

# Moving Beyond “Safety Culture”: Why Language Matters in Building Strong Organizations

By Heather MacDougall, JD, CSP

For years, the term *safety culture* has been used to describe the shared beliefs, behaviors, and practices around workplace safety. While well-intentioned, this phrase can unintentionally create silos, limit accountability, and suggest that safety exists apart from the business.

The reality? **Safety is not a separate culture. It is a core part of organizational culture.**

As companies pursue operational excellence—whether through Lean, Six Sigma, or continuous improvement—the language we use matters. Words shape perceptions, guide leadership focus, and influence decision-making. By shifting how we talk about safety, we can embed it as a driver of performance, resilience, and employee engagement.

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## What the Research Tells Us

### Organizational health drives safety performance.

McKinsey studies of companies have found that firms with strong organizational health—clarity of strategy, strong leadership, and alignment—consistently delivered better safety outcomes. See *The Symbiotic Relationship Between Organizational Health and Safety*, ([McKinsey, 2018](#)); *Organizational Health Is (Still) the Key to Long-Term Performance* ([McKinsey, 2024](#)).

➡ *Takeaway for operational leaders: Safety performance is not just about safety-specific programs, but about how well the organization functions holistically. When culture is healthy across many dimensions, safety performance tends to improve.*

### Culture predicts safety climate.

A study of 92 hospitals showed that broader culture—such as collaboration versus hierarchy—was a strong predictor of staff safety attitudes. Hospitals with team-oriented, less rigid cultures had stronger safety climates. Singer et al., *Identifying Organizational Cultures That Promote Patient Safety*, Stanford Health Policy, (2009).

Here, albeit in the context of patient safety, culture is not framed in narrow safety terms; rather, broader cultural attributes (how groups work, how hierarchical structures are) influence whether safety is embraced. That supports the idea that safety must be embedded in the whole culture.

➔ *Lean leaders know this: team-based, problem-solving cultures deliver better quality and safer outcomes.*

### **Leadership and values matter.**

Research in construction found that safety-focused leadership improved outcomes both directly and through morale. When employees truly believed safety was valued, results were even stronger. See Kaenten et al., [\*Impact of Safety Leadership and Employee Morale on Safety Performance: The Moderating Role of Harmonious Safety Passion\*](#), Buildings (2025).

➔ *Culture-driven ownership accelerates adoption of safe processes and ensures sustainability.*

### **Safety and performance go hand in hand.**

A 10-year analysis of publicly traded firms found that companies committed to workforce health, safety, and well-being consistently outperformed the market. Fabius R, Phares S, [\*Companies That Promote a Culture of Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Outperform in the Marketplace\*](#), J Occup. Environ. Med. (2021).

This is powerful: companies where safety and well-being are part of what the organization values perform better financially. That argues strongly for treating safety not just as a cost or compliance issue, but as a core part of what defines a winning organizational culture.

See also Haga et al., [\*Nothing to Fear: Strong Corporate Culture and Workplace Safety\*](#), Review of Quantitative Finance and Accounting, (April, 2024) (using a machine learning based measure of corporate culture and data on employee- and safety-related violations, researchers found that firms with stronger corporate culture are less likely to be penalized, incur lower regulatory fines, and have a reduced number of violations)

➔ *Executives take note: safety isn't just compliance—it's a competitive advantage.*

## EY's 2025 Global EHS Maturity Study confirms it.

EY's recent [global study](#), *How Does EHS Investment Drive Clear Commercial Value? Global EHS Maturity Study*, found that the most mature organizations integrate safety into governance, decision-making, and business strategy. Key findings include:

- Mature organizations link safety with resilience and stakeholder trust.
- Shared ownership is essential: operations, finance, HR, and the C-suite co-own safety.
- Advanced firms no longer talk about “safety culture”—they describe safety as a defining value of organizational culture.

➡ *In short: the language of maturity places safety within organizational DNA—not as a silo.*

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## Why “Safety Culture” Misses the Mark

### 1. Safety Cannot Stand Alone

“Safety culture” suggests that safety is owned by EHS, rather than being embedded in operations and leadership. By labeling safety as its own “culture,” organizations risk treating it as something separate or parallel to business operations. This can foster the perception that safety is “someone else’s job”—often relegated to the EHS team—rather than being a shared responsibility owned by leaders, managers, and frontline employees alike. In reality, safety is inseparable from operational excellence, quality, productivity, and employee engagement. A true culture of excellence naturally includes safety.

### 2. Language Shapes Perception

Words matter. “Safety culture” implies that safety must be “balanced” against productivity or efficiency, instead of enabling both. When we speak of *organizational culture that values safety*, we send a powerful signal that safety is not optional or supplementary—it is embedded into every decision, process, and behavior. This framing makes clear that safety is not a program or initiative, but a core value and business driver that influences how work gets done.

### 3. Aligning With Business Goals

Referring to “safety culture” can inadvertently place safety in competition with other organizational priorities. Framing it as part of *organizational culture* frames safety as a business value. It emphasizes that achieving safety is not at odds with business performance but is a critical enabler of long-term success, resilience, and sustainability.

#### 4. Driving Shared Ownership

If it's just "safety culture," others may not see their role in shaping it. An *organizational culture that values safety* highlights the collective responsibility of everyone in the enterprise. Leaders set expectations and model behaviors. Managers integrate safety into planning, execution, and performance measures. Employees take ownership of safe practices and hold each other accountable. This shared ownership is far more effective than positioning safety as the responsibility of a single function or department.

#### 5. Elevating Safety as a Core Value

Finally, reframing how we talk about safety elevates its importance. When safety is described as part of organizational culture, it signals that it is as essential as ethics, innovation, or customer service. It becomes a defining characteristic of how the organization operates and competes in the marketplace, rather than a compliance-driven obligation.

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## What Leaders Can Do Differently

To move from talking about "safety culture" to speaking of "an organizational culture that values safety", here are some practical steps:

### What to Change

Use language that ties safety to business values, mission, performance, innovation, well-being

Leadership messages that emphasize safety as part of what defines "how we do things here"

Measure safety outcomes alongside other organizational health metrics (employee engagement, leadership quality, learning, etc.)

Include safety in leadership development, performance evaluations, decision frameworks

Encourage cross-functional ownership: operations, HR, finance, etc. partnering on safety

### Why It Helps

Signals safety is central, not optional; positions it alongside efficiency, quality, customer experience, and innovation

Helps with alignment, consistency

Ties safety to broader performance, increases visibility

Ensures accountability across levels, not just in EHS

Builds shared responsibility and integrates safety into all business processes

## Potential Objections & Responses

| Objection                                                                                     | Response                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Isn't safety culture well understood and enough?"                                            | It's well understood in theory, but many studies show inconsistent or weak links between safety culture measures and actual safety outcomes.                                                                                                                     |
| "Is this just semantics?"                                                                     | Partly, yes—but semantics matter. The way we talk influences how leaders prioritize, where resources go, who feels ownership, and whether safety is embedded or siloed.                                                                                          |
| "Does framing safety as part of organizational culture water down focus or dilute expertise?" | Not necessarily—experts are still needed. But embedding enhances impact: when people across functions understand safety as part of how the business succeeds, they contribute in meaningful ways (better design, safer plans, better resource allocation, etc.). |

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## Key Take-Aways

- **Safety is not separate.** It's an inseparable part of organizational culture.
  - **Language matters.** Saying "our organizational culture values safety" drives integration and accountability.
  - **Evidence backs it up.** From McKinsey to EY, research shows better outcomes when safety is embedded in the broader culture.
  - **Leaders must act.** This isn't just semantics—it's a shift in mindset that can boost resilience, performance, and stakeholder trust.
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## Closing Thought

When we move beyond *safety culture* and instead describe *an organizational culture that values safety*, we reframe the conversation. Safety becomes inseparable from productivity, innovation, and growth.

As EY's 2025 Global EHS Maturity Study highlights, the most mature organizations already know this: safety isn't a program or a department. It's part of how the business succeeds.

By changing our language, we reinforce a powerful truth—**safety is core to organizational excellence, resilience, and long-term performance.**

## About

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