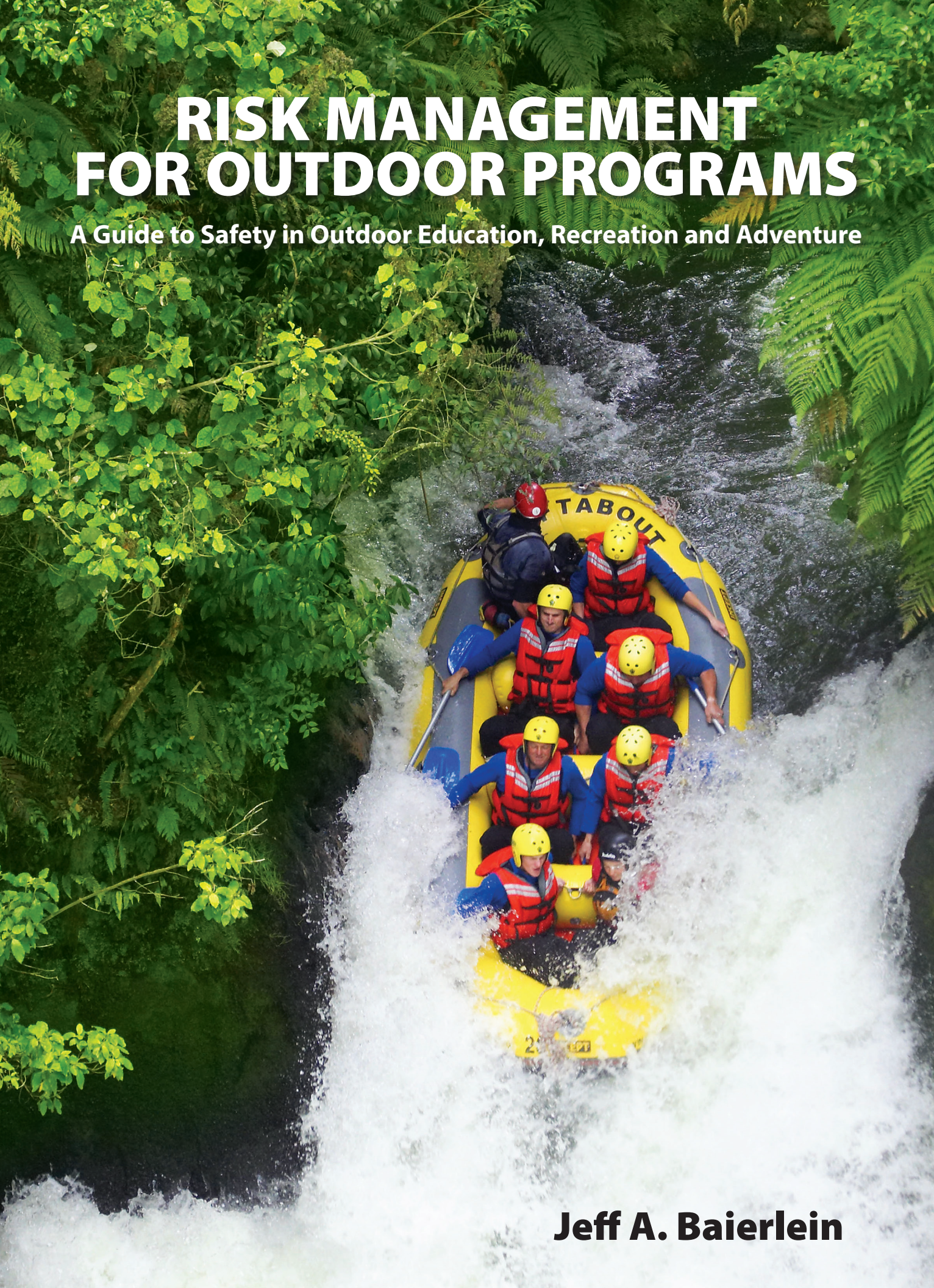


# RISK MANAGEMENT FOR OUTDOOR PROGRAMS

A Guide to Safety in Outdoor Education, Recreation and Adventure



**Jeff A. Baierlein**



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**Jeff A. Baierlein**

Viristar LLC  
Seattle, Washington



**VIRISTAR**

The background of the page is a light-colored topographic map with contour lines. At the bottom of the page, there is a photograph of a mountain range with several peaks, rendered in shades of blue and green, suggesting a misty or hazy atmosphere.

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# CULTURE



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. The importance and benefits of a culture of safety
2. The definition and elements of safety culture
3. Safety culture characteristics unique to outdoor programs
4. Steps for establishing and maintaining a culture of safety
5. Integrated safety culture
6. Safety culture surveys
7. Just culture
8. Additional resources
9. Challenges of change management

*The storm moved in quickly, fierce winds lashing tree tops, and sheets of rain pouring from the sky. Trees began toppling in enormous numbers, creating a dense thicket of downed trunks across the trail. One group of students who were huddled under a tree for protection moved to a more sheltered spot, and moments later a tree crashed down right where they had been crouching. Lightning bolts repeatedly struck trees, rocks, anything tall. Flash—BOOM! Flash—BOOM! The group of teens had been traveling through the wilderness for weeks, but this weather was harsher than anything they'd seen before.*

*The group's trip leaders were camped about a minute's walk away from the student group, leaving the students room to show their independence with camping and wilderness travel skills. As the storm eased, a couple of students walked over to the trip leader's campsite to ask them a question. Both leaders were down on the ground—one moaning, the other not moving. They had been seated on a large rock by the lakeshore, watching the storm, and were hit by lightning. As one trip leader recovered, he helped the students perform CPR on his partner, but to no avail. The body was airlifted out, and the deceased leader's fiancée, who was leading a group nearby, was airlifted out of the wilderness as well.*

*The initial reports from the outdoor program's administration stated that the bolt of lightning that killed the trip leader*

*came out of the clear blue sky, from a distant cloud far away. The death was a freak accident—an “act of God”—that no one could have predicted.*

*The following season, though, the message had changed. A lightning safety group that tracks individual lightning strikes had analyzed the storm and probable time of death, and concluded that the origin of the lightning bolt that killed the trip leader had actually been nearby. It was so close that the trip leaders should have been in a safer location in “lightning drill” formation protecting themselves from the lightning. But they weren't, and the surviving trip leader—who was the supervising leader—was blamed for not following safety rules and causing his assistant's death.*

*The following season the message changed again. The senior trip leader had not followed the rules, true: but the culture of the program division (at-risk youth) he worked for was known for a certain rebelliousness and disregard for rules. For instance, staff took illegal drugs while in staff housing; this was known and tolerated by administration. Breaking workplace rules was a norm, tacitly approved by management. As the thought process of the organization matured, then, it became clear that blame should not fall on freak weather, or an instructor fault, but that a major cause of the fatality was an issue of corporate culture.*

## 5.1. INTRODUCTION

When we consider outdoor safety, we often think about environmental hazards such as lightning, snake bites, and avalanches. We don't often consider another important influence on outdoor safety: the organizational culture.

However, organizational culture can have a profound impact on successful safety outcomes. The UK's Health and Safety Executive notes that an organisation's culture can have as big an influence on safety outcomes as the organization's safety management system.

### 5.1.1. What is a Safety Culture?

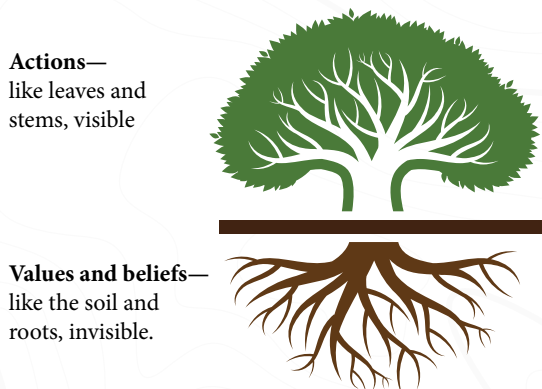
*What is Culture?* Culture is an integrated pattern of individual and organizational behavior, based upon shared beliefs and values.

*Beliefs* are things that are accepted as true: for example, "I won't get punished if I speak up about a safety problem."

*Values* are what are prized: for example, "safety is important."

*Behaviors*, in the context of culture, are the traditions, rituals and practices that spring from beliefs and values. Examples include following safety procedures, speaking up about safety issues, or organizing an annual disaster drill.

*Visible and Invisible Elements of Culture.* Behaviors spring from beliefs and values. Behaviors are visible, while we don't see another's beliefs and values. Just as vegetation is brought to life from the interplay of roots and soil underground, the safety behaviors we see spring from the values and beliefs we don't. Strong safety performance ultimately grows from the values and beliefs of a healthy safety culture (see Figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1. Actions, which we see, spring from values and beliefs, which are not visible.**

Beliefs and values may not be hidden only to external observers. Just as there can be unconscious bias with regards to sexism, racism, ageism, or other prejudices, employees may not be consciously aware of, for example, their beliefs and values prioritizing production and short-term financial performance over safety.

*Safety Culture.* Safety culture is the influence of organisational culture on safety. More specifically, safety culture is the values, beliefs and behaviors that affect the extent to which safety is emphasized over competing goals.

As this definition emphasizes, safety is only one of multiple legitimate organizational goals. The safety culture directs how much emphasis is given to safety as opposed to other important—and interlinked—priorities such as financial sustainability, organizational growth, and workplace equity and inclusion.

Therefore, a safety culture sets the conditions so that the organization can manage risks to appropriate standards, and with socially acceptable outcomes. This means that the organization should neither de-emphasize safety such that there are unacceptable losses, nor over-emphasize safety such that the organization is immobilized.

The role of a "safety culture" in preventing accidents came to prominence following the deadly explosion in April 1986 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in what was then the USSR. Investigators concluded a safety culture must be created and maintained in order to maintain safety and prevent future catastrophes.

### 5.1.2. Why Safety Culture Is Important

When stakeholders in an organization have the beliefs and values and show the behaviors commensurate with a healthy safety culture, many benefits follow.

An appropriate safety culture leads to fewer losses: fewer injuries, illnesses, instances of property damage and deaths. These are desirable aims in their own right. They also have business implications: when serious accidents have occurred, outdoor organizations have faced loss of reputation, confronted loss of business, and been forced to close down completely. In some cases, outdoor program managers have been jailed. A strong safety culture makes these outcomes less likely.

The right attention to safety management also provides employees an opportunity to lead a professional life aligned with moral values. This is a good thing in itself, and is a sign of a desirable workplace that employees can



be proud to be a part of. Improved employee engagement, productivity and retention may then follow.

These effects can increase the probability of an organization enjoying long-term success.

### 5.1.3. Safety Culture in the Outdoor Program Context

Outdoor adventure programs, by their very nature, generally involve intentionally exposing participants and staff to risk. We can't seek to eliminate all risk, then, but simply manage it to appropriate standards.

Prospective outdoor adventure program participants may intentionally seek out programs with higher risks, in order to gain the benefits of adventure. Marketers may promote programs with higher inherent risk, figuring that a white-water boating or alpine mountaineering program is more exciting and more likely to sell than a campout in the local park.

And activity leaders may use the workplace to seek out personal challenges, tempting them to take on risks perhaps suited for their advanced skills but beyond participant capacities to handle safely. Many outdoor leaders are young people, no older than their 20's, who by the nature of their stage in brain development seek more and greater risks than do more mature persons.

And with some outdoor activities, such as mountaineering, a macho culture of peak-bagging and mountain-conquering may exist, exacerbating the already greater inherent risks of technical alpine travel.

Those working to influence safety culture in outdoor programs, then, would be wise to be aware of these potential dynamics.

#### **Traditional Masculinity Ideology**

In some cultures, the expression of traditional masculinity ideology can lead to increased risk. The American Psychological Association (APA) notes that these cultural values, which include adventure and risk, also lead to suppression of emotions. According to the APA, research indicates that the rigid suppression of emotions is linked to increased negative risk-taking. The World Health Organization also links traditional masculinity and risk-taking. Acculturation to not ask for help, and to not express doubt or confusion, may additionally lead to increased risk. This "toxic masculinity" may not just be present in high-adventure outdoor activities such as mountaineering, but in many settings.

## 5.2. CHANGING CULTURE

In order to foster an appropriate culture of safety, one has to shift behaviors to ones associated with a healthy safety culture. In order to shift behaviors, the beliefs and values of those involved must be suitably aligned with safety aims. How, then, does one go about changing values? In our case, we might ask, how do we increase the amount safety is valued?

Influencing how much safety is held as an organizational value follows the same change management process as influencing any other organizational value: financial performance, innovation, product quality, growth, or equity and inclusion.

Since every organization has a different organizational culture and business environment, there is no one right way for all organizations to go about developing an appropriate safety culture. However, general principles for project management and change management exist. And established standards exist for behaviors, business structures, and ways of thinking that can inform the trajectory of an organization's change process.

It's also useful to remember that an organization doesn't have one safety culture. Instead, multiple safety cultures exist—in different departments, in different levels of the organization's hierarchy, among different demographic groups (for example age or national origin). This diversity should be accounted for when assessing where interventions are most needed.

### 5.2.1. Articulate Values

Establishment of a safety culture starts with unambiguous and repeated messages from the organization's top leadership that safety is an important value.

Such statements can come in many forms. The importance of safety should be incorporated into the organization's business plan, strategic plans, and risk management plan. It may be a part of the organization's formal mission, vision and values statements. It should be evident in the risk management mission statement that is a part of the organization's risk management plan. It can be stated in company-wide and departmental meetings, announcements, newsletters, and other media.

In order for the messages to have credibility, they must come from the uppermost levels of the organizational hierarchy, such as the CEO and the Board of Directors or equivalent.

It's important to explain why safety is an important organizational priority. Values adoption occurs when individuals examine the value and make a decision to adopt it; it cannot be forced.

### 5.2.2. Establish Expected Behaviors

After articulating the values expected of staff, the expected behaviors springing from those values are outlined. Behavior expectations are in three categories: policies and procedures, systems and structures, and proactive, dynamic risk management.

*Policies and Procedures.* Individuals should be directed to follow established policies and procedures. This represents “rules-based safety,” as opposed to “managed safety,” discussed below; a balanced presence of both is important for an integrated safety culture. For instance, climbers and belayers should be instructed to wear helmets at a climbing site.

Policies and procedures should be comprehensive. However, permitting procedures to not be followed if that is judged to be the safer option (as explained in Chapter, 2, Approaches to Risk Management) helps reduce the risk of creating a compliance culture where safety is reduced to checking boxes rather than thinking independently and using the presence, judgment and initiative of staff to anticipate and deal with unexpected risks.

Many written policies and procedures in outdoor programs are focused directly on outdoor activities—requiring harness double-checks before climbing, for example, or covering incident reporting. However, managerial procedures have an important impact on risk management and should be considered as well. For example, a protocol stating that the sales department cannot sell a group program within, for example, 30 days of the program start without an ok from the staffing department to ensure sufficient staff will be available, helps manage staffing-related risk.

*Systems and Structures.* This includes the systems in Part III of this book, Risk Management Structures, such as incident reporting, incident reviews, Risk Management Committee, medical screening, risk management reviews, and accreditation. Structures to manage the risks in Part II, Risk Domains, such as subcontractor assessment and equipment management, are also included here.

The expectation should be that these systems and structures are in place, fully implemented, and working

as intended. For instance, with respect to safety issues and incident reporting, it should be expected that:

1. Staff and participants are encouraged to raise safety issues.
2. Issues are promptly reviewed and prioritized.
3. Issues are appropriately resolved.
4. Information about the issue and its resolution is provided to those who raised it and others as appropriate.

*Human Resources.* Safety performance expectations should be woven throughout Human Resources systems and structures such as hiring advertisements, job descriptions, performance evaluations, promotion criteria, compensation increase criteria, and discipline procedures. In addition, excellence in risk management should be an element in informal recognition systems such as awards and public recognition. Human resources systems should include clear accountability for safety, for the organization as a whole and in each unit. Clear requirements for staff competencies, and contingency plans for backup staff capacity, reduce the probability of poorly trained last-minute hires or “field promotions” leading to unqualified staff in the field. A key element of safety culture in Human Resources is the establishment and maintenance of just culture, outlined later in this chapter.

*Mission Integrity.* New Element Readiness Assessments, program-level strategic plans, and other necessary tools should be employed to ensure that programs and activities offered stay within the core competencies of the organization. In some settings it can be tempting for the scope of activities to creep outside the boundaries of what the staff and organization are well-qualified to do, in a search for more revenue.

*Participants.* Communications to participants before program commencement (such as required equipment and training requirements) and during programs (such as safety briefings (figure 5.2), foot checks for blisters, and debriefs) make it clear to participants that safety is a priority. Participant feedback provided during the program, and formally collected at program end, does so as well.



**Figure 5.2.** Safety briefings before activities reinforce a culture of safety. Here, a safety briefing before rafting a whitewater rapids in Nepal.



**Judgment and Managed Safety.** Field staff should be encouraged to use their judgment to make safety-related decisions, within appropriate boundaries. This means that operating procedures should generally be followed, but do not have to be, if that is reasonably considered safer. This flexible construction of procedures is intended to create a balance between “rule-based safety” and “managed safety.” An integrated safety culture (Figure 5.3, below) strikes this balance, and promotes proactive and dynamic risk management on the part of field staff. This represents decentralized risk management, rather than a top-control model that can falsely give the illusion of control over risk.

Avoiding a compliance culture where risk management is diminished to unthinkingly following rigid rules is particularly important where there is significant risk, and the environment is not under staff’s control and can change quickly. Mountaineering in avalanche terrain is an example of this situation. Here, more weight should be given to judgment and taking initiative to identify and respond to risks, and less to compliance to a long list of safety rules.

Extreme amounts of filling out paperwork and completing checklists can lead to a compliance culture in which individuals don’t think for themselves or take the initiative to dynamically assess and manage risk. But some documentation is essential, so an appropriate balance must be found.



**Figure 5.3.** An integrated safety culture skillfully balances rules-based safety and managed safety.

### 5.2.3. Establish Expected Ways of Thinking

Risk assessment spreadsheets and safety checklists, unless used skillfully, or constrained to limited contexts such as evaluating discrete activities or activity areas, can lead to a focus on the obvious operational risks like boat

capsizes and sharp knives in the camp kitchen. A broader view that captures a wider range of risks and accounts for their interrelated nature is found in a systems thinking approach to risks.

The most significant accidents—major catastrophes—are often the result of systemic breakdowns, and are hard to predict. This applies to outdoor incidents such as multiple-person fatalities on a boating trip, as well as industrial incidents like airplane or train crashes, nuclear power plant meltdowns, and acts of terror.

See Chapter 23, *Seeing Systems*, for more on systems thinking.

### 5.2.4. Invest Resources

Talk is cheap. No amount of rhetoric will make up for a risk management system starved of resources. Even in times of financial stress, the appropriate resource allocation to risk management must be protected.

**Time and Attention.** What people pay attention to is reflected in what they talk about, and the stories they tell. This shows up in a variety of ways.

1. **Meeting agendas.** Risk management is included in meetings at all levels of the organization: for example, Board meetings, senior leadership team meetings, planning retreats, management team meetings, all staff meetings, program briefings, and program debriefings. One metric used in safety culture assessment is: at Board meetings, time to discuss risk management is equal to or greater than time to discuss financial performance.
2. **Reports.** Risk management is included in reports about organizational performance: for example, annual reports, reports to the Board, reports to funders, and written end-of-program reports.
3. **General communications.** Risk management is presented in newsletters, reference materials made available to staff, posters and bulletin board materials, articles passed around for professional development, and elsewhere.
4. **Safety memos.** Safety memos go out to staff periodically, providing positive reminders about safety practices. A memo might include a case study or narrative of a recently occurring incident, discuss the incident, provide a reminder of important risk management principles, and conclude with an appreciation for staffs’ attention to risk management and a positively-worded encouragement to continue efforts in the service of risk management excellence.

5. **Recognitions and celebrations.** When awards for performance are provided, at season-end celebrations, at all-staff meetings, and in similar settings, staff are recognized for superior risk management performance. This can be as formal as an official annual award, or as simple as a few words of recognition.

In addition, sufficient time to perform tasks without rushing or taking shortcuts should be provided. Situations with staff who are exhausted, harried, or overwhelmed are more likely to lead to incidents. Research indicates that stressed individuals tend to make riskier decisions. In addition to having sufficient time for program planning, leading activities, and transportation, activity staff require sufficient dedicated time to handle risk management responsibilities such as writing program-end reports, holding debriefs, and writing incident reports.

**Funding.** Financial resources sufficient to adequately manage risks—even when money is tight—must be provided. This includes funds for staff (including sufficient compensation and professional development to support good employee retention), training, and equipment. If an accident occurs, a defense of “we didn’t have enough money” is ineffective.

**Equipment.** Safety, first aid, rescue and emergency gear and supplies must be available and in good condition. This includes safety-critical equipment such as vehicles, appropriate clothing and personal protective equipment. Chapter 8, Equipment, discusses details. If safety equipment—such as satellite phones or the next generation of emergency telecommunications technology—is available at a reasonable cost, it should be procured and appropriately maintained and used. Failure to properly purchase, maintain and employ reasonably available safety equipment can lead to charges of negligence.

**Staff.** All staff should have dedicated time for the management of risks. In larger organizations, this includes full-time positions such as a risk management officer, Vice President of Safety, or the like, and may include a separate department solely devoted to risk management. Organizations of any size should have a person designated as the risk management officer, if not solely then along with other duties. Medical screening staff should also be employed.

Field staff need appropriate training not just in technical skills, but in judgment, communication and decision-making. Board members, committee members and other volunteers should be supported in their safety-related training needs as well.

Investing in preferentially hiring activity leaders whose brain development with respect to risk management has more fully developed than with individuals in their teens or early 20’s can be helpful. Establishing, tracking, and working towards employee retention goals can be useful as well.

See Chapter 7, Staff, for more on this topic.

### 5.2.5. De-incentivize Undesired Behaviors

Enforce behavior expectations by having negative consequences for conduct not commensurate with a culture of safety. This includes enforcing appropriate compliance with policies and procedures.

At one outdoor program, the logistics manager’s driver training for activity leaders included a warning to not exceed the speed limit while driving. Asked if the logistics manager always obeyed the speed limit herself, she declined to answer affirmatively. This behavior does not support a culture of safe driving.

### 5.2.6. Incentivize Desired Behaviors

Here the positive consequences of doing the desired thing are enhanced to reinforce appropriate behaviors.

This includes ongoing communications and leadership by example from the organization’s top leadership. Awards, recognition and celebrations of safety success, as discussed above, also have a positive effect. (Care should be taken to avoid perverse incentives, however, such as a goal of reducing incident rates leading to underreporting of safety incidents.)

Principles of social norms marketing can be effective in nudging individuals towards desired behavior. People generally want to do what they believe other people are doing, that is, what they consider to be “normal” or “typical” behavior. Sending messages about how most people are doing a certain pro-safety behavior can increase the rate at which message recipients exhibit that behavior.



### 5.2.7. Seek Continuous Improvement

An environment in which new and better ways of managing risk are constantly being sought, assessed, and implemented reinforces a culture of safety.

This can include reviewing promising new approaches and technologies, providing continuing education, and conducting surveys that solicit improvement ideas.

It also includes reviewing safety results—including incident report data, incident reviews, inspections, risk management reviews, debriefs, program reports, personnel evaluations, and program evaluations by staff and participants—and following up with improvement actions.

*Managing for Continuous Improvement.* The plan-do-check-act management method discussed in Chapter 2, *Approaches to Risk Management*, can also be applied to managing a continuous improvement process for any focus area, including safety culture.

Assessments of baseline status and improvements in safety culture can be done with a variety of tools. Similar to how a risk management review uses document analysis, interviews, and direct observation to assess overall risk management performance, those tools, along with survey instruments, can be used in assessing safety culture.

## 5.3. SURVEYS

Surveys are a common tool for evaluating the culture of safety. Staff at all levels of the organization, volunteers (including Board and Risk Management Committee members), contractors and participants can be asked about the espoused and lived safety-related values, along with related beliefs and behaviors, at the organization.

Survey instruments provide the most useful data when professionally designed by evaluation experts. Questionnaires and related survey instruments are best when they are both valid and reliable. Validity refers to the degree to which a measurement actually measures what it is intended to assess. Reliability indicates the extent to which the results obtained can be replicated.

Sample sizes, methods of administration, and statistical analysis of results are among other areas of survey design and administration that benefit from skilled expertise.

Surveys should ideally distinguish respondents from different departments and hierarchies of the organization, in order to uncover sub-cultures of safety present in the organization. However, appropriate confidentiality and anonymity should be retained in order to obtain the most candid feedback.

Although surveys developed, administered and processed by evaluation experts are optimal, in some cases simple questionnaires distributed to staff can provide useful information.

Survey instruments are often re-administered every 12 to 18 months to review progress.

### 5.3.1. Safety Culture Survey

Questionnaires are often organized as a series of questions covering certain topics. A response scale such as the following is often used:

- 1 – Never true
- 2 – Rarely true
- 3 – Sometimes true
- 4 – Almost always true
- 5 – Always true
- 0 – Unsure

A focus group can be used to develop themes and subjects for survey.

Since the needs of each organization differ, a complete survey is not provided here. Examples of topic areas and sample questions, however, are provided. For each topic area, multiple questions should be asked, dispersed throughout the questionnaire. To improve validity, some questions should be framed positively (where a response of ‘true’ indicates an appropriate safety culture), and others negatively.

Different surveys may be given to different organizational groups (such as Board members or activity leaders).

#### *Sample Topics and Questions.*

##### **1. Safety Mission And Vision**

- a. My organization’s safety vision statement and aspirational end state are clear and consistently communicated.
- b. There is a good balance between safety and other organizational priorities.
- c. I don’t know what our risk management mission statement says.

## 2. Leadership Support

- a. The words and actions of management with regards to safety are consistent.
- b. My organization's CEO and leadership team effectively build enthusiasm for and understanding of my organization's safety vision statement.
- c. My supervisor overlooks safety problems that happen over and over.

## 3. Inclusion and Ownership

- a. I am asked about safety improvement ideas.
- b. My ideas are valued and taken into consideration.
- c. If I don't act, I would feel responsible if something happened.
- d. My voice matters.

## 4. Policies, Procedures, Structures and Systems

- a. People follow safety policies and procedures when doing so is the safest course of action.
- b. Incidents and near misses are reported when they occur.
- c. Performance assessments and incentives for the organization's leadership include safety culture metrics and performance.
- d. The organisation strikes a balance between following the rules and thinking for one's self.

## 5. Systems Thinking

- a. We think about the interrelationships between different risks and other organizational elements.
- b. When an incident occurs, we look for root causes.
- c. If a mistake is made, we don't automatically blame the person, but examine our culture and practices.

## 6. Sufficient Resources

- a. I have enough time to get my job done.
- b. Staff have the risk management training they need.
- a. The equipment I have is suitable for good safety management.
- b. Staff receive education and review opportunities in safety culture.
- c. When time, money or other resources are tight, safety is never compromised.

## 7. Culture of Questioning

- a. I feel free to question the decisions or actions of those with more authority.
- b. I think about unexpected risks and how to adapt to them.
- c. Leaders are open to hearing new ideas about risk management.
- d. If I speak out, something will be done.

## 8. Collaboration

- a. Staff work together up and down the organizational hierarchy and across departments on safety issues.
- b. My department is in a silo and does not work closely with others on safety concerns.

- c. Different areas of the organization compete for safety-related resources and hoard information and other resources.

## 9. Communication

- a. I am given information about incidents and their follow-up.
- b. My organization has a program for recognition and celebration when individuals or teams excel at key safety behaviors and culture metrics.
- c. My supervisor recognizes others when they see a job done according to established safety procedures.
- d. Staff will freely speak up if they see a safety issue.

## 10. Continuous Improvement

- a. After we make changes to improve safety, we evaluate their effectiveness.
- b. The organization completes and reviews culture of safety surveys every 12 to 18 months and sees evidence of improvement.
- c. The organization makes continuous efforts to improve risk management.
- d. Incidents are used as learning tools to improve risk management.

## 11. Just Culture

- a. Speaking up about safety won't threaten my job.
- b. Individuals are not punished for raising safety issues or confronting supervisors about unsafe practices.
- c. Staff feel like their mistakes are held against them.

## 12. Overall Appraisal of Safety Culture

- a. The prevention of the most serious risks is a priority shared by all.
- b. Management provides a work climate that promotes safety.
- c. People here take safety seriously.
- d. I feel safe here.

## 5.4. JUST CULTURE

Just culture is a concept related to systems thinking focused on addressing the underlying structure that led to an incident rather than blaming the person directly involved.

Most incidents are not simply the result of individual errors, but are caused by flawed systems that increase the probability of risk and loss. A just culture acknowledges this fact. In just culture, individuals aren't penalized for making human mistakes. This systems approach fosters an atmosphere in which people feel valued, trusted and respected. It increases the probability that incidents will be reported promptly, fully and accurately. And it therefore enables the organization to learn from



incidents, prevent their reoccurrence, and improve its management of risks.

Just culture doesn't mean that anyone can do anything without negative consequences. Individual accountability is maintained, but discipline is linked to inappropriate behavior, rather than harm.

- **Human mistakes:** treated as a learning opportunity for the organization and its staff. Coaching, training and similar support may be provided to persons involved.
- **Gross negligence (willful misconduct), reckless behavior:** disciplinary action applied to perpetrator. Also treated as a learning opportunity.

In this construction, inappropriate behavior may be subject to discipline, even if no harm is caused. No discipline may be enacted, even if harm (due to a human mistake) has occurred.

When an adverse event occurs, the focus is on what went wrong, not who caused the problem. The emphasis is on uncovering and responding to the root causes of the incident.

Fostering just culture in an organization involves an organizational change management process that can be embedded into a larger process of establishing a culture of safety.

### An Observation on Conservative Safety Culture

Just as people mature and may become less risk-seeking over time, organizations—and their approach to risks—evolve as well.

Organizations that exhibit a culture of being conservative with regards to risks, thoughtful, and deliberative—verging on boring—are among those who do the best in outdoor program risk management. These are sometimes long-standing institutions (some over 100 years old) with well-established clientele, a reputation for quality, and significant financial resources. They may depend on their history and reputation for sustaining their business. They often have a lot to lose if things go wrong.

This is in marked contrast to organizations with an ethic of 'move fast and break things' found in certain industries and in some startups and highly entrepreneurial organizations.

## 5.5. SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

A great deal of information is available to support initiatives fostering a culture of safety.

1. **Health and safety agencies.** Government agencies concerned with occupational safety and health often provide extensive written information and other forms of support for organizations seeking to sustain an appropriate safety culture.
2. **Consultants.** Private organizations can perform safety culture project management, oversee surveys, and provide other support.
3. **Industry groups.** Outdoor industry groups and industrial safety associations of various types provide research, publications, conferences, accreditation, standards, or inspections. These resources can support good risk management in general or provide support specific to safety culture.

Regulations, standards and audit schemes developed by government authorities, working in concert with outdoor industry representatives, can provide essential support for a culture of safety. So too can national and international accreditation schemes and incident tracking databases. Outdoor programs, particularly those which are larger or have access to sufficient resources, enhance safety culture industry-wide when they advocate for and support such larger-scale risk management systems.

### Managing Change

People resist change. This occurs even when the change is clearly desirable. Those leading efforts to change organizational safety culture should be aware of challenges in managing change.

**Power.** Power over our environment is a fundamental psychological need. It drives babies to cry, billionaires to over-accumulate wealth, and big countries to invade little ones. When change threatens to reduce the power of a person or a department, resistance can be vicious. Taking away money to invest in safety and imposing safety policies can elicit this resistance, just as shifting the balance of money and unearned privilege influences change efforts around civil rights, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic equity.

In order to effectively manage complex change, then, every element in the change management process must be managed with deftness and skill. Simply sending out

a questionnaire about safety culture will not suffice. A commitment from the top for searching, long-term change efforts is essential, as are dedicated resources. For any but the smallest organizations, obtaining the guidance of those deeply experienced and skilled in leading long-term organizational change management efforts may be essential.

**Deflecting Responsibility.** A leader may loudly proclaim a strong commitment to changing organizational culture, and appoint an internal or external consulting team to lead a change process. The team may find that the source of the deficient safety culture is actually the leader themselves. The leader may resist being identified as a source of problems. In this classic dynamic, cognitive dissonance, power imbalances, and other obstacles inhibit meaningful change.

**Managing Complexity.** Some safety culture assessments result in a long list of issues, which leads to a corrective plan composed of numerous disparate actions. Failure to take a systemic approach to developing an integrated, coherent plan can doom a change management effort. Likewise, trying to address all issues simultaneously may be less effective than employing a sequential, phased approach to incrementally improving the culture of safety.

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Change management in the corporate environment—or anywhere else, from addressing nationalist politics to improving one's diet—is a complex subject. Shifting an organizational culture takes time. Change efforts are generally measured in years of continued focus and investment. Many resources beyond the introduction provided here are available and will be useful, particularly in the context of larger organizations, in effectively improving the culture of safety.

## Characteristics of Safety Culture

### 1. Leadership From the Top

- a. Culture starts at the top—CEO and Board. They are responsible for generating support at all levels of the organization, for all aspects of safety culture development.
- b. Support must be sufficiently resilient to survive the departure of a CEO or other top leadership.

### 2. Inclusion.

- a. Everyone is involved in improving the safety culture.

- b. All persons are invited to contribute ideas.
- c. Staff at all levels participate in risk management reviews, safety discussions, incident reporting, and safety culture surveys.
- d. Information is widely shared. Incident report data, safety memos and risk management review reports travel through all levels of the organization.
- e. Every person knows they have a responsibility for safety, and feels a sense of ownership for risk management.

### 3. Suffusion.

- a. Safety permeates the organization, in every part and corner.
- b. Safety is not the responsibility of the risk manager, but everyone has a role, including those in marketing, logistics and other non-program areas.
- c. All members of the organization can articulate the vision for safety and how it relates to their individual work.

### 4. Culture of Questioning.

- a. Staff recognize risks are never completely eliminated and no risk management system is perfect.
- b. Staff are vigilant about identifying new risks and finding ways to better manage risks.
- c. It is acceptable to question those in authority when there are urgent safety concerns.
- d. Formal authority defers to greater expertise.

### 5. Collaboration.

- a. Staff work together up and down the organizational hierarchy and across departments.

### 6. Effective Communication.

- a. Upper management listens carefully and respectfully to all voices.
- b. Staff at all levels communicate in both directions (speaking and listening) about safety.
- c. Cultural attributes like unwillingness to admit ignorance, admit mistakes, or ask for help are effectively discouraged.

### 7. Just Culture.

- a. Individuals are not punished for raising safety issues or confronting supervisors about unsafe practices.



## Chapter Summary

1. A culture of safety is an important element of good outdoor program risk management.
2. Culture is an integrated pattern of behavior based on shared beliefs and values.
3. Behaviors are visible elements of culture; beliefs and values are not directly visible.
4. Safety culture is the influence of organizational culture on safety and the extent to which safety is emphasized over competing goals.
5. A good safety culture leads to fewer losses, enhances employee well-being and performance, and supports sustained organizational success.
6. Safety culture has unique characteristics in outdoor adventure programs, since such programs are based on taking risks.
7. Organizations have multiple safety cultures in different areas of the organization.
8. Fostering an appropriate safety culture involves influencing the values and beliefs that affect safety-related behavior.
9. Influencing values and beliefs begins with sustained articulation of values and their justification from top leadership.
10. Expectations for behaviors—found in policies, procedures, operating systems and structures—must be established.
11. A balance should be maintained between rules-based safety, emphasizing following procedures, and managed safety, emphasizing judgment and adaptation.
12. Systems thinking should be encouraged.
13. Sufficient resources—time, attention, funding, equipment and staff—must be available.
14. Undesired behaviors should be discouraged, and desired behaviors systematically encouraged.
15. Continuous improvement efforts should be made.
16. Surveys are one method for assessing safety culture, and require expertise to be administered well.
17. Just culture, looking for underlying incident causes rather than unfairly blaming persons, supports appropriate safety culture.
18. Additional support for enhancing safety culture is available from various sources.
19. Shifting the culture of safety is a change management process, which is inherently challenging.
20. Characteristics of safety culture include: leadership from the top, inclusion, suffusion, culture of questioning, collaboration, effective communication, and just culture.

