaching, accountability, and to conduct rounding.

● Develop messaging that clarifies purpose, timelines, and expectations

Unfortunately, years of surveys and forgotten action plans make engaging staff and local leaders a challenge. Precise messaging from senior leaders should include an overview of the organizational goals around safety culture, timelines for utilizing the survey data, and expectations for local leaders to act. This messaging should start well ahead of the survey dates.

Measure



Historically, most time and effort have been spent on the "Measure" phase of the improvement cycle. Yet many organizations still fail to refine a clear narrative about the true state of their safety culture. Safety culture surveys are evidence-based and highly valuable, but they are only one part of the overall assessment. When measurement is done correctly, organizations gain a clear picture of performance at both the system-wide and local levels.

The core activities of the Measure stage are:

> Conduct an unbiased survey with greater than 60% response rate

> "Make sense" of survey data through a thorough analysis and comparison

> Rapidly roll-out data to all levels of the organization, including the frontline

● Conduct an unbiased survey with greater than 60% response rate

The survey should build upon the work defining the improvement infrastructure. Each unit, department, or subgroup should also achieve a 60% response rate or higher. This requires ongoing response rate information throughout the survey, support from senior leaders, and a process that ensures complete anonymity. External vendors often have turnkey solutions for this activity.

● "Make sense" of survey data through a thorough analysis and comparison

Basic survey portals do not provide the analytical depth needed to properly leverage benchmarks, historical comparisons, role analysis, and other factors. Safety culture data and comments should be analyzed to provide internal best practices, risks, and an understanding of internal variability. Additionally, these results should be compared to other data sets such as employee engagement and quality indicators.

● Rapidly roll-out data to all levels of the organization, including the frontline

Most organizations struggle to get safety culture surveys results back to senior leaders, local leaders, and the frontline in quick time frame. Results should be cascaded throughout the organization within 6 weeks of the close of the survey. The results should contain initial messaging from senior and local leaders about the upcoming improvement process and leaders should use these forums to collect information on the core drivers of the gaps and successes.

Plan



Safety culture action plans are essential for improvement; however, this phase often results in plans that are unlikely to create real change. Action planning must remain a collaborative process between leaders and frontline teams to ensure relevance and feasibility. Effective safety culture plans should align with broader organizational metrics and priorities. Organizations that excel in the “Action” stage often achieve greater impact with fewer – but more focused – initiatives.

The core activities of the Plan stage are:

- Gather input from frontline team members and local leaders
- Align safety culture action plans with other organizational strategies
- Cascade targeted and brief action plans throughout the organization

● Gather input from frontline team members and local leaders

Many organizations errantly dive into action planning based on the safety culture survey results alone. Leadership’s perception of safety culture tends to be significantly higher than the frontline - leading to action plans that do not address the core issues being identified. Senior and local leaders must spend time through rounding, town halls, staff meetings, focus groups, and/or informal settings to obtain clarity on what the data means and what ideas for improvement their teams have.

● Align safety culture action plans with other organizational strategies

Too often safety culture action planning is approached solely from the perspective of a survey, rather than a higher-level understanding of broader safety and quality metrics and organizational plans. These siloed action plans have little chance of being fully implemented once time passes and the memory of the safety culture survey fades from focus. Action plans should address both culture and complementary organization-wide metrics. Areas of focus should be chosen not just based on safety culture data, but also current strategies, operational realities, and plans for long-term performance improvement.

● Cascade targeted and brief action plans throughout the organization

Simply approaching safety culture improvement from the organizational level ignores the variability of unit and department based micro cultures. However, leaving the action planning to the units and departments alone misses the opportunity to efficiently and effectively address organizational wide risks. Action plans should have no more than three areas of focus, beginning with an organizational area of focus, and allowing local leaders to set one or two more local issues to address.

Improve



The most important phase of any improvement cycle is clearly the improvement phase. Many healthcare organizations fail to see significant improvement in safety culture, in part because the prior phases were poorly implemented, and in part because execution of the “Improve” phase is weak or inconsistent. The few organizations that do execute and monitor well are able to see significant improvement in safety, quality, and overall staff engagement.

The core activities of the Improve stage are:

- > Imbed direct senior leadership rounding
- > Equip local leaders with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to lead local change
- > Monitor process and accountability metrics across the cycle

● Imbed direct senior leadership rounding

Senior leadership rounding is often touted to accelerate improvement in several different metrics. However, rounding often proves unfruitful for staff and senior leaders alike. Consistent rounding must be implemented with a specific focus on understanding safety culture and holding teams accountable to their improvement actions. A productive rounding program improves perceptions of safety culture, ensures improvement actions are effective, and maintains accountability throughout the improvement cycle.

● Equip local leaders with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to lead local change

The day-to-day work of safety culture improvement occurs in the unit, department, and location-based areas (“micro-cultures”). The managers and directors of these areas are often not given the resources, time, and support to guide improvement in their local culture. To be successful in safety culture improvement across these micro cultures, senior leaders must invest in equipping these local leaders through trainings, rounding, coaching, and by having the time to do the work. Organizational culture improvement requires most micro-cultures to accomplish lasting improvement.

● Monitor process and accountability metrics across the cycle

All successful long-term strategies require constant revision as conditions change, and tactics prove to be effective or ineffective. Although hospitals constantly measure and adjust their marketing, payer, or market share strategies, they rarely measure and adjust their safety culture improvement strategy. During the “Improve” phase, leaders must

capture and respond to process metrics such as the completion of actions, barriers identified, changes to strategies, and input from senior leadership rounding. The metrics should also be compared to outcome metrics at the end of the improvement cycle to evaluate the effectiveness of various improvement efforts.

Closing Summary

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Committed to Continuous Improvement

“We believe that meaningful and continuous improvement of safety culture is attainable for organizations of all sizes, financial positions, and structures. We reject that safety culture improvement requires special circumstances and long periods of time.”



Creating and fostering a positive safety culture is no simple task. Many stalled improvement efforts have led to frustration and a lack of focus on cultural improvement. However, achieving high reliability or “zero harm” requires organizations to build strong cultures at the organizational and local level. Taking a systematic approach, through Defining, Measuring, Planning, and Improving is the only way to be successful along a long-term journey of improvement.

About Beterra

Beterra is a healthcare technology company focused on building tools for safety and quality management.

Our solutions help clients accelerate improvement via collection, analysis, sensemaking, and safety and quality data utilization.

Scan the QR code to explore our website or contact us at hello@beterra.com

