

Creating A Positive Workplace Culture For Safety In The Climbing Gym

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In this article we will take a look at how we can take a **positive approach** to creating a culture for safety in the climbing gym environment. At the end of the article, be sure to download our one-page quick reference guide to developing a safety program.

The term “Safety Culture” was coined by the International Nuclear Safety Advisory Group following the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in 1986. In their summary report, ‘safety culture’ was pointed to as an underlying cause for the catastrophe. It was used as an explanation for the attitudes, actions, and systemic failures that led to the cascading effect of failures.

Over the years, ideas about ‘safety culture’ have evolved with research but the concepts, application, and understanding of what creates a broader “culture for safety” remain vital.

The Case for Workplace Safety

First, it is important to distinguish between those risk management issues that we deal with at a customer/patron level versus those at an occupational level. A customer **chooses** to accept a certain level of risk, most often via a liability waiver, in order to participate in climbing activities.

Juxtapose this with an employer who has a **duty**, to maintain a workplace free from recognized hazards “likely to cause serious physical harm or death” and “comply with occupational safety and health standards.”^[1] Likewise, each employee must also comply with health and safety rules, regulations, and standards, in addition to gym policies and procedures.

Besides the legal obligation that workplace safety is a **requirement**, there are other worthwhile reasons to move towards a pro-safety workplace.

Morally, it's the right thing to do! Climbing gym employees and employers are often a collective of fellow climbers and friends. In such a community, we look out for each other.

Another reason is that there's a business case for safety. A recent study found that workplace safety influences customer satisfaction, "suggesting that there are likely spillover effects between the safety environment and the service environment."^[2] This study showed that customer satisfaction and a company's safety climate and injury rates were "significantly correlated."^[3]

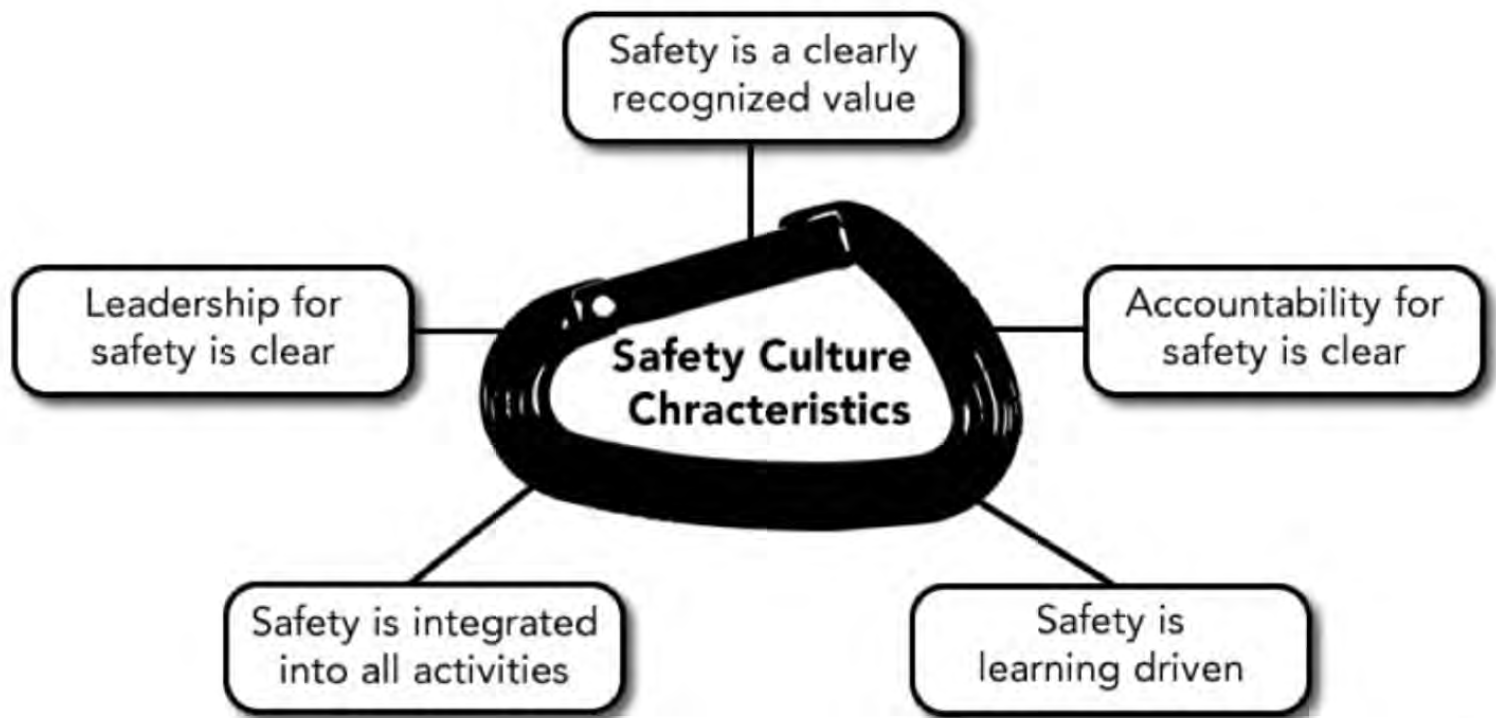
Although the research was conducted in the electrical utility industry, and no specific research has been conducted correlating climbing gym customers and worker safety, it's worth considering the parallels within service industries as a whole. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when employers take the safety of their employees seriously, they benefit through customer loyalty. In other words, a safe gym environment translates to a safer environment not only for your employees but to the customer as well.

Finally, a good safety program reflects a level of professionalism. Climbing walls/gyms in the modern age are legitimate operations that offer lifelong careers and provide health and fitness opportunities for generations of climbers. Employees are looking for opportunities for growth and desire to have lasting employment in a professional environment. Having written programs and systems in place is a key component for demonstrating that employee safety, health, and wellbeing are core values.

Safety Culture Characteristics

Looking to lessons from the nuclear power industry again, they identified five basic characteristics of a culture for safety that we can adapt to the climbing gym environment:^[4]

1. Safety is a clearly recognized value
2. Accountability for safety is clear
3. Safety is learning driven
4. Safety is integrated into all activities
5. Leadership for safety is clear



Each of these characteristics has specific attributes that contribute to sustaining safety culture. [5] For example, in order for safety to be a clearly recognized value (item 1), safety conscious behavior must be socially acceptable and supported by the employer and employees alike.

Item 3, "Safety is learning driven," means that a questioning attitude prevails, that learning is encouraged, and assessments are used and tracked.

And for item 5, "Leadership for safety is clear," the commitment to safety should be evident at all levels, and management should build trust to ensure continual openness and communication with individuals.

Positive Safety Leadership

Management reacting solely when there is an incident is short-sighted and ineffective. In a reactive safety environment, employees hide or do not want to report an injury for fear of retaliation or punishment. Consequently, blaming an employee rarely results in a positive outcome or a safer workplace.

Instead, management should take a proactive approach to make accountability a positive not a negative. Rather than focusing on blaming someone for a mistake, focus on what it takes to remedy the situation and enabling workers to practice safe work habits.

Accepting that hazards are inevitable and there is always the possibility of an accident, involve employees and work towards solutions that are meaningful to them. Positive reinforcement does not mean incentivizing employees for safe work but instead rewarding them through recognition and praise when someone does something well.

Measuring Safety Progress

Data have shown that there can be prolonged periods of time between incidents, but an unsafe

working environment can still exist. The traditional approach, simply measuring accident rates is not a good means of determining if you have a sustainable safety program.^[6]

In order for us to confirm that we are on the right track with our safety program, we have to be able to measure key components of the program.

Good data begins with selecting the right things to measure. Focus on measuring positive performance aspects of your program like:^[7]

- Safety Activities
- Participation Rate
- Perceptions
- Behaviors
- Conditions

Track the behaviors of workers on things like accident prevention, reporting unsafe situations, taking corrective action, wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), and participating in training. For example, track the use of protective eyewear rather than the number of eye injuries.

Gym Program Areas

Below are some of the program areas that may be relevant to your climbing wall or gym. This is not a comprehensive list as activities vary among facilities, so it is important to consider all the potential hazards and program areas.

Within each of these areas there are specifics that need to be tailored to the facility while keeping in mind OSHA regulations, state and local laws, insurance requirements, and industry standards.

- Fall Protection – Comprehensive for routesetters and awareness level for other employees. Include training on dropped object prevention.
- Portable Ladder Safety
- Eye Protection
- Hearing Protection
- Emergency Action/Response Plan
- First Aid/CPR
- Aerial Lift Safety
- Spill Response
- Slips/Trips/Falls
- Access/Egress

Example Scenario

Take a look at the following situation and consider the questions that follow:

A loose hold on a top rope climbing wall is reported to the front desk staff person by a member. Unfortunately, no routesetter is available but the staff person, who has some experience tightening holds, is eager to help, and takes it upon themselves to address the issue. In an effort to tighten the hold quickly the staff person avoids getting a stepladder, extension ladder, or using a harness/rope system and instead climbs about eight feet high. In the course of tightening the hold with an impact wrench, the staff person slips from another loose hold, lands awkwardly, and seriously injures their back.

- What contributing factors might have resulted in this accident?
- What areas for improvements are there?
- If you were in a management role how would you communicate with the employee? How would you communicate with other staff?
- What can be learned from and improved upon from this incident and how is that communicated?
- What other proactive measures might be considered going forward?

Clearly, the intentions of the staff person were good, as they were attempting to demonstrate good customer service and be proactive in remedying the situation on their own. But unfortunately, the choices the staff person made resulted in their injury.

For this situation a number of other variables would exist based on the facility itself. We might want to explore if there was a system or rule in place for who is authorized to address climbing wall maintenance. From there we could determine if the person was authorized to tighten holds and if they had the appropriate training. Other things we would want to look at would be the standard work practice for climbing wall work, do we allow someone to climb and set or should they be working off a ladder, lift, or via a harness and rope system?

Unfortunately, sometimes we do not know there is a weakness in our program until something goes wrong. Part of moving towards a culture for safety includes anticipating various types of incidents and proactively addressing them, but that's not always possible. We have to accept that even the best programs can have gaps and take a productive approach.

In this case, the focus would be on improving the systems, communication, and training that can prevent future incidents from occurring and then tracking those changes going forward.

In Conclusion

Maintaining a positive safety culture is a process. There will always be pitfalls and areas for improvement.

The National Safety Council sums it up best by stating, "In an organization with a positive safety climate, where safety does not take a back seat to productivity, employees are likely to believe they have permission to do things right. Doing things right is a permeating value in a work unit that is likely to reach into several domains of work behavior, some of which influence the quality of work."

Download our cheat sheet for a quick-reference resource containing guidelines for developing a safety program!

References

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4. [Chernobyl: 30 Years On - Lessons in Safety Culture](#), Aerossurance
5. [Culture for Safety](#), International Atomic Energy Agency
6. [Building the Foundation for a Sustainable Safety Culture](#), Judy Agnew, EHS Today
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Resources

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About The Author



Aaron Gibson holds a Masters of Science Degree from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center and has over fifteen years of work experience in workplace and environmental safety and health. He's worked with local, state, and federal agencies as well as private industry. Since 2007, Aaron has applied his experience to the indoor climbing industry as a gym owner/operator, coach, routesetter, instructor, and industry consultant/expert. You can contact Aaron at aaron@rockislandclimbing.com

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