

SAFETY CULTURE

WHAT IS A SAFETY CULTURE ASSESSMENT AND HOW DOES IT WORK?



A safety culture assessment helps to provide an organization with insight into their culture. Looking into your own safety culture is comparable to looking into your own individual personality - it's very difficult to see yourself objectively without the help of those external to us. We struggle to see our own blind spots because we live and breathe within our own culture every day.

By engaging in an assessment process with the expertise of the Railway Association of Canada (RAC), a baseline understanding of safety culture can be built. Having this perspective from the assessment process enables organizations to more clearly pinpoint their safety strengths and also their opportunities for safety improvement. After several years of research and conducting assessments, RAC's approach to safety culture assessment includes the following steps:



The first step is planning and design.

Mapping out the entire assessment beforehand is helpful in understanding what will work best for the specific organization and how to get the entire workforce engaged in the process. This step includes ensuring buy-in from senior management, creating an in-house team to guide the assessment and future improvements and developing an appropriate communication plan.



Collecting information is the second step.

The assessment methods or tools used will depend on what size the organization is. RAC offers: surveys, focus groups, interviews, observations and document analysis. Collecting this perceptual information from the workforce helps to create a picture of what the safety culture looks like.



Understanding and sharing results is the third step.

Once the in-house team has an understanding of what the assessment results tell us about the culture, the results can be communicated to the broader workforce.



Developing an action plan is the fourth step.

The action plan will be informed by the results from the assessment and will focus on top opportunities. Following through with the action plan is very important, as it will be the way to demonstrate to the workforce that their input matters. Continually communicating about plans and progress for the action plan with the workforce is also important.



Moving forward is the fifth and final step.

RAC encourages keeping communication open after the assessment by scheduling check-ins to ensure that the organizations have all resources necessary to continue their improvements after the assessment process. Safety culture is a journey where ongoing initiatives build strength progressively. Organizations also have the opportunity to re-assess their safety culture in the future.

Assessing your safety culture can help to identify areas of safety improvement. Acting upon these improvements will not only contribute to a more positive safety culture but a more positive organizational culture as well. This will bolster all aspects of performance including safety, service and efficiency. If you would like more information or have an inquiry about safety culture assessments through RAC, please contact [Julia Desmarais \(jdesmarais@railcan.ca\)](mailto:jdesmarais@railcan.ca).



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THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN A SAFETY CULTURE ASSESSMENT



The Railway Association of Canada's (RAC) safety culture assessment process has enabled several Canadian railways to identify opportunities and to implement initiatives which have made a positive impact to strengthen their safety culture.

An effective safety culture bolsters all aspects of performance, including safety, service and efficiency. Having an effective safety culture is helpful particularly in decentralized working environments like the railway industry. Employees largely work unsupervised or in small teams and must therefore be properly supported by their leaders and safety systems.

RAC has worked with experts to develop a safety culture assessment process which is available to its members, along with credible practitioners to support implementation available only to its members.

Please contact [Julia Desmarais \(jdesmarais@railcan.ca\)](mailto:jdesmarais@railcan.ca) for more information on completing a safety culture assessment through RAC.



An organization's safety culture is comprised of more than "what we do around here". **Safety culture is the shared attitudes, values, beliefs, behaviours, perceptions and assumptions around safety in a workplace.** Although behaviours and attitudes can be readily observed, it is much more difficult to observe the underlying beliefs and assumptions driving the culture. Safety culture is important to understand as it sets the tone for how our safety management systems will work in practice. The best management system, standard or policy can be put in place, but without the right culture supporting it, employees can still work in an unsafe environment.

Seeking the help of an objective, third-party perspective to facilitate an assessment can be beneficial for understanding and learning about safety culture. The Railway Association of Canada maintains the **Safety Culture Improvement Initiative** for member companies. Through the initiative, member companies have access to a confidential safety culture assessment that is delivered by credible practitioners and through a methodology tailored for railway companies in Canada.

The assessment process can be customized depending on the number of staff employed at the railway. An assessment can also include: perceptual surveys, interviews, focus groups, and a review of safety policies and procedures at the railway. Each assessment provides an important opportunity to work with practitioners to identify pragmatic actions that can improve a railway company's safety culture. This includes access to guidance material and "best practice" documents produced by railway companies.

Benefits associated with participating in a safety culture assessment include:

- > Having an opportunity for the workforce to provide honest feedback about safety which will help to inform what improvement opportunities there are.
- > Developing a platform to discuss important issues that affect workplace safety. This happens through participation in the assessment and also through identified actions from feedback such as having employee-led groups or joint groups.
- > Increasing employee ownership of safety activities and associated responsibilities (as the opportunities identified for improvement are highlighted by employees and they are involved in implementation).
- > Developing trust between organizational levels.
- > Developing an open communication forum between employment levels.
- > Learning how to integrate knowledge from previous safety incidents or near misses into organizational safety systems and workforce communications.
- > Development of an internal safety culture baseline that will help to track improvements and progress.

By understanding the current state of a railway's safety culture, a organization will learn how to improve and create a safer, more effective working environment.

