How Often Should I Assess My Organization’s Safety Climate?

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Safety climate is usually thought of as a human resources issue and treated as such—measured annually (if not less often) and reported back out to units some number of months after the survey is completed with general recommendations to “improve climate through communication” or “improve climate through training” or “maintain the good climate”. However, in this paper we will argue that safety climate should be treated like the key performance indicator that it is. We will review evidence that safety climate is a key safety performance indicator. We will also provide recommendations for how to measure and use safety climate as a key performance indicator.

High reliability organizations are organizations that need to operate at a near perfect level in order to avoid disaster to organizational resources, organizational members, the environment, and nearby communities (e.g., nuclear and chemical power plants, aircraft carriers, hospitals, etc.). As a result, these organizations often collect high density process-related data, such as “black box” recordings on airplanes, real-time measures of pressure in chemical processing tanks, or event-linked reports of process deviations. Some of this data is necessary in the moment-to-moment management of volatile processes, but other data is used to understand the longer-term risks and gaps (often illustrated as holes in Swiss cheese) in organizations and to put mitigation plans in place. Safety climate data can be used in a similar way, if only organizations were willing to collect the data.