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Sam Sherwood-Hale talks to Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services at the Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC), about what safety culture really means, why it matters so much in rail and where psychology fits in

SSH: What do we actually mean when we talk about safety culture?

LH: Safety culture is, in essence, the way an organisation thinks about and approaches safety, reflected in the behaviours it encourages, accepts and reinforces. An organisation will have its formal systems and procedures – and these are essential. They establish expectations, define safe working practices and provide mechanisms for training, monitoring and assurance. But safety culture goes beyond what is written down or functional practices. It is shaped by people – by the values, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours of people throughout the entire organisation, and by the extent to which safety is consistently prioritised in practice.

From a psychological perspective, the relationship between what an organisation says about safety and what its people experience day to day is particularly important. Leadership from the top down and throughout the organisation plays a significant role in establishing that connection.

SSH: What does a strong safety culture look like in practice?

LH: A whole host of factors contribute to a strong safety culture. That's both the beauty and the challenge of what we do at the OPC: there is no single action an organisation can take to achieve it. Instead, we need to consider how several factors can work together for the best outcome.

An important factor is the prominence given to safety throughout the organisation, not just within functions with specific safety responsibilities. Communication is key, and it needs to be two-way. Organisations with strong safety cultures will often have mechanisms for frontline employees to raise concerns and have their voices heard at the highest levels.

Equally, managers at every level need to listen, respond and engage in conversations about safety. As one client put it, communication can sometimes be 'flood down, and trickle up!' A strong safety culture depends on changing that dynamic, so that frontline concerns and insights travel upwards as effectively as messages and expectations about safety travel down.

Leadership is also critical. Safety leaders who engage and motivate their teams, encourage ownership of safety and take a supportive, facilitative approach help create an environment where people feel able to speak up without fear of repercussions. Their behaviour plays an important role in shaping safety culture.

Strong safety cultures are frequently characterised by a commitment to learning



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and continuous improvement. Mistakes can and do happen, even when systems and processes are well established – our employees are not robots! What matters is how an organisation responds to an incident or near miss: whether it examines what happened, looks to find and understand the underlying causes and moves away from a culture of blame towards one of shared learning. This means being open about what went wrong and taking positive action to reduce the likelihood of similar issues arising again.

SSH: Why does safety culture matter?

LH: We know there is a link between a strong safety culture and safety performance, with stronger safety cultures supporting safer behaviours, helping to reduce the likelihood of incidents, accidents, and mistakes. When safety is consistently valued and promoted throughout an organisation, employees are better placed to put those values into working practice on a day-to-day basis.

Even where competence management, auditing and assurance systems are well established, a weaker safety culture can undermine their effectiveness. Leaders may say that safety always comes first, but if they continually press teams to work faster to meet deadlines, the implicit message may indicate that getting the job done quickly takes priority. Employees may then feel under pressure to take shortcuts or deviate from procedures without fully recognising the risks involved. This illustrates how a disconnect between an organisation's stated commitment to safety and the behaviours it actually reinforces in practice can influence safety decisions, impacting the safety culture.

Systems and processes can be very explicit, but culture is implicit. It's reflected in the less visible influences on how individuals, teams and organisations actually behave. Understanding that distinction is essential to strengthening safety culture.

SSH: When something goes wrong, how do you find out whether culture played a part?

LH: When something goes wrong, we initially look at the systems and processes involved. Was there a problem with a procedure, or was a process in place that an individual did not follow? If the latter, we need to understand why. Exploring the reasons behind an individual's actions may reveal contributing factors such as gaps in knowledge or training, complacency, or influences arising from the wider safety culture.

For example, an individual may come to believe that following a procedure is unnecessary because the behaviours of colleagues or managers have implicitly reinforced that view. A more experienced colleague working alongside a younger apprentice may inadvertently signal that it is acceptable to skip certain steps, shaping the apprentice's understanding of what is expected in practice, even if nobody explicitly says so.

By looking beyond the immediate circumstances and examining the wider working environment, we can identify whether weaknesses in the safety culture may have contributed to what happened.

SSH: Why is safety culture particularly important in rail and other safety-critical environments?

LH: As explored, we know weaknesses or gaps in safety culture can contribute to things going wrong. Rail can be a hazardous environment, where mistakes have the potential to result in serious injury or loss of life. This makes it important to take a multi-pronged approach to preventing incidents, from recruiting the right people and ensuring they have the necessary competence, to designing jobs effectively and establishing robust systems and processes. A strong safety culture underpins all of these, helping to reinforce safe behaviours and reduce the likelihood of accidents and incidents.

SSH: Are there particular pressures in rail that influence safety behaviours?

LH: Pressure is an important consideration, and it can arise at every level and across every part of the rail network. This might include depot teams maintaining trains, those involved in track development and maintenance, signallers managing train movements, or train operators working to keep services running on time and meet passengers' expectations. While some pressures may be explicit, others are perceived by individuals or teams.

'Ultimately, improving safety culture means addressing the practical, organisational and behavioural factors that influence safety. Leaders have a key role to play, but lasting change depends on everyone understanding their responsibilities, working effectively together and having the right conditions, support and resources to put safety into practice.'

Even when leaders communicate strong safety messages, individuals or teams may still feel they need to work quickly to get a job done. This perceived pressure can influence decision-making and increase the potential for mistakes or errors.

Sometimes, over time, small deviations from established procedures can gradually accumulate and become accepted practice. This is known as 'normalisation of deviance': small changes to the way a task is carried out may occur on different occasions, with each change becoming part of the way the work is done. As these changes accumulate, the way the task is carried out can gradually move further away from established procedures, without anyone necessarily recognising the extent of the shift. A strong safety culture helps organisations recognise and challenge these emerging patterns before they become embedded and begin to displace established processes and procedures.

SSH: Is there greater awareness of these psychological concepts now?

LH: There's an awareness of terms such as psychological safety, safety culture, but less so around normalisation of deviance. But do people really understand what these look like in practice when they're at work? Maybe not until they've experienced them or had them explained and then they may recognise them. A lot of our work is preventative, focusing on helping organisations to recognise how safety culture can influence everyday behaviours, decisions and working practices, before something goes seriously wrong. It's about raising awareness of the factors that can strengthen or undermine safety culture, and why they matter. Once people understand these influences, they can start to identify where changes may be needed and take positive action.

SSH: How do teams respond when you run workshops on this?

LH: People are very open to it. The vast majority have a strong desire to understand safety culture, to get it right and to take strides to improve it. No one comes to work intending to cause an operational irregularity or injure themselves, but we're human and we can make mistakes. Part of what we do is to help people recognise what they're already doing well and become more consciously aware of why it works. It doesn't replace the technical side of anyone's job; it complements it.

SSH: Has the focus on safety culture been constant over time?

LH: Its prominence ebbs and flows, often in response to major incidents. One of the findings of the Ladbroke Grove inquiry, for example, was that safety culture was an issue. The safest organisations are those that don't rest on their laurels. They recognise that their safety culture can improve or deteriorate over time, so they continue to monitor it and look for ways to strengthen it. An organisation that believes it has reached its peak risks allowing its safety culture to slip.

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There can also be pockets of safety culture within an organisation. A depot, station or site might have a different culture from another just a couple of miles down the road, influenced by the people working there and the behaviours they see modelled every day. That's where safety leadership has real influence. Strong leaders who demonstrate positive safety behaviours can help develop and maintain a strong safety culture within their teams.

SSH: Who is responsible for creating and maintaining a strong safety culture?

LH: In short, everybody. It starts with the CEO or MD, and when directors, senior managers, middle managers, frontline managers and frontline teams all demonstrate strong safety behaviours and expectations, a strong safety culture is more likely to follow. It's very difficult for someone on the frontline to maintain those standards if the people more senior to them aren't doing the same.

In the strongest organisations, even those without safety, operations or engineering in their job title understand the influence they can have. HR, finance, communications design or legal teams all make decisions and take actions that can indirectly shape safety culture. If someone from the legal team visits a site and chooses not to wear a hard hat or follow the designated walking route, what message might that send to someone in a safety-critical role? Could it lead them to think they don't need to follow those requirements either?

SSH: Where does psychology come into it?

LH: As occupational psychologists, we help organisations understand how people's behaviour is shaped, so a lot of our work is about helping people recognise how their everyday actions, including small, non-verbal ones, can influence the safety behaviours of others.

SSH: How did the OPC develop the framework behind its approach?

LH: All our work is grounded in psychological theory and established research. Our team includes registered occupational psychologists and business psychologists, who draw on these foundations to inform how we assess and address organisational challenges.

A lot of our work involves understanding what is happening within an organisation before recommending solutions. If an organisation believes it has a safety culture problem, rather than jumping straight to off-the-shelf solutions, we'll investigate first. Do they have a problem, and if so, where might it lie? This could involve surveys, interviews or workshops, depending on the organisation and what we need to understand.

For organisational safety culture work, we will often use **OPC Assessment's Safety Culture Questionnaire (SafeCQ)**. It provides a structured way to explore how safety is perceived, managed and embedded within an organisation. It examines twelve building blocks associated with a safer culture, including communication about safety, management involvement, attitudes to safety, access to safety information and learning from safety issues. The findings can help us pinpoint areas of strength and concern, identify where improvements are needed and work alongside the organisation's teams to develop targeted actions that address the issues identified.

Our approach is grounded in theory but is very often tailored to each client's needs and specific areas of focus.

SSH: What are the warning signs that a safety culture isn't working?

LH: The more tangible indicators might include high sickness absence, higher staff turnover, an increase in grievances, slips, trips and falls figures, or more operational and safety-related incidents. None of these necessarily means there is a safety culture problem, but they are signs that are worth exploring further.

Other signs are less quantifiable such as, unhappy team members, someone who is usually outgoing becoming withdrawn, or a general decline in motivation and morale. Leaders who pick up on these changes can proactively help prevent underlying issues from escalating. However, this isn't always easy. Colleagues and managers need to recognise the difference between someone having a one-off bad day and someone who is fundamentally unhappy, potentially due to concerns around safety behaviours or wider factors affecting the safety culture.

Levels of safety reporting can also tell us something important. An increase in reports might indicate that people feel more comfortable speaking up, which can be a positive sign. Conversely, a lack of reporting might suggest everything is fine, but it could



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also mean people don't feel comfortable raising concerns. Many organisations have anonymous reporting processes, but what matters is whether people actually use them, whether concerns reach the right people and, crucially, whether reporting leads to meaningful action or simply becomes a tick-box exercise to meet a KPI.

SSH: How can organisations move from talking about safety culture to changing it?

LH: The starting point is understanding the current culture, whether that's through a survey, workshops or interviews, and assessing it against the building blocks of safety culture within the **SafeCQ**. Meaningful change takes time, so it's important to understand where the issues lie before deciding what needs to change.

The next step is raising awareness at every level of the organisation: what safety culture means, why it matters and how it applies to different teams and roles. From there, organisations can agree on specific actions. For example, a management team might identify changes they need to make to their own behaviours or ways of working and commit to putting those into practice.

Crucially, there needs to be a way of checking whether those commitments have been followed through and whether they've made a difference. This could be as straightforward as a follow-up review six months later. The important thing is to establish a baseline, agree what needs to change, take action and then measure the impact.

SSH: What happens when the culture people experience isn't the one the organisation aspires to?

LH: Having clear data helps organisations understand where issues lie and finding the right actions to address them. The SafeCQ framework can highlight areas for improvement, whether that's in safety leadership, communication, training, equipment, or the clarity and application of safety protocols. The response can then be tailored to any issues identified, whether that involves improving systems and processes or working with individuals and teams.

One-to-one work can help individuals understand how their Non-Technical Skills (NTS), attitudes and values influence their behaviour and therefore the wider culture. Group work can help colleagues better understand each other's behaviours, natural styles and preferences, and how these influence working relationships and team effectiveness.

It's also important to understand the pressures and challenges faced by colleagues in different roles. For example, helping a Signaller understand the pressures on a Controller of Site Safety (COSS), or a roster clerk appreciate the challenges faced by a track team working a difficult night shift, can build greater understanding of how different roles influence one another. Organisations can support this by enabling people to visit other depots, sites, stations and offices, where it's safe to do so, to gain a better appreciation of their colleagues' responsibilities.

Ultimately, improving safety culture means addressing the practical, organisational and behavioural factors that influence safety. Leaders have a key role to play, but lasting change depends on everyone understanding their responsibilities, working effectively together and having the right conditions, support and resources to put safety into practice.

SSH: What common themes come out of the OPC's safety culture work?

LH: Beyond the practical and behavioural factors that can influence safety culture, pressure is a recurring theme. People may be working under time constraints, managing competing priorities or dealing with limited resources. While pressure is part of working life, how it is managed can have a significant influence on safety behaviour, decision-making and therefore safety culture.

Another common theme is the tension between production or performance demands and safety. Most people don't want to put themselves or others at risk, but commercial or operational priorities can sometimes influence decisions. People may feel under pressure to keep work moving when the safest course of action is to stop or delay it.

We're never going to eliminate pressure or competing demands altogether, but strong safety leadership can make a real difference. Leaders who recognise these challenges and empower people to prioritise safety, without fear of blame or negative consequences, help create an environment where safe decisions are supported in practice.

SSH: How do the people an organisation recruits shape its safety culture?

LH: It's really important. As occupational psychologists, we use psychology to help people perform at their best in work, and that starts with getting the right person into the right role. Technical skills are essential, but looking at safety attitudes, preferences and behaviours during recruitment can also make a real difference to an organisation's safety culture.

For example, when recruiting train drivers or track workers, where following rules and procedures is vital, it's important to consider characteristics such as conscientiousness and a person's approach to rules – are they comfortable conforming to rules, or might they have a riskier approach. Personality questionnaires and situational judgement exercises can provide valuable insight into these areas, helping organisations make more informed decisions about how candidates might approach safety in the workplace.

Recruitment can also help influence an existing team's culture. If an organisation identifies areas for improvement, it can consider how the values, attitudes and behaviours of new recruits might positively influence the team. Appointing leaders who demonstrate a strong commitment to safety is also key and can also help reinforce the behaviours and attitudes an organisation wants to encourage.

Ultimately, recruitment is an opportunity not just to assess whether someone can do the job, but to consider how they are likely to approach it and the contribution they could make to building a positive safety culture.

SSH: In recruitment, how can organisations avoid making assumptions about candidates?

LH: It comes back to being clear about the behaviours and characteristics that matter for the role. This starts with thorough job analysis, role profiling and identifying the safety-related behaviours you need. Then deciding how best to assess them using appropriate psychometric tools and a structured interview approach alongside any other selection tools that may help inform decisions.

At the OPC, and OPC Assessment, we advocate evidence-based decision-making for recruitment. The right assessment approach helps organisations look beyond first impressions and focus on relevant evidence when considering a candidate's suitability. It's important, though, to select tools that are appropriate for the role and understand what the results can, and cannot, tell you. Assessments can provide valuable insight into a person's potential to perform safely, but they are one part of the wider selection process.

SSH: How has the growing body of evidence shaped your work?

LH: We're continually building on the evidence available to us. As our assessment tools are used, we gather more data, which our team analyses to review and refine existing tools, develop new ones, recommend appropriate norm groups and conduct validation studies.

Validation studies help us understand how assessment results relate to performance in training and on the job. More than three decades of experience in safety-critical environments, combined with a substantial body of data and specialist expertise, has helped us build a deeper understanding of the characteristics associated with successful performance in different roles.

We've also learned a great deal from the nearly 1,000 Post-Incident Assessments (PIAs) we've conducted with employees, exploring the circumstances surrounding safety incidents and the underlying factors that may have contributed. This work has revealed recurring themes, including missed opportunities to anticipate risk, insufficient checking and prioritising time over quality. These insights help us better understand the behaviours that can contribute to incidents and inform our work in recruitment, development and targeted interventions.

Bringing these different sources of evidence together helps us build a more rounded understanding of safety-related performance. It allows us to draw on research, statistical analysis and practical experience when advising clients, rather than relying on assumptions.

SSH: Train operators, Network Rail and contractors often share the same working environment. How can differences in safety culture create challenges at these interfaces?

LH: It's about working together rather than in silos. The more organisations share a common understanding of what they're doing and why, and align their safety standards and approaches, the more likely they are to develop safety cultures that complement and reinforce one another, helping to reduce the likelihood of safety incidents.

There are some excellent examples of organisations working together to strengthen safety culture, and I think South Rail Systems Alliance (SRSA) is a leading example. Through OPC-led workshops and safety leadership training, SRSA demonstrates how organisations can successfully collaborate to promote a more consistent approach to safety across organisational boundaries, recognising that everyone within each organisation has a part to play. When organisations share learning, align expectations and support one another in putting a safety-first approach into practice, the benefits can extend well beyond any one organisation.

I think we're seeing a positive shift towards train operators, Network Rail and maintenance organisations working more collaboratively. The more they understand each other's challenges, break down organisational barriers and work towards shared safety objectives, the greater the opportunity to build stronger alliances and, ultimately, a safer railway for everyone. This is of critical importance as we move to integration through the renationalisation of the railways via Great British Railways.

SSH: What is the one thing organisations should be thinking about if they want to strengthen their safety culture?

LH: I'm afraid I've got more than one thing! Firstly, understand your safety culture: what's working well and where there might be opportunities to improve. If you haven't identified an issue, you can't do anything about it. Then ask what, if anything, you want to change and remember that meaningful change takes time. It's also important to bring people with you, so everyone understands their role in creating and maintaining a positive safety culture.

For me, it also comes down to a mindset of continuous improvement. That doesn't mean making giant leaps; it's about asking what small things we can do today to be a little better than we were yesterday. For most organisations, there's already a great deal that's working well, and that's something we should recognise and celebrate. I see so many positive examples of safety culture across the organisations I work with. The opportunity is to build on those strengths, learn from experience and consider how we can do even better.

If we ever reach the point where we think we've got it all figured out, that's when we risk becoming complacent. It's about remaining open to learning and continuous improvement, always striving for the strongest possible safety culture for our organisations and our people.

WANT TO BUILD A STRONGER SAFETY CULTURE?

Discover how the OPC can help you understand the behaviours shaping your organisation and turn those insights into meaningful, lasting improvements. **Get in touch** with the friendly team to start the conversation.

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