THE SAFETY CLIMB

Five Milestones of Safety Culture

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ABSTRACT

The Safety Climb is a safety program assessment and development tool designed for safety professionals and company management. The model aims to provide safety leaders with a mechanism for evaluating, visualizing, and communicating the current state of the safety program and overall culture. Unlike other assessment models that rely on KPIs and leading/lagging indicators, The Safety Climb is designed to take a broader view and provide higher level guidance for assessing and approaching safety program improvement. Because of this, The Safety Climb can be applied to a wide range of organizations, industries, and safety programs.

INTRODUCTION

As a safety consultant, I've had the opportunity to work with numerous organizations at various stages of safety program development. Through the years, I've heard many misconceptions related to the state of "safety culture" at a range of institutions. The most common include:

1. "We're very safe. We've never had any incidents..." or "it's been X days since our last incident."

2. "We have a great safety culture. We're in compliance with all state and federal regulations."

While these are certainly positive statements, **they don't represent true barometers of the safety culture or overall workplace safety.** They can certainly represent program goals — no one wants incidents or non-compliance — but using them as program standards or performance metrics can be detrimental to the overall mission.

Why These Safety Culture Misconceptions May be Harmful

"It's been X days since our last incident." As discussed in our blog post, "Promoting Safety Culture Through Positive Reinforcement", the fear of negative consequences can interfere with incident reporting and information sharing. For many employees, the thought of "resetting" the safety clock is enough to discourage reporting, especially if significant "milestones" are approaching. This creates an underlying fear of "letting coworkers down" that reduces reporting rates and leads to an accumulation of unreported hazards.

THE SAFETY CLIMB
Five Milestones of Safety Culture

MILESTONE 5
The True Peak
"We're proactive!"

MILESTONE 4
The Final Stretch
"We're safe."

MILESTONE 3
The Pseudo-Peak
"We're compliant."

ANTICIPATION PHASE

MILESTONE 2
The First Hurdle
"We're aware."

BUY-IN PHASE

ACTION PHASE

MILESTONE 1
The Starting Line
"Where do we begin?"

DISCOVERY PHASE

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"We're in compliance with regulations." It's also misguided to equate regulatory compliance with safety. While most safety regulations are written with safety in mind, compliance alone will not guarantee a safe work environment. There are many hazards and process considerations that fall outside of common regulatory standards. Thus, developing a safety program solely through "box checking" risks oversights and gaps.

Presenting THE SAFETY CLIMB — A Tool for Benchmarking and Communicating Safety Culture

Safety is a continuum, and despite best efforts, it's rarely black-and-white. My hope in developing

The Safety Climb is to help organizations (and particularly upper management) better visualize where their safety programs fall on the so-called "safety spectrum".

While the spectrum itself is abstract, there are distinct "Milestones" that define safety culture. These program benchmarks can be used to guide understanding, prioritization, and improvement. The Safety Climb model identifies these key milestones and outlines the transitional phases that facilitate progress towards a truly safe and proactive workplace environment.

As shown in the model, The Safety Climb is broken down into five "Milestones" and four transitional "Phases". Milestone 1 represents the starting line, while Milestones 2 - 5 highlight key "targets"

for safety program improvement, namely "Awareness", "Compliance", "Safety", and "Proactivity".

Between these milestones are developmental phases that facilitate advancement to the next level. These phases include the Discovery, Action, Buy-in, and Anticipation phases.

In the sections below, each highlighted "Milestone" is followed by a "Transition" paragraph which provides tips and guidance to help programs advance through each of the respective "Phases".

MILESTONE 1
The Starting Line
"Where do we begin?"

DISCOVERY PHASE

Milestone 1: The Starting Line

All organizations need to start somewhere, and the "Where Do We Start?" tagline is not intended to be negative. In fact, it's one of the first questions organizations should ask regarding their safety program. Early awareness and appreciation of safety needs is a critical component of laying the foundation for a strong safety culture.

It's understandable for organizations to put the majority of the focus on productivity and process implementation during the initial stage of business development. After all, that's ultimately what drives success or failure for new companies.

However, neglecting safety considerations during the early decision-making process can be a big mistake. It's all-too-common for organizations to

endure costly facility redesigns or process adjustments because key safety elements were overlooked early on.

Common tripping points at this stage include:

1. Unforeseen regulatory requirements (local, state, or federal).

2. Unexpected facility limitations (e.g., ventilation, fire code, safety equipment, etc.)

3. Simply "Not knowing what you don't know".

Issues in these areas cause delays and often impact productivity .The good news is that there are resources available to guide organizations through the decision-making process .The key is involving these resources early enough to provide full value.

TRANSITION 1: THE DISCOVERY PHASE

I call the first transition point the "Discovery Phase". This is when organizations conduct an initial assessment of their overall safety requirements and best practices. This is most efficiently done in close coordination with process development, as safety considerations or facility limitations may influence the process scope, equipment selection, workflow, SOP development, and other key decisions.

Because of the "it's difficult to know what you don't know" dynamic, the early discovery phase represents a perfect opportunity to consult outside experts. Assistance from a safety specialist or code compliance group goes a long way toward efficient process development. This can save significant time and money in the long run through the avoidance of costly hiccups and oversights.

In addition to conducting the appropriate code and regulatory compliance assessments, this is also the time to define facility constraints and conduct initial job and process safety assessments. If you intend to scale, make sure the facility is equipped to accommodate both initial and future work. I've seen many organizations run into challenges be-

cause the initial facility designs or assessments failed to adequately account for future work or personnel expansion.

In order to successfully exit the discovery phase, the organization should have a firm awareness of all regulatory requirements (local, state, and federal), any facility limitations, process hazards and liabilities (with an initial plan to control for them), as well as an understanding for how the facility and operations will evolve in the future. Without this information in hand, it's difficult to even begin to develop a safe and compliant workplace environment.

MILESTONE 2
The First Hurdle
"We're aware."

ACTION PHASE

Milestone 2: The First Hurdle

Without complete awareness of the safety risks and compliance needs, it's impossible to craft an effective safety program. Because of this, I consider achieving "awareness" to be the first hurdle of the safety climb. Obviously, the sooner awareness is achieved, the better positioned the program is to succeed.

Ideally, the discovery phase should be completed long before the facility or process is operational. However, this doesn't always happen in practice.

I'm often asked, "When should we consult a safety specialist?" This question relates to a misconception in many industries that safety representation isn't needed until there are active processes to oversee, employees to train, and inspections to conduct.

This often results in safety representatives being consulted too late in the process, after key decisions have already been finalized. In worse case scenarios, the underlying issues are only identified after an incident or regulatory inspection. These are the types of events that a dedicated "Discovery Phase" is designed to avoid.

Organizations that fall into the "We don't know what we don't know" category, should consider professional safety support as early as possible. In my experience, organizations tend to seek this guidance from their insurance provider or legal representation. In some cases, this may be appropriate, but it's not always sufficient.

A generic, cookie cutter approach to safety programming often results in gaps in hazard assessment and program development. Dedicated safety professionals are generally better equipped to assess the nuances of the facility and safety program to provide customized support.

If cost is a concern, consider that most safety consultants offer free initial consultation services. A simple hour-long phone call or meeting can go a long way toward fulfilling the awareness piece. This small initial step can save significant time, stress, and money in the long run.

TRANSITION 2: THE ACTION PHASE

I call the second transition the "Action Phase". This falls after organizations have done their due diligence and are generally aware of the overall safety program requirements.

You'll notice in the model that there are a couple "crevasses" between Milestone 2 and Milestone 3. These represent the fact that this transition isn't always the smoothest or straightforward endeavor. It's common for additional "need" areas to be identified as the program develops and processes

evolve. Keep an eye out for these occasions and be ready to quickly shift priorities. When these situations arise, the program may need to quickly revert back to the Discovery Phase to address new or unforeseen elements.

Organizations that fall into the late Discovery Phase or early Action Phase are generally aware of the requirements but may be daunted by the prospect of implementing a safety program and defining culture. This is understandable, and it highlights the value that a safety professional can offer.

There's a lot that goes into a complete safety program. A partial list includes:

- Permits
- Manuals
- Trainings
- Hazard Assessments
- Policies and SOPs
- Safety Committees
- Incident Reporting Documents
- Occupational Health Agreements
- Safety Equipment and Supply Ordering

Many of the elements listed above take considerable time and effort to develop, even for safety professionals familiar with the process. The task is even more daunting for individuals with no or limited safety experience. Consider this when deciding who to rely on for program development, as safety professionals can save considerable time on key program items. In the case of early **need** items like permits, manuals, SOPs, and training materials, time saved can have a direct impact on operational timeline and productivity.

When considering whether to consult outside help, consider that the ROI of safety is often cited to be in the range of ~$3-6 for each dollar spent.*

While admittedly this doesn't directly contribute to revenue generation, it does impact the bottom line over time. For this reason, organizations should view safety as a capital investment in the health and wellness of employees and the company, rather than as an initial expense. When viewed in this context, it's easier to appreciate the value of seeking quality guidance and expertise.

Milestone 3: The Pseudo-Peak

Having a fully compliant safety program is certainly something to celebrate, but it's not the end. For this reason, "We're Compliant" is called the Pseudo-Peak. Many organizations mistakenly think they're done when they've reached full regulatory compliance. However, this simply isn't true.

In fact, "fully compliant with the regulations" is little more than the halfway point of The Safety Climb. At this stage, program requirements have been identified and implemented, but there's a long way to go before the program achieves true "safety and proactivity". For this reason, simply "checking the regulatory boxes" will not ensure a safe work environment.

It's worth mentioning that this is not a static zone. Active effort and monitoring are required to maintain compliance. Neglected and poorly managed safety programs run the risk of slipping back down the slope toward Milestone 2.

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* "ROI of Safety: How to Create a Long-Term Profitable Workplace Safety Program." AmTrust Financial, Accessed November 19, 2019. https://amtrustfinancial.com/resource-center/trends-and-research/roi-of-safety.

Some "general maintenance" items required for continued compliance include:

- Annual manual reviews, updates, and training

- Permit renewals

- New hazard assessments as process evolve, new equipment is purchased, etc.

While it's certainly a positive to reach and maintain "compliance", it's important to recognize and appreciate that this isn't the same as creating a safe workplace. It takes intentionality and additional investment to continue the climb to Milestone 4.

TRANSITION 3: THE BUY-IN PHASE

As represented in the model, the "Buy-in Phase" represents the transition from generic regulatory compliance to true safety. In my experience, this is often the most challenging transition for organizations and safety professionals to manage.

Why? Because, while it's fairly easy (given adequate resources) to check the boxes and achieve compliance, it's not always straightforward to facilitate buy-in and establish a truly safe workplace environment. This is when the best safety professionals provide top value.

It's important for all safety professionals to realize that permits, manuals, and policies only provide "value" if they're actually utilized. I've seen many organizations with beautiful safety programs on paper, only to find that the actual workplace has significant underlying hazards and/or employees that "improvise" or "take shortcuts".

As someone who has developed many safety manuals and policies, I can appreciate the frustration. There's a lot of time and effort that goes into the resources on the safety shelf, and they're all developed with the goal of protecting employees from harm or illness. However, if these resources aren't properly communicated or integrated into day-to-day work practices, they have limited value.

The "Buy-in Phase" is when the safety program truly evolves and the overall workplace culture is established. While, Milestones 1-3 can (and should) be completed before employees start work in the hazardous workplace, buy-in can't be solidified until employees are hired, trained, and begin working.

While this is true, it doesn't mean you have to wait until employees are hired to define your safety culture. Quite the opposite!

The sooner you set the "safety expectations" and overall workplace culture, the easier The Safety Climb becomes. As mentioned in "Building Safety Culture in Four Easy Steps", I'm a big advocate of discussing safety culture expectations during the new hire interview process. When you assess a candidate's "safety mindset" alongside their other qualifications, you may find that a promising candidate doesn't align with your organization's safety mission or culture. Weeding out these potential "bad apples" can go a long toward protecting the organization's safety program, as it only takes one or two bad examples to drag down the overall culture.

It's not always easy and will certainly take time, but it's definitely possible to move the needle. While the climb from Milestones 3 to 4 is the most challenging, it's also the most rewarding in many ways. This is when true progress in safety is made and when the great safety professionals demonstrate their worth.

Regardless of the industry or safety program, the two most important elements of buy-in are:

1. Commitment from Upper Management

This is essential. If employees don't view safety as an overall company commitment or value, it opens the door for complacency and non-compliance. That said, what this looks like varies. It could be a company official making a statement at the beginning of safety training, it could be in the form of a periodic safety memo, etc.

What it's not is company officials skipping safety meetings or openly violating safety policies. Upper management and safety team representatives play a critical role in setting and maintaining the culture. Any examples or perception of these individuals failing to follow internal safety policies sets a bad precedent that is very difficult to overcome.

One common example of this is "PPE-deficient" facility tours. We've all seen them. These are "facility tours" led by company managers that don't conform to safety policies or procedures. They could be a "quick peek" into the manufacturing space or a "we won't touch anything" trip through the laboratory.

The context doesn't matter. No effort to gain investors or customers should undermine the safety culture. Besides, in most cases, these visitors love to put on the safety glasses, hard hats, lab coats, etc. and get the "full experience". If you welcome guests into your workplace, make sure you have enough PPE available to accommodate them and enforce the policies. In addition to liability protection, this is a great way to reinforce culture.

Upper management commitment is also critical for financial investment in safety. Whether this comes in the form of new equipment or advanced training needs, the safety program will need financial resources from time to time. Without this commitment, it may not be possible to provide employees with the tools and resources required to perform their work safely.

We've all seen pictures and videos of individuals performing tasks in unsafe ways. The responses to these events typically involve targeting the employee "for taking a short cut", "a lack of awareness", or "general stupidity".

However, in many cases, employers haven't provided these employees with the right tools or training to perform the task safely. When this happens, workers may be forced to choose between completing the work in an unsafe manner (with sub-optimal resources) or losing their job (and ability to provide for their family). It's up to the organization to ensure that employees are never forced into these situations, whether in actuality or by perception.

2. Open Communication and Involvement

I always tell new safety professionals that relationship building and soft skills are critical for 90% of the success in this industry. I can teach safety and regulatory knowledge, but it's much harder to teach relationship building and soft skills.

Why is it so important? As safety professionals, it's impossible to be everywhere in the workplace all the time. As a result, employees on the ground or in the field need to fill the role of the "safety

eyes and ears". Because of this, employees need to be comfortable coming forward with observations, ideas for improvement, and incidents/near misses. These pieces of information are critical to identifying areas for review and improvement. The more ways organizations provide to involve these employees in the safety discussion, the better the safety culture becomes.

Communication should be easy, continuous, and appreciated. On the other hand, the following elements tend to decrease communication and should be avoided:

- Using complicated systems or forms to facilitate "official communication"

- Not following up on concerns or observations

- Penalty systems or polices that give the perception of a negative consequence (including resetting a safety clock)

As for involvement, "at-risk" employees should always be included in key safety decisions. This means seeking their input before finalizing policies, asking for their opinions during PPE review and selection, and including them on safety committees. Programs that fail to include representatives from all levels of the organization tend to lack key elements for building safety culture (e.g., financial resources, accurate information, or buy-in).

MILESTONE 4
The Final Stretch
"We're safe."

ANTICIPATION PHASE

Milestone 4: The Final Stretch

Once organizations have achieved complete buy-in and have provided employees with the tools, resources, and information required for "true safety", they've entered the final stretch of the climb.

At this point, employees throughout the organization are taking ownership of their own safety. They're actively communicating potential hazards, participating in the safety culture, and working closely with management and the safety team to promote improvement.

Safety isn't viewed as a priority. It's a company-wide value. All processes are conducted safely because that's simply how the organization conducts business. New employees learn as much from the example of other employees as they do from onboarding and safety training. The overall culture is constantly reinforced by safe actions on a daily basis.

While the "Buy-in Phase" never really ends due to the influx of new hires, process changes, etc., Milestone 4 is when the safety program shifts focus from day-to-day safety to proactive planning and anticipating future safety needs.

A Word of Caution: Becoming Blinded by KPIs and "Measuring Safety"

It's generally around Milestone 4 that I see groups begin to struggle with the idea of how to measure

the safety program. They tend to know that they're doing a decent job, but don't know how to measure, articulate, or demonstrate safety in a meaningful way.

Let me concede that it's a serious challenge without a definitive solution. There's a lot of debate about safety metrics and the merits of leading vs. lagging indicators. However, it's important to put these metrics into context and continue to focus on communication, engagement, and improvement, rather than any single metric.

The one KPI that tends to be the "most prized" by company management is incident rate. I get it. It's quick. It's easy. And **in theory,** measures one of the ultimate goals of health and safety. Are we protecting people from getting hurt?

However, as someone who has had the opportunity to assess many safety programs across a range of industries, I can tell you that I rarely see a correlation between incident rate and real safety. In fact, I've found that the safest workplaces tend to report incident rates that are slightly higher than the industry average. This is generally because they understand the importance of communication, hazard identification, and mitigation and have expanded their definition of an "incident" to include things that other groups may brush under the rug as a "near miss" or "non-recordable".

Remember that the ultimate goal is safety.

An Alternative Method: Safety Culture Assessments (SCAs)

If you're looking for a way to measure safety culture, consider a Safety Culture Assessment (SCA). A SCA is an anonymous survey designed to get direct and honest feedback about day-to-day safety practices.

A well-designed SCA looks at all levels in the organization from management, to supervisors, to at-risk employees in a quick and efficient manner. Questions should be program-specific and targeted to a specific safety improvement strategy. It's also best to prioritize questions that ask about the overall safety culture or feelings about the training and preparedness of other individuals (because people tend to over estimate their own safety awareness and emergency preparedness).

Sample SCA questions, include:

	AGREE	DISAGREE
1. I'm confident that my coworkers are trained and prepared to help me in an emergency.	☐	☐
2. There is a quick and easy method in place for reporting hazards and near-misses.	☐	☐
3. I'm given adequate resources to conduct my job safely.	☐	☐
4. If I identified an equipment issue or unsafe element of my work, I would be comfortable reporting it (and am confident that it would be addressed quickly).	☐	☐
5. My productivity is more important to my company than my safety.	☐	☐
6. If I saw a coworker or supervisor operating in an unsafe manner, I would feel comfortable speaking up to correct the issue (and would be supported by my company for doing so).	☐	☐

While Agree/Disagree is the simplest response model, SCAs can be adapted to use any preferred system. The ultimate goal is to receive direct, honest feedback from employees at all levels of the company, rather than relying on metrics that are often misleading or don't tell the whole story.

The best news is that an SCA doesn't require an expensive, third-party agency. Effective SCAs can be designed and implemented in-house, using any number of online (and often free) survey programs. However, if you do opt for an in-house survey, make sure it can be done in a blinded and anonymous manner to maximize honesty, relevance, and value.

TRANSITION 4: THE ANTICIPATION PHASE

While it's certainly commendable to work in a safe manner on a daily basis, the truth is that accidents and incidents happen even in the safest workplaces. Because of this, employees need to be able to anticipate potential issues and prepare for appropriate emergency response efforts.

We've all seen examples of "safe and compliant" organizations making questionable decisions when unexpected events arise. While safety programs can evaluate, anticipate, and plan for as many scenarios as possible, there are limits to the scope and breadth of planning efforts. It's in handling these "unforeseen" situations that the best safety programs shine.

For example, there are numerous videos out there of well-intentioned employees attempting to move coworkers with possible head, neck, or back injuries. We've all seen or heard stories of delayed emergency response procedures because employees were unsure how to response or were overwhelmed in the moment. These cases serve as important reminders that anticipation and preparation is a key component of a thorough safety program.

Keep this in mind if your organization is considering a "Zero Incidents or Injuries" commitment or policy. In addition to the potential communication issues described above, these policies tend to diminish the emphasis on post-incident response.

While employees shouldn't constantly be worrying about accidents or incidents, they should be confident in their ability to handle adverse situations. This means providing the knowledge, tools, and **experience** to appropriately handle potential emergency scenarios. I highlight experience because most organizations provide the appropriate training and equipment necessary to respond to emergencies, but never actively practice the response.

I'm a strong believer in proactive safety drills. You never want employees to "learn" emergency response procedures in the middle of an actual emergency. Pre-planning exercises and drills go a long way toward identifying and correcting pitfalls and provide employees with the confidence needed to complete the task successfully.

It's amazing how few organizations hold proactive safety drills. Many have never even gone through a full fire evacuation drill. Others only go through the motions because it's required by local or state regulations.

In order to complete The Safety Climb, organizations must be well-equipped, prepared, and **practiced** on their emergency response procedures. This means conducting all relevant drills for fire, hazardous chemical spills, confined space rescue, first aid/AED, etc.

These drills may be company-wide or with specialized "response teams", but the key is to develop a plan and ensure that employees aren't facing a serious (potentially life or death) situation the first time they implement the protocol.

MILESTONE 5
The True Peak
"We're proactive!"

Milestone 5: The True Peak

It's subtle, but you'll notice I don't call the peak the "Finish Line". That's because like Milestones 3 and 4, Milestone 5 never really ends. There are always opportunities in safety to review, improve, and practice. It's all about commitment and intentionality.

It's also important to recognize that different elements of the safety program may fall into different stages at any given time. The organization may have achieved Milestone 5 for medical response and fire safety but may fall into Milestone 2 or 3 in other program areas. The Safety Climb model (with an accompanying SCA survey) provides a basis for identifying and directing additional focus to those need areas.

Additionally, what constitutes "The True Peak" varies from organization to organization, as it's very much influenced by facility design, work hazards, and potentially even the size of the company. As systems scale, there are important process improvement steps that need to be implemented.

For example, a company of 20 employees may be sufficiently covered by one evacuation response procedure and a single rally point. Conversely, a company with many employees situated across multiple locations may require many procedures and rally points to cover each facility.

Furthermore, the safety climb needs to be re-evaluated each and every time a new facility or process is introduced. The good news is that The Safety Climb process becomes easier to navigate with each climb.

CONCLUSION

The Safety Climb model is designed to help organizations and safety professionals assess their standing along the "safety journey". Safety progress is often difficult to assess and communicate in a meaningful way. By providing "checkpoints", the hope is to provide opportunities to engage in meaningful and forward-thinking discussions.

Remember that safety cannot be reduced to a checklist of regulatory compliance, and it's often something that is difficult to measure with metrics, statistics, or indicators. Instead, safety should be viewed through a broader lens with a commitment to communication, proactive engagement, and complete buy-in.

While it may be a difficult climb at times, in the end, establishing a positive safety culture is both rewarding and a great investment.

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If you have any questions about improving safety culture, or if you'd like to include "The Safety Climb" presentation at your next event, conference, or meeting, please feel free to contact Corey Martin:

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