

THE SAFETY LEADERSHIP LINK

Implications for organisational safety
climate, behaviour and performance



sentis



Safety

It's synonymous with hard hats, errors, incidents, policy, procedure, PPE...

We know these things are important.

But we've lost the true meaning of safety.

Safety isn't about protecting us from something, but for something.

For the things, places and people we love.

The things that bring us joy and that we care about most.

The cost of an incident extends far beyond the workplace.

Ongoing social aftershocks devastate families, friends, colleagues and communities.

Leaders are tasked to deliver the tough news.

Fingers are pointed. Direction and focus is lost.

Trust, engagement, reputation... it all begins to crumble.

We struggle with the 'what now' and the 'what if'...

How do we come back from this?

What more could I have done?

We've made significant progress in the safety space.

But there's still more to be done to ensure every worker returns home safe.

Leaders play a critical role in creating positive change.

So, how do we ensure employees make safe choices in and outside the workplace?

How do we invest in leaders to drive and foster a positive safety culture?

*Because safety **is** an investment.*

Not simply for organisations to prevent devastating hurt, injury or loss.

But for individuals to protect themselves for the things they care about most.

For the things we're all trying to get home to.

So that we can enjoy them, tomorrow and long into the future.

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“The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example.”

John Wooden

Introduction

Recent research indicates that leaders hold a higher opinion of their own safety leadership, when compared to their teams' perceptions of their ability.* Essentially, leaders don't necessarily have an accurate understanding of their own safety leadership ability.

When we speak to clients about safety leadership in their organisation, more often than not, we hear things like:

The problem isn't with leaders, it's getting the guys on the ground to do the right thing.

We invest so much time on procedures and equipment, but they keep getting hurt.

We've done everything we can to get the message through, but they just don't listen.

If only they'd do as they're told... life would be so much easier.

But when we ask about safety performance and general culture and climate, we hear things like:

Perceptions around wellbeing aren't great.

We've got some issues with error management.

There's a fear of reporting incidents.

Our guys on the floor don't seem to be learning from their mistakes.

It doesn't come as a surprise that it's easier to see these external indicators. Reflecting on one's own performance or contribution can be confronting. Our cognitive bias kicks in, and our brain automatically finds support for our point of view—examples of when we've performed well, when we think we've communicated critical safety messages effectively, when we're sure we're displaying strong safety leadership behaviours. But despite what we might think about our own leadership, the reality is different. And the data backs it up.

In this report, we explore four key findings of a recent study into the relationships between safety leadership and safety climate, behaviour and performance.

But if there's one thing to take away from this report, it's this:

If there's a problem with any element of your safety climate, there's a problem in leadership.

This isn't necessarily bad news. Once an opportunity for improvement is identified, we uncover what we need to address. And that becomes an opportunity to drive positive change.

Invest in creating and maintaining strong, effective safety leadership and you will see improvements in safety climate, behaviour and performance.

But what do we mean when we talk about safety climate and how is it different to safety culture? And what does strong, effective safety leadership look like?

*Based on a Sentis study of 8,747 participants across 9 industries.

Culture, Climate and Leadership

Safety culture is an organisation's shared attitudes, beliefs and values about safety—essentially, 'the way things are done around here'. It influences safety performance and is a significant factor in predicting the likelihood of safety incidents. But it isn't easily observed. It's deeply embedded into the fabric of the organisation, often below conscious awareness.

Safety climate is more easily measurable and reflects employees' shared perceptions of the extent to which safety is valued within the organisation. It's essentially a snapshot of an organisation's safety culture at any one point in time.

How does this relate to safety leadership?

On the surface we see the visible characteristics of the culture (i.e. behaviours, systems, processes and structures). These are an indicator of the safety climate—the expressed values and perceptions around safety. But what drives these values and perceptions is the core safety culture—the assumptions and beliefs the collective workforce holds with regards to safety.

Sometimes these deep-seated cultural beliefs directly relate to leadership and perceived leadership ability.

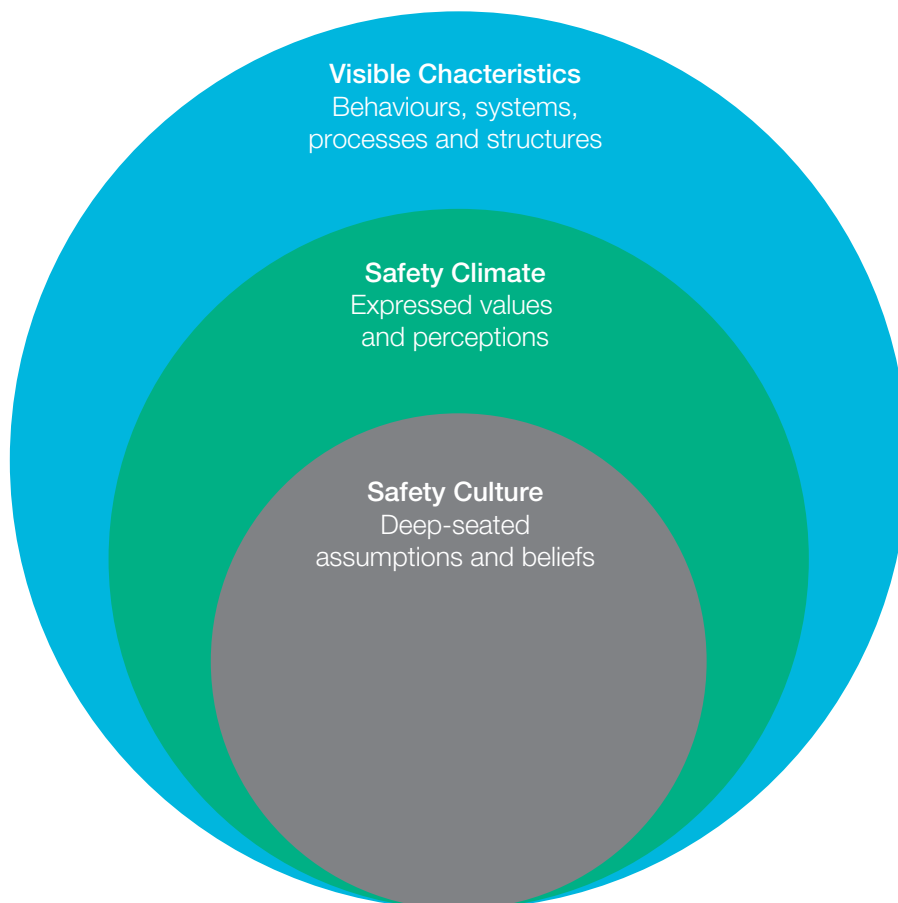


FIGURE 1. UNDERSTANDING SAFETY CLIMATE AND SAFETY CULTURE

CLIENT EXAMPLE

A mining client was concerned that workers were failing to report incidents. They had hypothesised various reasons why—from the system and mechanism of reporting, through to a potential lack of education on how to report. Yet, when measuring the safety climate, none of these were found to be the case. The reason workers weren't reporting incidents was because they held a poor perception of how incident investigations were run.



The client now knew that it wasn't employee education or even the system itself that were problematic, but rather the events that followed. But stopping there wouldn't necessarily help them to address the issue.

Together, we delved deeper to understand the core safety culture driving these perceptions. It turned out that there was an underlying mistrust of leaders with regards to how incident investigations were handled. This was the true driver of counterproductive employee behaviours—incident reporting was perceived as something to fear.

Historically, there had been instances where incidents involving multiple contributing factors had been reported, only for individual workers to be held entirely responsible. This had led to beliefs that the process was unfair and inconsistent. That the organisation didn't care for individuals. That leaders were more concerned about the numbers than their team. And that challenging the system or speaking up during investigations would lead to being punished in some way (either by being assigned 'the dirty jobs' or in some instances termination of employment).

The problem wasn't in the process, system or education. It was in leadership.

It only takes one negative incident to create a ripple effect. And it doesn't take long for negative perceptions and beliefs to permeate a culture. It's hard to come back from. But unless you know the root of the problem, you're only addressing symptoms and are not creating sustainable positive change.



FIGURE 2. APPLYING SAFETY CLIMATE AND CULTURE TO A PRACTICAL CLIENT EXAMPLE

Business impact

Generally, as safety leadership improves (and as climate and culture improve with it), organisations see a decrease in unwanted safety outcomes and an increase in positive safety outcomes.

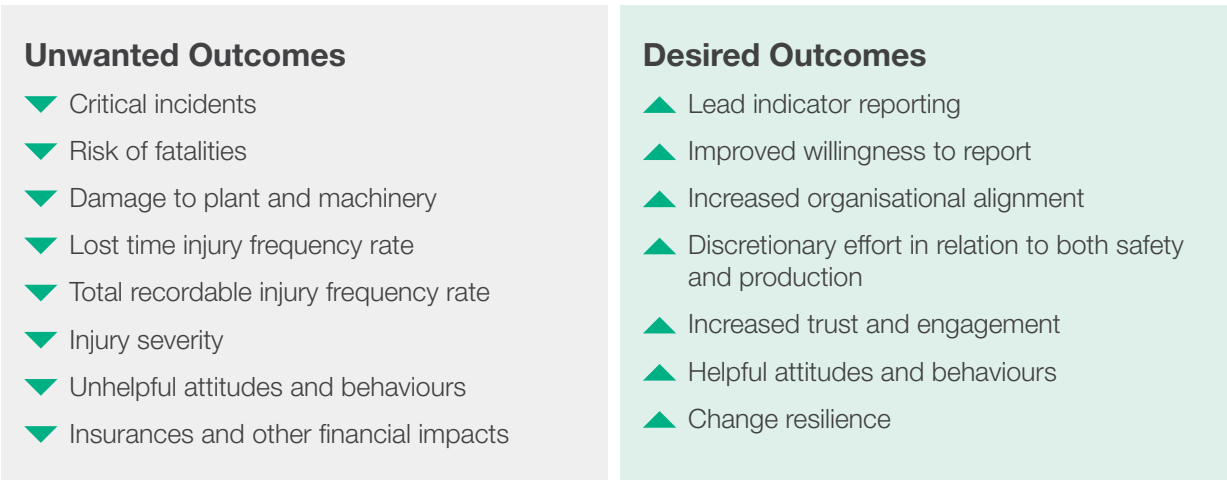


FIGURE 3. IMPACT OF IMPROVED SAFETY LEADERSHIP, CLIMATE AND CULTURE ON SAFETY OUTCOMES

If we seek to improve safety culture and overall business performance, where do we best invest our limited resources? While it is important to invest in the workers on the frontline, strong and effective leadership is required to create significant and lasting change. The guidance and support of leaders sets the culture, as well as worker expectations around safety behaviour and performance.

But investment in leadership should not apply exclusively to senior and executive leaders. Organisations must also invest in frontline leaders. They’re closest to the ground and exert significant influence on team safety culture, behaviour and performance. They’re also less likely to have participated in formal leadership training and education, so failing to invest in developing frontline leaders’ ability could have detrimental effects.

“Failing to invest in developing frontline leaders’ ability could have detrimental effects.”

Study Overview

Intuitively, it makes sense that safety leadership predicts organisational safety culture. But where do the strongest relationships exist? What safety culture benefits will organisations observe if they invest heavily in leadership development? And what gaps might exist in their safety culture if they choose not to invest in their leaders?

The results of the study that follow use Safety Climate Survey data to uncover the relationships between safety leadership and safety climate, behaviour and performance. The Safety Climate Survey measures employee perceptions of safety climate indicators, as well as upwards perceptions of safety leadership (i.e. how I view my direct leader's ability).

When measuring safety leadership specifically, the Safety Climate Survey measures the eight core competencies of safety leadership. Scientifically validated, these competencies form the basis of the Sentis Safety Leadership Model which summarise the critical behaviours that define effective safety performance by leaders.



FIGURE 4. SENTIS SAFETY LEADERSHIP MODEL

Effective safety leaders:

- **Support** team members through active monitoring of decisions and actions, and ensuring alignment with the corporate safety strategy, vision and values.
- **Recognise** and reward team members based on their demonstration of effective safety behaviour.
- **Actively care** for the health, safety and general wellbeing of team members.
- **Collaborate** or share ownership of safety with team members by asking for their active participation in safety decision-making, and empowering individuals to take personal responsibility for safety.
- **Share** a vision for safety and facilitate the development of team goals, targets and plans to achieve it.
- **Inspire** the team to achieve the safety vision and safety excellence through motivational and encouraging communication.
- **Role model** safety-compliant behaviours that set the benchmark of what is expected from the team.
- **Challenge** team members to think about safety issues and scenarios in ways that they might not have considered before.



Research sample

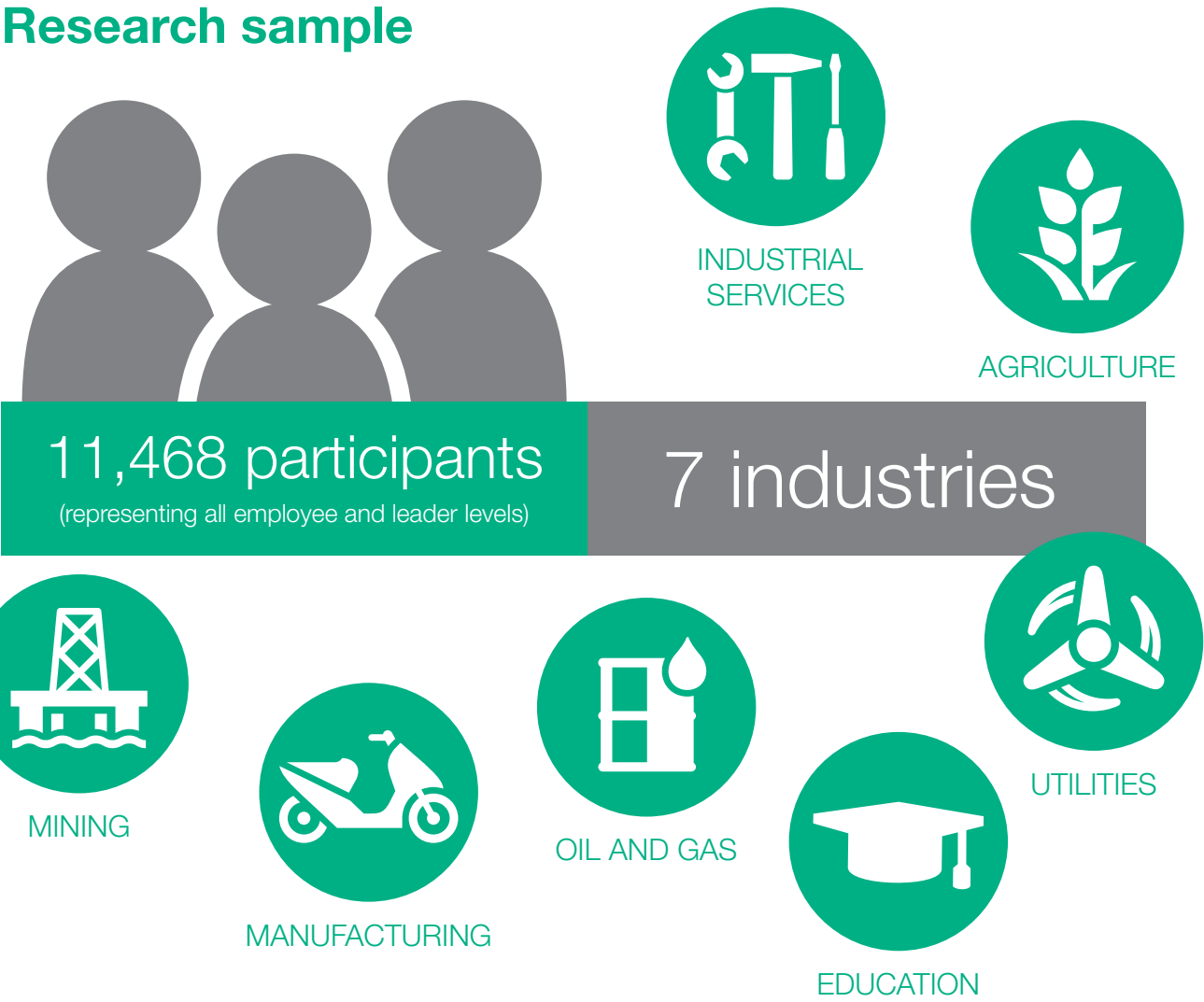


FIGURE 5. STUDY SAMPLE SIZE AND INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN

Key Findings



1. Safety climate is indicative of safety leadership ability.

2. Increased production pressure and poor safety/production balance is indicative of poor leadership.

3. Improved safety leadership leads to improved team safety behaviour and performance.

4. There is a strong opportunity to address wellbeing climate through safety leadership.

1.

Safety climate is indicative of safety leadership ability

When considering the results at the highest level, we find that safety climate and safety leadership are strongly linked. Put simply, a negative safety climate is generally reflective of poor safety leadership and a positive safety climate is generally reflective of strong safety leadership.

Exploring the relationship further, we examined eight key indicators of safety climate:

- **Organisational safety climate** such as availability of equipment, management commitment to safety, safety practices and systems, and safety involvement.
- **Team safety climate** such as supervisor and co-worker support for safety, team housekeeping and quality of safety briefings.
- **Error management climate** such as willingness to report errors and whether the organisation focuses on learning from past mistakes.
- **Safety communication** such as the quality of safety communication between all levels of the business.
- **Safety training quality** such as onboarding and adequacy of safety training more generally.
- **Safety training transfer climate** such as the extent to which individuals feel supported to apply safety training on the job.
- **Contractor safety relations** such as consistency of attitude and behaviours with overall organisational safety vision and values.
- **Wellbeing climate** such as the impact of workplace stress or pressure on employee's personal lives and whether leaders demonstrate genuine care for the wellbeing of their team.

We determined the strength of relationship between each indicator and leadership—specifically, how likely is that improvements in one (e.g. safety leadership) will reflect improvements in the other (e.g. safety communication).

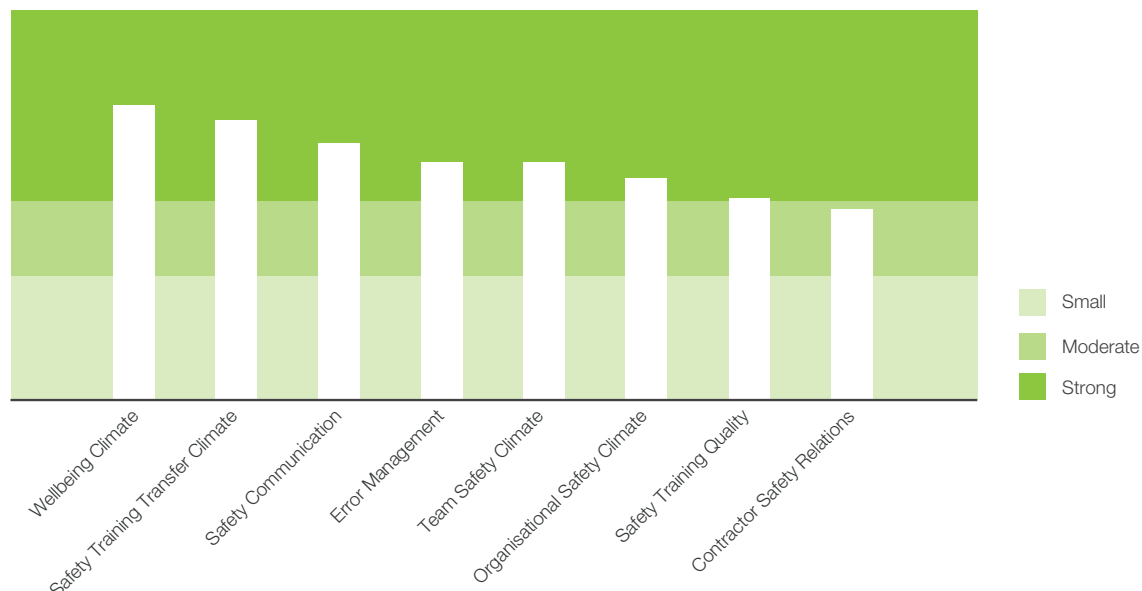


FIGURE 6. STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAFETY LEADERSHIP AND SAFETY CLIMATE INDICATORS

Our findings uncovered significant positive relationships between safety leadership and all eight safety climate indicators. This means that the more positively a team member perceives their direct leaders' safety leadership ability, the more positively they will rate the various elements of safety climate in their organisation.

While strong links exist between safety leadership and safety climate indicators across the board, the three strongest relationships are: wellbeing climate, safety training transfer climate and safety communication.

Wellbeing climate

Interestingly, wellbeing climate demonstrates the strongest positive relationship with safety leadership. This indicates that the more positively a team member perceives their direct leaders' safety leadership ability, the more positively they will rate the wellbeing climate of their organisation. Wellbeing climate taps into perceived organisational investment in wellbeing, leadership and co-worker support of wellbeing, and the impact of workplace stress or pressure on employees' personal lives.

But this relationship isn't necessarily as surprising as one might initially think. The eight core safety leadership competencies (see page 11) also promote improved leadership in areas beyond safety.

What is potentially surprising, is that detailed analysis determined strong relationships not only between safety leadership and overall wellbeing climate, but specifically between safety leadership and perceptions of leader and organisational commitment to wellbeing.

This result indicates that the influence of direct leader safety leadership reaches beyond perceptions at a site or team level. It also influences employee perceptions of broader organisational policies and commitment. In other words, where safety leadership is viewed positively, the organisation's approach to (and support of) employee wellbeing is also viewed positively.

Safety training transfer climate

Safety training transfer climate is measured by asking respondents to rate the perceived level of organisational, supervisor, co-worker and job support they feel is available to apply safety training on the job. While strong positive relationships exist across all areas, by far the strongest relationship exists between perceived safety leadership and supervisor support.

This indicates that the more positively an employee views their direct leader's safety leadership, the more likely they will feel supported by their supervisor to apply the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in safety training on the job.

This result provides a warning for organisations. If investment is made in skills- or attitude-based safety training for frontline employees, but not in developing safety leadership, there is a risk that safety training won't have the desired impact on safety performance.

Time, money and resources may also be wasted on safety training if frontline workers do not feel supported by their leader to apply their learning back on the job. While compliance and technical training must be offered by organisations, investing solely in these areas without also investing in safety leadership may mean organisations don't see the return on investment they hope for.

Safety communication

Safety communication is assessed across four levels: upwards, downwards, internal (within-teams) and lateral (between-teams). Strong positive relationships exist between safety leadership and all levels. Yet, like wellbeing climate and safety training transfer climate, some areas have even stronger relationships with safety leadership.

It's not surprising that, in this case, the strongest relationship is with upwards communication, i.e. 'the more positively I perceive my direct leaders' safety leadership ability, the more comfortable I feel approaching him/her with safety concerns.' This has significant implications for team member willingness to report, error management and the fostering of a shared learning culture.

However, it's worth noting that leaders with stronger safety leadership skills are also more likely to create team environments where internal communication occurs, where safety information is shared effectively with other teams, and where employees are satisfied with the level of safety information provided downwards from management.

So, if you hear senior leadership say something along the lines of “we have a communication problem”, what this could mean is “we have a safety leadership problem”.

Implication for leaders

We know that these areas have the strongest links to safety leadership. We also know that while leaders struggle to accurately reflect on their own leadership ability, they are acutely aware of issues in safety climate.

With this in mind, what signs and symptoms should senior leaders look out for that might indicate poor safety leadership performance? And what should individual leaders look out for that might indicate opportunities for personal development?

Example behaviours that might indicate an opportunity to improve safety leadership:

- There is little transfer of skills acquired in training to on-the-job activities.
- Communication seems inconsistent with some work groups being up-to-date about changes or updates, while other teams are not.
- Neither positive nor poor safety performance is recognised or rewarded consistently.
- Senior management doesn't hear much feedback from frontline workers about safety concerns or suggestions for improvement.
- Errors or incidents are kept hidden from management, or the seriousness of events is downplayed.
- Significant delay occurs before management is made aware of incidents or errors.
- Safety violations are dealt with inconsistently across the business.
- Safety briefings and meetings consist of unengaging, one-way communication from leaders to teams.
- Leaders are not always present at safety meetings and briefings.
- Leaders tend to shift the blame for poor safety performance to their teams, or other external factors, rather than accept accountability.
- Senior management is not visible to frontline workers and spends little time onsite engaging with employees.
- Wellbeing systems and policies exist and are promoted by the organisation, yet workers seem reluctant to use them.

Keeping an eye on safety climate indicators can help organisations to determine which areas of the business contain strong leadership performers and which areas need development. If you notice any of the above in your team or organisation, it may indicate an opportunity for safety leadership development.

2.

Increased production pressure and poor safety/production balance is indicative of poor leadership

At the time of being surveyed, **28% of workers had experienced pressure from their direct supervisor to prioritise production over safety in the previous three months.** Almost 40% of these workers reported experiencing this pressure **on a weekly basis.**

Our study showed a negative relationship between safety leadership and supervisor production pressure. It makes sense that leaders with higher perceived safety leadership skills are less likely to be seen to be putting their team members under production pressure.

Supervisor production pressure can drive unhelpful safety behaviours within individuals, such as failing to use safety systems as they are meant to be used, cutting corners, failing to use the correct tool for the job, and implementing band-aid fixes to malfunctioning equipment and machinery rather than shutting it down. In this cultural environment, an incident is inevitable. It's not a matter of if, but when and how serious.

Supervisors exert a powerful influence over their team. If an organisation develops its supervisors' safety leadership skills, they will likely see a drop in production pressure on frontline workers; allowing them to take the time to do their jobs safely and efficiently, and ultimately make it home safe.

Additionally, a positive relationship exists between perceptions of safety leadership and safety/production balance. The more positively employees rate their leaders' safety leadership ability, the more likely they will feel that production and safety are given appropriate attention in their team.

Implication for leaders

A key challenge for supervisors is finding an appropriate balance between production and safety. Most leaders are aware that safety is a priority; but if production falls, this can have a significant negative impact on the organisation's bottom line. Usually, when things aren't going well or fall behind, team members still experience implicit pressure to prioritise production over safety.

Leaders who demonstrate strong safety leadership skills tend to be able to navigate this challenge more effectively and focus their teams on the goal of safe production, further strengthening the case for investment in safety leadership development.

Senior leadership can also support supervisors by investing in messaging and policies around safe production, providing clear guidance and reassurance for leaders on the ground.

*“Supervisor production pressure can drive **unhelpful safety behaviours**. In this cultural environment, **an incident is inevitable**. It's not a matter of if, but **when and how serious**.”*

3.

Improved safety leadership leads to improved team safety behaviour and performance

How does safety leadership impact individual and team safety behaviours? What about overall safety culture and performance? Do safe workers make helpful choices regardless of their supervisor's leadership skill? Or does their leader's ability influence whether they simply comply or choose to go above and beyond to ensure the safety of the entire team?

Safety leadership impact at an individual level

Self-reported safety behaviour is assessed across two key areas: compliance (where employees invest energy in complying with safety standards and procedures) and citizenship (where employees go above and beyond basic compliance to improve safety for themselves and others).

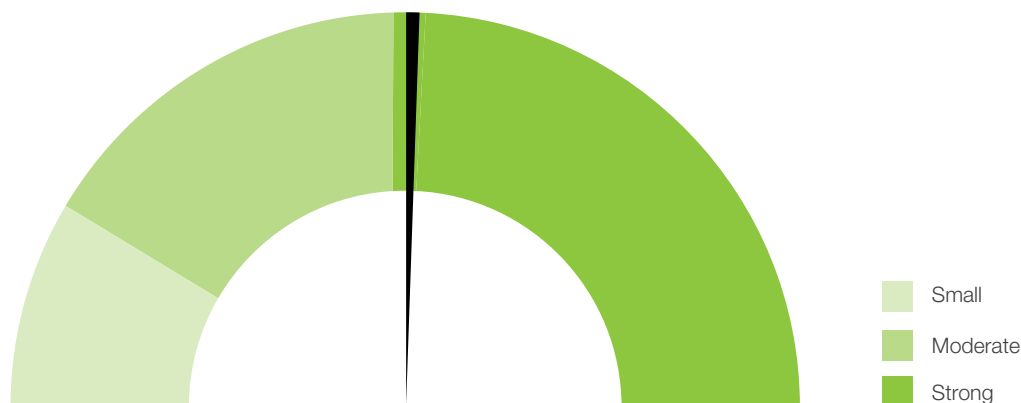


FIGURE 7. STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAFETY LEADERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL SELF-REPORTED SAFETY BEHAVIOUR

Results show a strong positive link between safety leadership and individual self-reported safety behaviour. Put simply, employees with more positive perceptions of their direct leader's safety leadership ability tend to report more positive safety behaviours. In turn, these positive behaviours lead to improved safety performance and a more mature safety culture.

Consider a leader who displays strength in setting a safety vision for their team. They clearly communicate the organisation's safety goals and what teams need to do to achieve them. They also provide detailed and regular feedback on whether employee behaviour is hitting or missing the mark. In turn, frontline workers have a clear understanding of what needs to be done to impress their leader. They quickly learn they will earn no praise for cutting corners, but only for the safe and efficient completion of their work.

Safety leadership impact at a team (and broader safety culture) level

Team safety performance is measured by asking respondents to rate the percentage of their team that exhibit specific safety-related behaviours. These behaviours directly relate to safety culture maturity and are derived from the Sentis Safety Culture Maturity Model. This framework maps an organisation’s journey from negative to positive safety culture. The lowest level, *Counterproductive* describes a culture where individuals actively work against the company and safety rules and procedures. The highest level, *Citizenship* describes a culture where individuals seek ways to improve and invest in safety for the benefit of themselves, their team and the organisation.

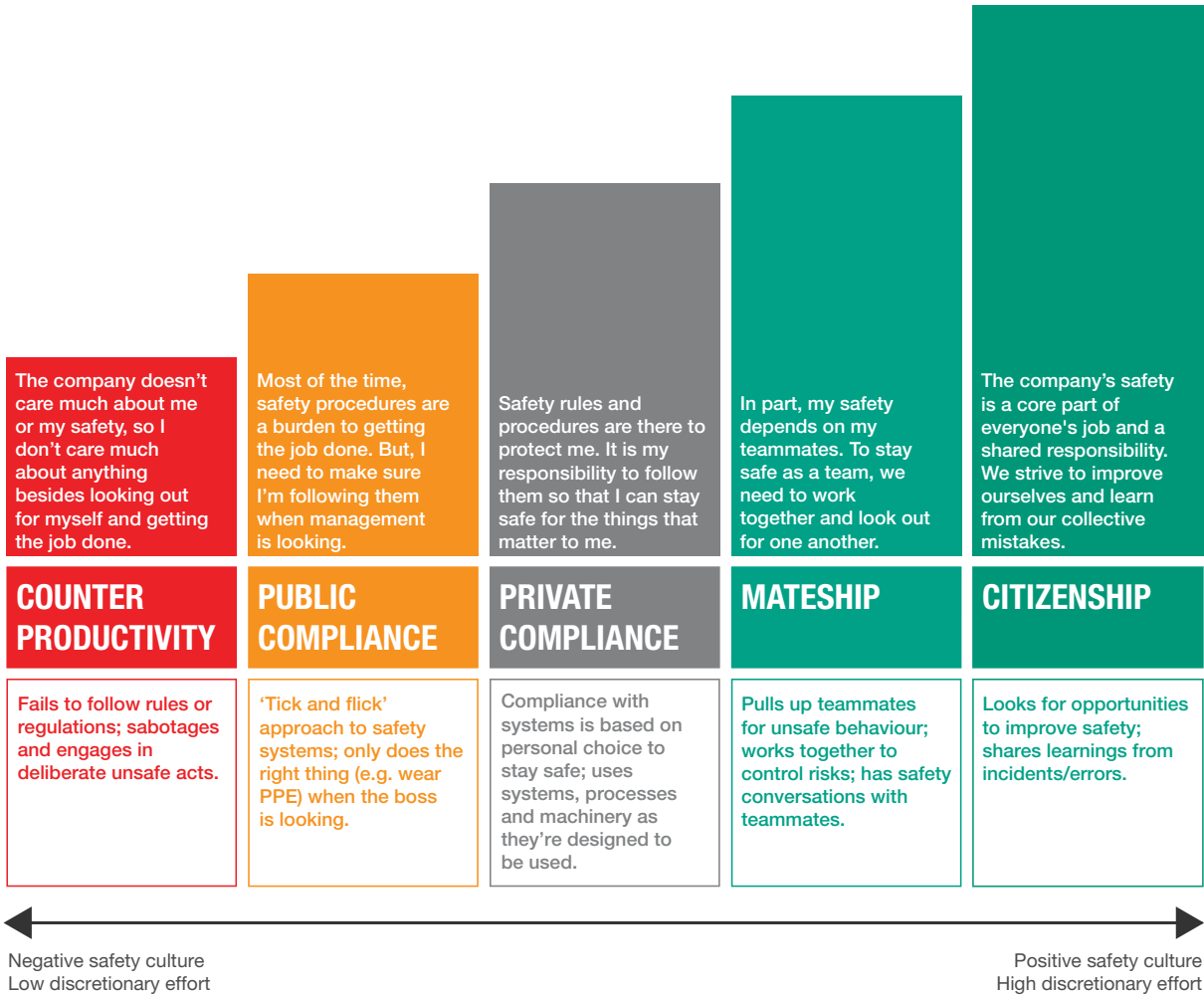
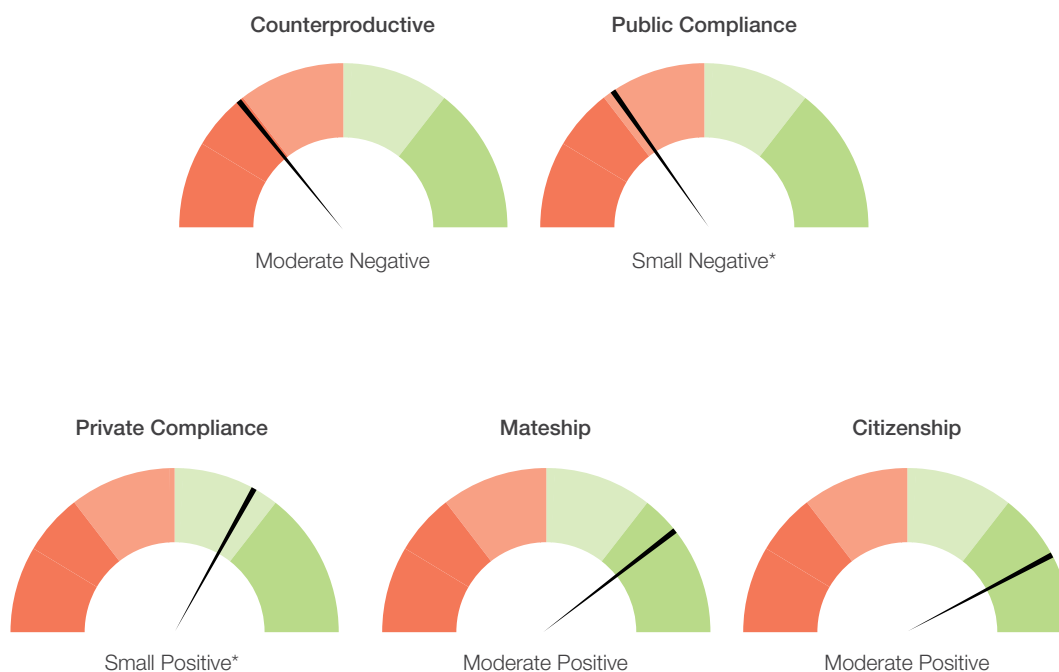


FIGURE 8. EXAMPLE SAFETY-RELATED BEHAVIOURS ASSOCIATED WITH DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SAFETY CULTURE MATURITY

When examining the relationship between safety leadership and the different levels of team safety behaviours, we find a negative relationship between safety leadership and the two lowest levels of maturity-level behaviours. This means that a high safety leadership score will result in lower levels of *Counterproductive* and *Public Compliance* behaviour. In contrast, a poor safety leadership score will result in higher rates of these same behaviours.

Not surprisingly, a positive relationship exists between safety leadership and the three highest maturity levels. This suggests that the more positively team members perceive the safety leadership of their direct leader, the more likely they will see positive safety behaviours from their teammates.

Safety leadership impact at a team (and broader safety culture) level cont.



Note: Graphs represent strengths up to a moderate level.

*While the relationship strength appears lower for Private and Public Compliance, the results for these remain statistically significant and indicative of a potential trend.

FIGURE 9. STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SAFETY LEADERSHIP AND TEAM SAFETY BEHAVIOURS

Operating under a strong safety leader, teams are more likely to demonstrate discretionary effort and *Citizenship* behaviours such as: looking out for teammates; suggesting ways to improve safety across the organisation; and focusing on learning from errors and mistakes to ensure measures are put in place to avoid these in the future.

Implication for leaders

Intuitively, it makes sense that strong safety leadership leads to improved safety culture. So, it goes without saying that investing heavily in safety leadership development represents an opportunity to shift safety culture maturity from negative to positive. This shift in safety leadership will influence teams to demonstrate more helpful safety behaviours. In time, this will also begin to shift the safety culture towards the goal of *Safety Citizenship* and safety performance excellence.

4.

There is a strong opportunity to address wellbeing climate through safety leadership

One of the most interesting findings of our study was the strong opportunity to improve wellbeing through investment in safety leadership development. While all eight safety climate indicators show significant links to safety leadership, wellbeing is by far the strongest (see page 14). Coupled with the fact that this area also performed poorly (i.e. achieved a low score when rated by respondents), wellbeing represents the area with the greatest opportunity for improvement.

Employee mental health and wellbeing has a substantial effect on an organisation's bottom line. Decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and increased stress and psychological injury claims are just some of the costs facing organisations with a poor wellbeing climate. We are also starting to better understand and address the significant personal impact on individuals and their families.

While organisations are making positive steps towards ensuring their workforce is supported appropriately, we still find that most struggle to successfully incorporate wellbeing into their overarching business strategy. Simply providing fruit baskets, morning teas and access to an EAP provider is not necessarily an effective or proactive approach.

Often, when organisations discover a poor wellbeing climate, they respond by creating additional policies and increasing the initiatives available for employees to become involved in. But if leaders aren't encouraging and supporting the use of these programs, or demonstrating genuine care for the wellbeing of their people, money invested in wellbeing policy and initiatives is wasted.

Implication for leaders

Given the strong relationship between safety leadership and wellbeing climate, there's a clear case that safety leadership may in fact prove an effective vehicle to improve overall employee wellbeing. And when you consider the eight core competencies of strong safety leadership behaviour (see page 9), it's not really a surprise that this would lead to happier, healthier teams. In fact, developing safety leadership skills also develops broader leadership skills, creating positive effects in all areas of the business and a more positive organisational culture overall.

“There is a clear case that safety leadership may prove an effective vehicle to improve overall employee wellbeing.”

Next Steps and Recommendations

If you have identified an opportunity to improve your organisation's safety leadership, the first step is to determine where your strengths and opportunities lie.

Measuring safety leadership (and broader safety climate and culture) is the best way to determine where to invest resources. This is best done by a third-party to ensure accurate reporting and to eliminate organisational bias.

We recommend undertaking a Safety Leadership Assessment in conjunction with a Safety Climate Survey and Onsite Safety Evaluation. This will provide the most comprehensive view of safety leadership and culture, and clear recommendations for improvement and development.

Post-assessment, you will be provided with a clear plan of attack designed to help drive positive change. This may include targeted training programs, one-on-one coaching and embedding tools to cement and sustain long-term change. We also recommend pulse checks to track improvement and make adjustments where required.

It's important to remember that change doesn't happen overnight. But with determined and strategic focus, and a comprehensive approach, you will find your organisation making positive progress towards safety excellence and a culture of *Safety Citizenship*.

THE STATE OF SAFETY LEADERSHIP

How do today's safety leaders measure up?

How do employees perceive safety leadership in their organisation? How do leaders perceive their own ability? What strengths and opportunity areas do safety leaders have in common? Do industry, age, tenure or position impact upwards perceptions of safety leadership? Find out the answers to these questions and more in *The State of Safety Leadership*.

We've analysed responses from more than 8,700 employees across 9 industries to bring you meaningful insights on the state of safety leadership across heavy industry, as well as recommendations for improvement.

Visit sentis.com.au/state-of-safety-leadership to access *The State of Safety Leadership* and discover trends in safety leadership, as well as areas of strength and opportunity to help guide leadership assessment and development in your organisation.



Sentis specialises in safety culture measurement and transformation. Experts in applied psychology and neuroscience, Sentis helps organisations to enhance and move beyond compliance to empower employees to work safely—not because they have to, but because they want to. Offering training, coaching and consulting, Sentis has helped more than 250 companies and 140,000 people think differently about safety since 2003.

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