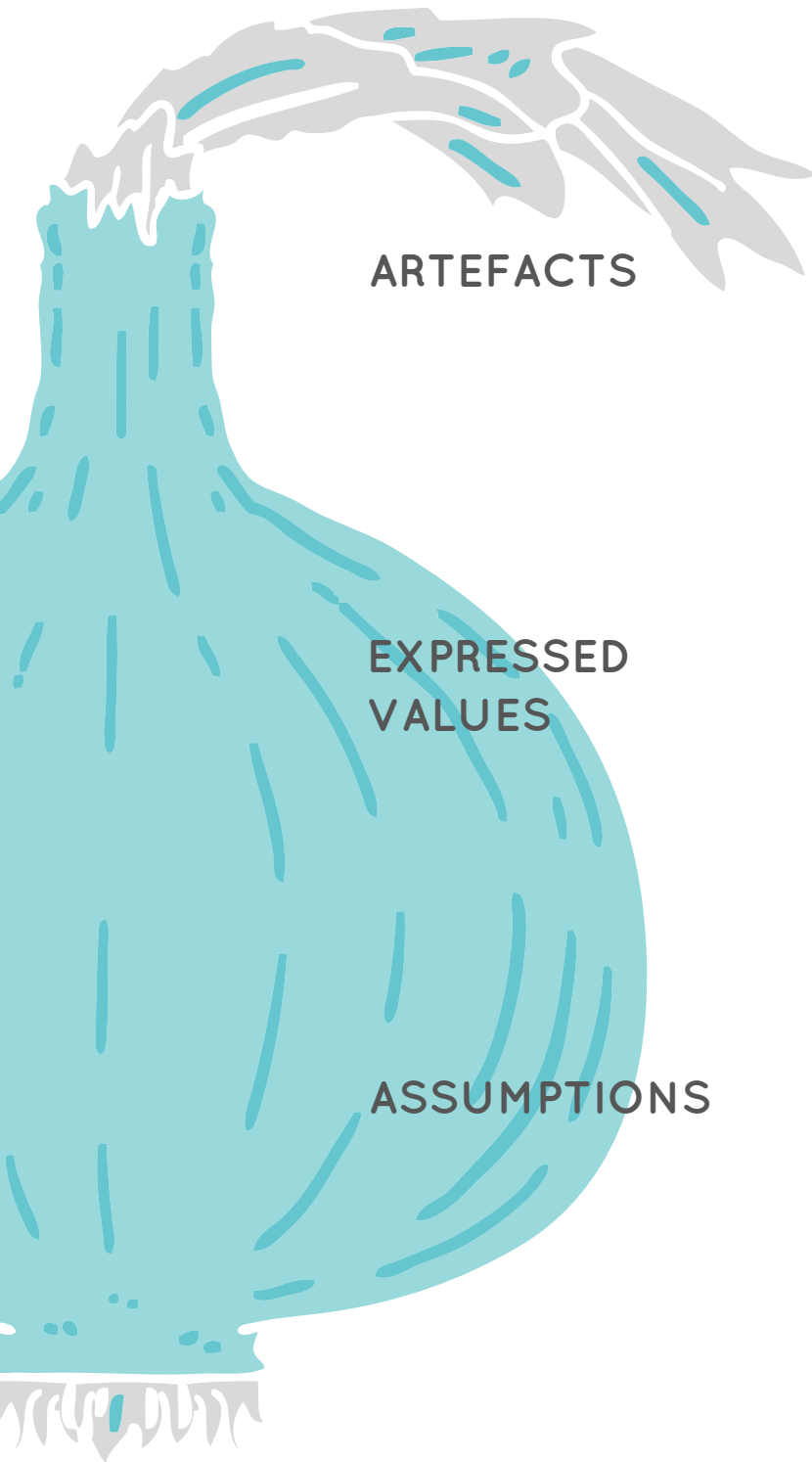


WHAT IS SAFETY CULTURE?



Safety culture has become a popular concept in the realm of occupational health and safety, but it is often misunderstood.

A strong safety culture helps to enable and support SMS and safety practices by promoting a consistent mindset that is always on the "lookout" for safety concerns.

Safety culture can be defined as ***"The shared beliefs, values, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours that influence safety in the workplace."***

We can compare the complexity of safety culture to the layers of an onion. The deeper the layer, the harder it is to access and change.

At the first exterior level we have artefacts; components of the work environment we can observe. Further below the surface, we have the expressed values of the organization and its employees. At the core of the onion and organizational culture, we have assumptions. Assumptions are hard to see or even be aware of, especially for those who work in the culture.

All organizations have a safety culture, whether it is weak or strong. For organizations to understand and improve their safety culture, a good first step is to think about how your organization promotes and ensures the elements that comprise a safety culture.

The four main safety culture elements that appear consistently throughout safety research are summarized in the SOS dimensional model. They are **leadership commitment to safety, communication, workforce engagement** and **learning culture**.

Leadership commitment to safety refers to the formal and informal ways the leadership team demonstrates their commitment to safety to the workforce. This may include worksite visits, one-on-one conversations, how safety is prioritized, safety policies, etc. Leadership commitment is the most important element of a safety culture because leaders have the most influence of an organization. Their values trickle down to the rest of the workforce.

Communication encompasses the way safety is talked about throughout an organization. Are employees well informed about safety? Are there formal systems to report safety concerns? In a strong safety culture communication flows in multiple directions, not just top down.



Workforce engagement refers to the opportunities employees have to be involved in safety other than compliance with the rules. This includes joint occupational health and safety meetings, inviting employees to share their safety concerns when creating policies and rules, being involved in hazard assessments, etc. The more opportunities employees have to be involved in safety, the more ownership they will have over safety behaviours, as well as the broader safety culture.

The final element is **learning culture**. An organization with a strong learning culture uses incidents and near misses as a opportunity to learn and adapt from the experience. In order to support a learning culture an organization must have trust.

Organizations that solely rely on discipline following an incident have a reactive culture. It is important to go further than the "root cause" in an investigation as root causes may feed back into our safety systems and dictate patterns of employee safety behaviour.