



# First Steps

How to achieve safety culture excellence:  
now and tomorrow





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# Introduction

For many years, the Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL) has been at the forefront of understanding safety culture and why improving it brings huge benefits to your business and your safety performance.

We developed the highly respected Safety Climate Tool that helps organisations measure their safety culture at a particular point in time. We also have one of the largest dedicated human factors teams in Europe that provide expert advice and consultancy using insights gleaned from many years working with industry.

In this paper, the third in our series of papers about safety culture, we focus on helping you understand the process of improving your safety culture, specifically laying the foundation for a successful programme and using the Safety Climate Tool to help you understand your strengths and target areas for improvement.

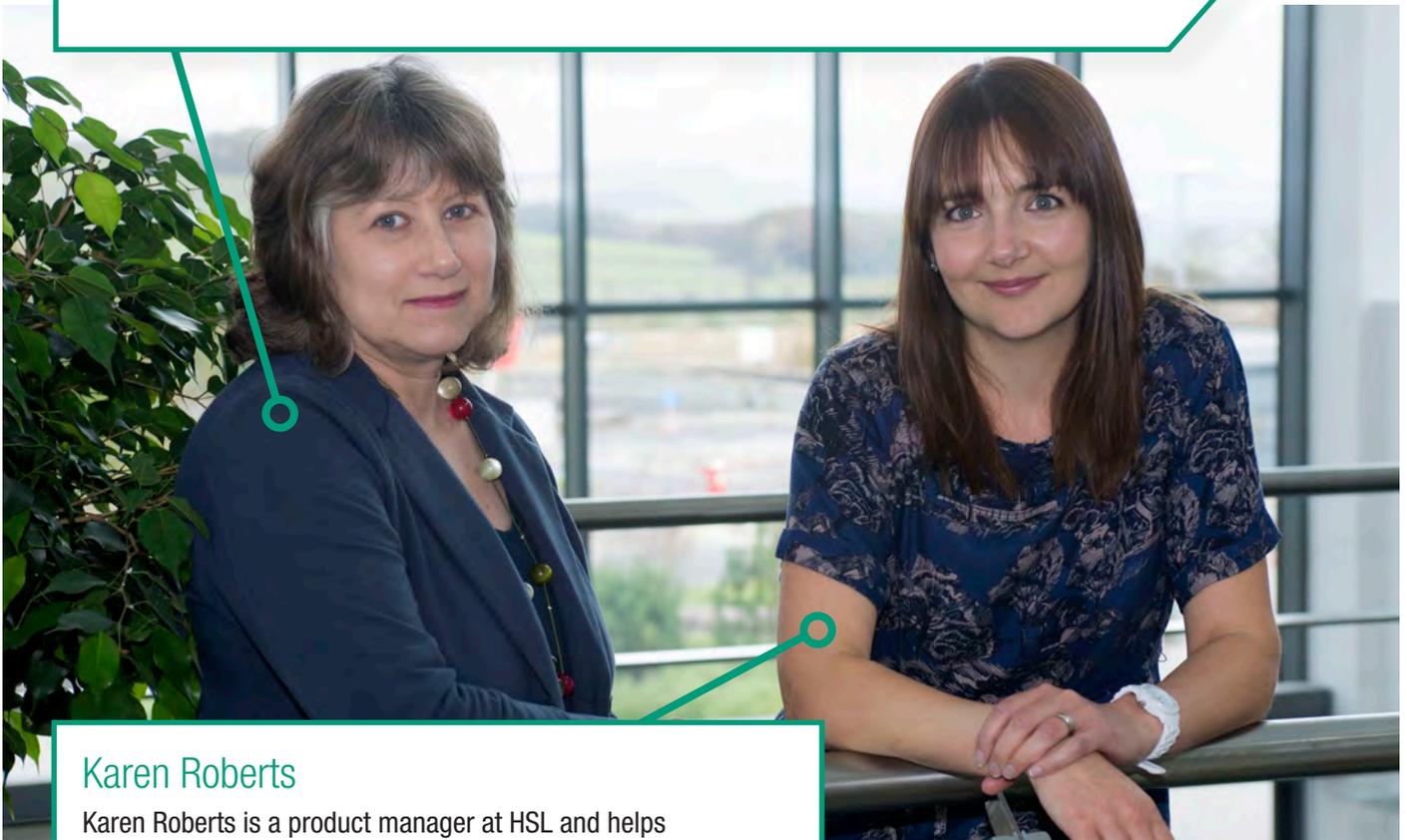


## About the authors

### Jennifer Webster

Jen Webster is a work psychologist at HSL and helps organisations make improvements to their health and safety culture.

Recently Jen has been involved in research that is looking at the differences in safety culture between the construction and decommissioning of the Olympic Park sites. She has also been developing health and safety competencies for supervisors in the waste and recycling industries.



### Karen Roberts

Karen Roberts is a product manager at HSL and helps organisations source HSL product solutions so that they can become healthier, safer and more productive places to work. These include the Safety Climate Tool, ACT Behaviour Change Toolkit, Safe Deal playing cards, and GRIP footwear rating scheme.

# Background

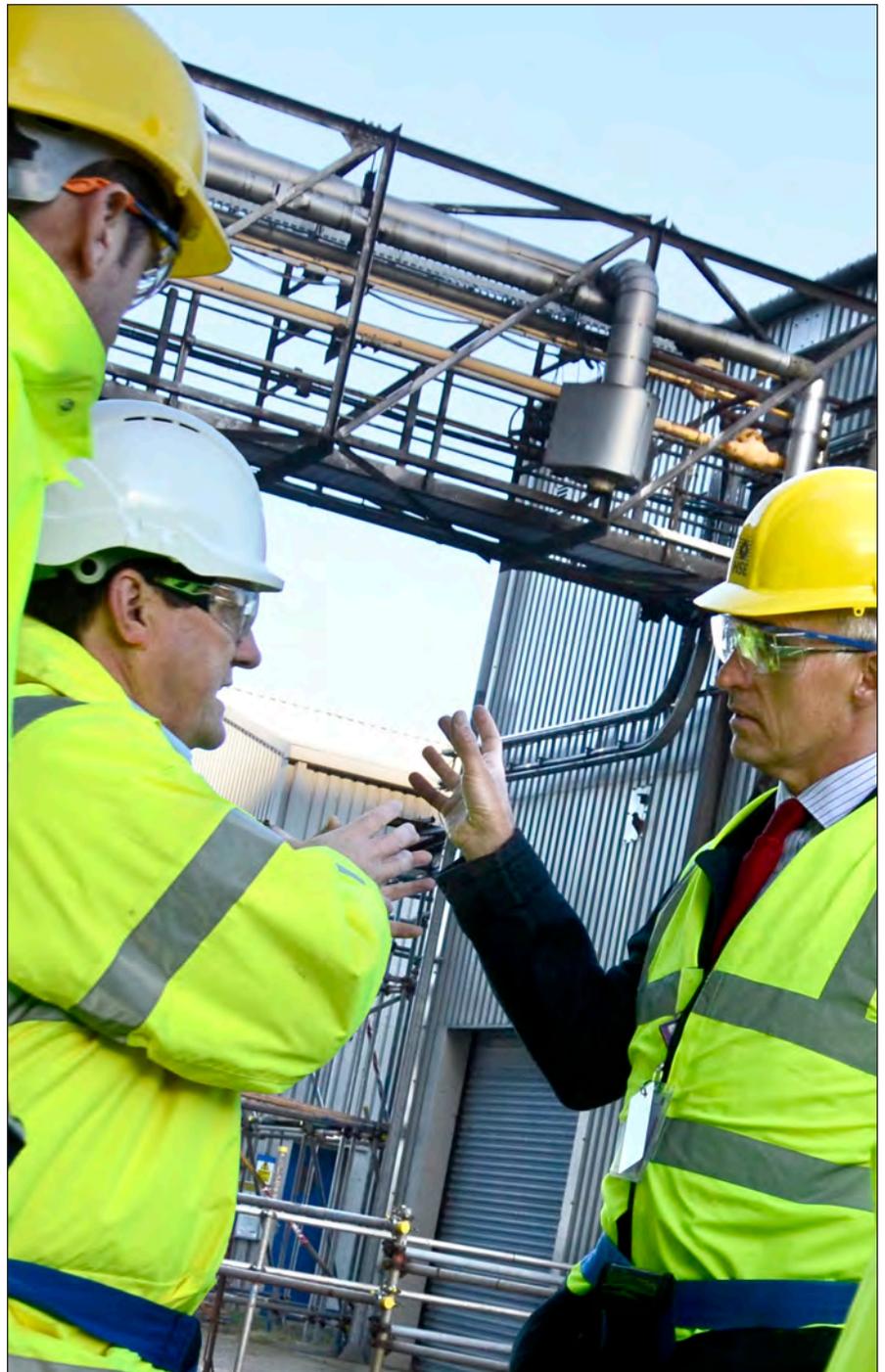
**Many health and safety professionals recognise the relationship between a positive safety culture and good health and safety performance.**

Most organisations reach this point having invested time and effort getting their health and safety management systems right, for example health and safety policies, procedures, control measures etc., but recognise that a different approach is required if they really want to 'change the way things are done around here'.

They recognise they need to engage with their people more effectively and inspire safety leadership in order to improve their safety culture and make that important step change to their health and safety performance.

But how do you improve safety culture? After all, safety culture is a combination of the shared values, beliefs and habitual working practices that influence human behaviour and subsequently safety performance.

Where do you begin?



# Take it in stages

**From the outset, all organisations have to be realistic - culture change happens slowly and changing the attitudes and behaviours that influence your safety culture takes effort, commitment, resource and, most importantly, time.**

Rather than becoming overwhelmed by what might first appear to be a monumental task, it is helpful to look at the wider process and break down what you are trying to do into more manageable steps.

Improving your safety culture can be broken down into 5 key stages.

## 5. Evaluate

It is important that you try and keep the momentum going with your culture change initiative by reviewing the actions you have put in place and evaluating what impact your changes are having.

## 1. Foundation

A good foundation is essential to any successful safety culture improvement programme and includes: securing senior management commitment and resources, establishing a steering group and project plan, and developing an employee engagement strategy.

## 2. Analyse

Running the HSL Safety Climate Tool (SCT) to gather employee opinions on your safety culture enables you to start understanding your strengths and target areas for improvement, and gives you data against which you can measure the success of follow-up interventions.



## 4. Act

You can now make evidence-based decisions which will form the basis of targeted action plans that focus your resources on those areas that genuinely need attention, and those that will have most impact on improving safety performance.

## 3. Focus

SCT data analysis provides an indication of the underlying culture of your organisation and key areas to target. The next step is to discuss the results with a sample of employees and develop solutions that you can act upon.

### Five Stages to Assess and Improve Safety Culture

In this paper we will explore the first two stages in more detail to help you lay the right foundations and obtain some of the crucial data on which to base your subsequent improvements. Key to your success is using the Safety Climate Tool to measure the attitudes, perceptions and values of your employees as an indicator of your organisation's safety culture.

# Foundation

**A good foundation is essential to any successful safety culture improvement programme: time and effort spent developing a comprehensive plan at this stage will help you make the most of your improvement programme in the long run.**

To successfully prepare your organisation for running your improvement programme, you need to consider the following:

## Do you have a clear understanding of your aims and objectives?

As a health and safety professional, why do you want to improve your culture? You might already have an idea of what your culture is like. Asking your workforce what they think about health and safety is not only a great way to engage with your workforce, but the responses can be used as tangible evidence to confirm what you already suspect.

Using the Safety Climate Tool as a vehicle for gathering their views and opinions will give you quantifiable evidence about what is happening in the organisation.

It is likely that the results will not come as much of a surprise, as managers, more often than not, understand their issues but want help to focus on those areas where they can make real improvements.

You might also want to understand the attitudes held by the different demographic groups within your organisation, use the results from a Safety Climate Tool survey as a leading indicator of safety, or demonstrate to your customers and your competitors that you go beyond compliance.

By understanding the motivation for improving your culture, you will be able to shape your plan and work out who you need to work with and influence in order to make your programme a success.

## Have you secured senior management commitment?

It may seem obvious, but unless senior management are committed to supporting the process and providing the necessary resources it will be difficult to make the changes you need.

If you need to make the business, legal or moral case for investing in the Safety Climate Tool you can request our previous white paper 'Making the Case for Culture', which will help you to articulate the benefits of improving your safety culture.

## Do you have a project steering group in place?

Your steering group will be responsible for telling the workforce that a programme is going to happen as well as communicating with them throughout the programme. Think about who should be in your

project steering group to ensure organisational representation. Who are the key influencers? Who do people trust? It's not always the management, so think carefully about who you can use to spread the word and gain that important buy-in.

## How can you develop your organisational vision and associated values?

Your project steering group is responsible for defining your organisation's vision and setting values for health and safety. What vision do you have for your organisation? Which values will help your organisation achieve this vision? What is really important for the people working in your organisation?

## Develop a project plan

A project plan is a written document detailing what you intend to do and how. Your project plan should encompass running the Safety Climate Tool, analysing the results to see where you need to focus your efforts, running focus groups to delve deeper, planning and implementing your actions and re-running the survey to measure and evaluate the impact of any organisational changes you make.

Think about where in your plan you may want to take a step back and take stock of your progress. The plan should be flexible enough for you to make any changes you need as you go along. Use the plan to manage the process. Do not let the plan manage you.

## Brief your staff

Support from employees at all levels is vital.

Everyone needs to be made aware of the importance of the programme as early as possible. Communicate your aims and objectives to staff in advance of starting the programme and use team meetings to regularly remind people to take part in any meetings, surveys, focus groups etc. and why.

It is important to explain why improving the organisation's safety culture will benefit them, as we all want to know 'what's in it for me?' The most successful programmes have well executed communication

plans and articulate the benefits well. In your communications, include the purpose and reasons for the programme, and information on the process. Remember to include information about:

- Why the organisation wants to improve its safety culture;
- Why participation is important;
- What will happen throughout the programme;
- How often communications will be provided.
- What's 'in it for them'.

If the reasons are clear and well communicated people are more likely to participate.

## Motivate your middle management

Supervisors are a key link between workforce and management: they are central to engaging the workforce.

It is well known that the attitudes of supervisors influence staff attitudes and behaviours: if supervisors do not convey the message that it is important to participate in the programme, staff are unlikely to co-operate.

Encourage your supervisors to think of themselves as role models for good health and safety practices and to think of the programme as a way of making further improvements to the 'way things are done around here.'



# Analyse

**Once your team and plan are in place, the next step is to gather evidence about the maturity of your safety culture. The Safety Climate Tool is a quick and effective way of gathering employees' opinions. Measuring your safety climate gives you a baseline you can build from, gives you insights into how your people actually view health and safety in your organisation, provides a means to evaluate the impact of any change initiatives you put in place and above all involves everyone in the programme, affording all employees the opportunity to have their say.**

## Use the right tools

HSL's Safety Climate Tool is the obvious choice for measuring your climate, the tangible aspect of your safety culture.

It is a revision of HSE's Climate Survey Tool, which was widely adopted and quickly became a byword for best practice in companies. Using our specialist knowledge of organisational safety culture, HSL refined the tool to make it a reliable and robust psychometric instrument for measuring safety climate.

The HSL revision is now trusted by well over 350 different organisations as the tool of choice for measuring safety climate.

## Get the timing right

Consider the best time to run the survey. Think about when you are likely to obtain the best response rate.

Avoid holidays (Christmas, Easter etc.) and periods of organisational change (e.g. reduction in staff numbers, restructuring) when running the survey, as these will influence response rates. Also, think about your plan. Have you given yourself enough time to get the right messages out about the survey?

## Use the right survey format

Your safety culture is a product of everyone who works within your business, not just a subsection of them and it is important to choose a format that is accessible to all employees.

The Safety Climate Tool allows you to run the tool as an online survey, a paper survey or both. Ensure that you choose the most appropriate method for your organisation.

## Plan your demographics

Defining the demographics for your organisation is critical to the success and usefulness of the Safety Climate Tool. Which groups do you intend to focus on?

The Safety Climate Tool allows you to tailor the survey and ask questions that will help you to understand the difference in climate between the different areas of your organisation e.g. the roles your employees perform, what part of the organisation they work in, the age profile of your workforce and how long they've been with you, what type of work they do, their gender, whether or not they've been involved in an accident

and whether they are contractors as opposed to permanent members of staff.

Spend some time considering what data will actually be useful to you, and remember the maxim - do not ask the question if you are not going to do anything with the answer!

Take care to keep demographic choices to groups of 10 or more - as you will need a minimum of 10 responses from people sharing the same demographic profile in order to generate the more detailed reports.

Larger organisations with more complex operations may need to consider running more than one survey - data from multiple surveys can be easily merged into one set of results using the Safety Climate Tool software.

Do you want to include any open questions for employees to offer more detailed responses, e.g. why or how could health and safety be improved? If so, think about whether you want some help to analyse this data.

## Prepare your introduction and management statements.

The Safety Climate Tool allows you to personalise the introduction to the survey, and you can include a management statement to reinforce the message that the senior management team is behind the programme. You should not underestimate the power of a message from someone at the top of your organisation.

## Build your survey

The Safety Climate Tool is easy to use, easy to set up and easy to tailor. It is accessible via an online account, which is securely hosted, and there is no additional software to install on your computer. Once you have logged in, you can begin to create your survey using a step-by-step intuitive design wizard. The Safety Climate Tool allows you to choose up to 9 demographic questions and an additional 6 free text questions of your choosing.

Once you have built your survey, you need as many employees as possible to complete it. If you have spent time at the outset planning how you are going to communicate what the programme is about and explaining that the survey is part of that programme, you will find it easier to get employees to complete it.

## Reassure everyone that the survey is confidential

It is important to remind employees

that the survey is totally anonymous; employees must feel that their opinions are not only valued but their responses will be treated confidentially. Encourage your staff to answer honestly, and not just put down the responses they think the organisation wants to hear.

Sometimes it is not enough to simply tell them, some people need to hear it several times, in several ways. Take time to explain how employees' confidentiality will be protected. Consider whether the message needs to come from HSL as an independent voice.

## Completing the survey

If you want to send out the message that the organisation is taking the programme seriously, give people work time to complete the survey. Encourage staff to participate and highlight the importance of their views to the organisation, but do not make it compulsory; if people feel under pressure to complete the survey they may not respond truthfully which compromises the usefulness of the findings.

Be mindful that off-site or shift working will affect the timescale for completing and returning the questionnaire, so be realistic with your timings.

## Boosting response rates

A really low response rate could raise doubts as to how representative the findings are.

To boost responses:

- Lay the groundwork - planning and briefing has a strong impact on response rates;
- Keep reassuring your workforce that the responses are anonymous and confidential;
- Issue reminders - at least one and preferably two reminders should be sent. Include response rates to motivate participation. Give the survey deadline, reinforce the importance of participation;
- People are more likely to participate if emails or letters are addressed to them personally;
- Incentives can increase participation. However, the incentive needs to be acceptable to your organisation, for example a charitable donation based on the % response targets;
- Get your managers and supervisors to talk positively about completing the survey. If they can be seen to be taking time out to complete the survey then so will everyone else.

**In this paper we have summarised the key steps in building the foundation for a successful safety culture change programme. In the next paper we will explore how you can interpret your results and focus in on the key areas to improve.**



**HEALTH & SAFETY  
LABORATORY**

## Want to get started?

If this paper has inspired you to understand and improve your safety culture, get in touch with us to arrange your free demonstration of the Safety Climate Tool.

Call Maddie Udall on **01298 218356** or  
Hannah Tomlin on **01298 218233**

E : [productsupport@hsl.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:productsupport@hsl.gsi.gov.uk)



## Need more support?

HSL specialists are available every step of the way to guide your progress to safety culture improvement. Whether you just need some advice at the end of the phone, or full facilitation of a safety culture improvement programme, HSL has a consultancy package to meet your needs.

Call Nadine Mellor on **01298 218378**

E : [nadine.mellor@hsl.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:nadine.mellor@hsl.gsi.gov.uk)

## Further reading

**Have you got our other papers about safety culture?  
If not request them now!**

E-mail [productsupport@hsl.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:productsupport@hsl.gsi.gov.uk) quoting AWP14 to request your **free** copies.

