# PS Asks: Steve Simon

**PS: You've been part of major safety culture initiatives at large companies such as GE, GM and New Jersey's PSE&G. What do you find most surprising at the start of the change process at huge organizations like these?**

**Steve:** People often don't know what they're getting into with real culture change. Change leaders tend to apply familiar models based on the implementation of other initiatives in their organizations. But such models don't usually engage them in the kind of direct interaction among people at all levels that enables true culture transformation as distinguished from programmatic system changes. There are also unanticipated demands on leaders—not so much for conventional resources (e.g., staff time, budget, training), but for putting more of their own skin in the game.

**PS: Your expertise is in psychology. How much does the successful implementation of culture change hinge on understanding the psychological aspects of the different roles in a work environment?**

**Steve:** Respectful attunement to people's differing experiences, perspectives and beliefs counts far more than training in a particular academic discipline when it comes to mounting a successful culture change initiative. My educational background buttressed my development of the methodology, but what is to be prized in facilitating large-scale culture change is less academic preparation than the people skills it takes to work up, down and across an organizational community.

**PS: Grassroots Safety Leadership is a methodology you developed for implementing large-scale culture change in manufacturing organizations. How did this methodology evolve? Was there one seed idea or incident that sparked it all?**

**Steve:** When I started work in safety culture almost 30 years ago, I realized that culture change was not a program but a journey and that it had to engage all members of the organizational community. There's a difference between employee involvement—already a popular theme then—and employee leadership. If cultures are shaped by leaders, then the only way frontline culture can change is if it is driven by the frontline leaders, the grassroots. That's not as simple to implement as it might sound. Genuinely empowering grassroots leaders is the product of a complex set of interventions.

**PS: Can you identify the four key phases to the process of culture change and share a best practice for each?**

**Steve:** Phase one is enlisting and educating leaders. Crucial here is taking it slow and providing a broad grounding in organizational and safety culture to a critical mass of the joint leadership.

Phase two is assessing the culture. No assessment is complete until you've spoken directly with enough individuals across the workforce to ensure that you've captured the unquantifiables, or the culture's history, narratives and underlying assumptions.

Phase three is driving change from the grassroots. That entails setting up an infrastructure sturdy enough to empower frontline workers to exercise real leadership toward driving change, as opposed to just sitting on management committees.

Phase four is designing and implementing culture-based projects. Managers and frontline employees alike must be equipped with the tools they'll need to target and develop projects that affect cultural norms, behaviors and beliefs.

**PS: You advocate the formation and training of teams, specifically grassroots teams and guidance teams. Can you explain the difference between them and why you believe the two-tier structure works best?**

**Steve:** A grassroots safety team is comprised primarily of frontline workers. A guidance team is a mixed-level group of site leaders. When we started to drive safety culture change through grassroots teams, encouraging their development of culture improvement projects, we found they were nearly always successful during the first year when they typically had a sponsor to support them. However, we noticed that support for the grassroots teams, and consequently their performance, declined dramatically when the sponsors who formed them abandoned their roles or moved to other jobs. Clearly the engagement of a sponsor matters, and if one sponsor is good, a team of sponsors—a guidance team—is better.

**PS: Your methodology involves defining roles and responsibilities for each level of an organization. In your experience, which of those levels are most resistant to change? Which are the most willing to embrace change?**

**Steve:** Typically, top management embraces change because it wants better results. And when folks at the grassroots level see their authentic participation welcomed and supported, they willingly jump on board. It's the people in the middle, the supervisors, who are most resistant to change because they're the recipients of mixed messages about the culture change process. Until real effort is devoted to resolving such messages, middle management will continue to be a breeding ground for resistance. They're told to support the new culture, yet they're expected to deliver results based on metrics steeped in the old culture. So, while supervisors are mandated to create an environment where everyone is encouraged to share their mistakes as examples to learn from, they're still under the sway of a measurement system that rewards reporting the fewest mistakes or incidents. There must be dedicated opportunities for them to express and address conflicts between lip service to the new culture and the tacit imperatives of the old.

**PS: What are some of the executive-level reasons you hear for not implementing change?**

**Steve:** One of the biggest is, "We're doing well enough without it." Another big one is, "We're already doing it." That one is important because it signals that whoever says it may not get the difference between working the culture and working the traditional safety program. If they say "we are changing the culture" when they're not yet, then they don't understand that there's a lot more to doing so than saying so. Safety culture is something you have to create.

**PS: When launching an initiative, what's an effective way to get and sustain management commitment? How about employee commitment and involvement?**

**Steve:** One way to get management commitment is to capture and articulate the many small wins that typically come about near the launch of a safety culture change process. The more management sees results, the more its commitment builds. On the employee side, commitment at the beginning of the culture change journey is a direct reflection of the authenticity and credibility of the process. If employees feel, for example, that the culture assessment report discusses the unmentioned issues they know truly get in the way of safety in their workplace, their level of commitment increases. As they find that real changes are being made, the commitment is sustained.

**PS: What advice do you offer safety directors who feel defeated within their corporate cultures?**

**Steve:** It's a fallacy that culture change has to be driven from the top at the very beginning of a safety culture journey. That is not to say that top management commitment or support is optional—it's not—but, surprisingly, it doesn't necessarily have to be there from day one. Demonstrating success in even a small area that may be off upper management's radar will eventually make its way onto their screen. Many times a safety director champions a culture change before top management fully buys in. I say to start any place that has an accepting leader or an enthusiastic culture change champion. Sometimes that might be only in a pilot group in a single department. Sometimes it will mean starting at the edge of a corporation or plant and working slowly into the center. Sometimes it can be starting at the bottom and working up to the top. Often once senior managers see results, they want to own them.

**PS: How would you contrast culture-based safety and behavior-based safety?**

**Steve:** Culture-based safety looks at the entire apple tree instead of focusing as behavior-based safety does on each individual apple. Make the whole tree healthy and the individual apples will be healthy, too. The premise of culture-based safety is that the individual's behavior is a product of the group's culture and particularly of the norms mirrored and modeled by leaders, formal and informal. Accordingly, it is in the groups that make up an organization that sustainable change needs to take place. Behavior change without culture change won't last.

**PS: How would you handle a company with employees who may be resistant to or skeptical of the culture change process?**

**Steve:** That someone is "resistant to change" implies that there is a sacred truth and s/he doesn't get it. But members of a work community are the experts in their own work culture. They have reasons for what they believe and those reasons must be respected as experience-based conclusions that identify real barriers which should be looked at. If someone says, "that won't work here," that person is often right. What you want to know, toward giving the change process the best chance, is why it won't work. Resistance and skepticism provide opportunities to engage people about how they see the world. If you take the time for authentic dialogue in which people feel their points of view are respected, then they will frequently open their minds to new ideas. More so if they see that they've been helpful in similar settings.

**PS: You've described safety culture assessment as the start of a transformative process. Explain what that means.**

**Steve:** I encourage people to think of assessing a safety culture as an intervention, not simply as a survey. When the assessment effectively engages leaders at different levels and presents an honest picture of the way people really see things, the potential to launch a true culture transformation can surface.

**PS: You have likely heard every reason in the book for resisting change. Have you ever been surprised by something you've heard?**

**Steve:** I have heard a myriad of reasons but I can't say any have surprised me. I try to understand what's behind the pull to hold onto the status quo. I want to learn about their experiences and why they translate into reasons for inaction. Experiences universally influence decision making and negative experiences can make for negative decisions. To help people see things in a different, more positive way, you have to do what it takes to get inside their resistance.

**PS: Your website says of culture-based safety, "the idea of culture change is to address the hidden beliefs, norms and assumptions that govern the people side." What might be some of those be?**

**Steve:** Parsing employee behavior often reveals how culture puts employees at risk. Take the utility workers whose supervisor is told each must read 100 residential electric meters each day. That same supervisor also admonishes them to work safely while getting those readings (e.g., don't jump over hedges or rush around corners, stay away from dogs). The employees know they can safely read only 90 meters a day. So which mandate do they go with, the 100 or the 90? Their norm is to take the risks because the quota has to be met. The underlying assumption is that production is more important than safety.

Employees also may behave according to group norms and assumptions for their own convenience (as in, "why bother with cumbersome procedure?") or to be part of the crowd ("who goes along gets along"). Take a mechanic who knows that the proper safety procedure for doing any live electrical work is to lockout and tagout. He also knows that the norm among his coworkers is not to lockout if the disconnect is 100 ft away or if the job is a short one. Their hidden belief is, "since we've done that a thousand times and haven't gotten hurt yet, it must be okay."

**PS: How did you become interested in culture change? Or was there a defining moment in your training and/or career that drove you to focus on culture change?**

**Steve:** Back when I was a graduate student in psychology at Harvard's Department of Social Relations, study of the individual merged with study of the group and also of the larger culture of which that group was a part. I began to synthesize all three for myself as I recognized that the dynamics of a culture drive the group norms that affect the behavior of individuals within the group. The next step was identifying those dynamics as norms, assumptions and beliefs and construing them as determinants of organizational culture. It wasn't a big leap to see understanding organizational culture as a precondition to understanding individual behavior in safety, the arena in which I found myself working on behalf of an early client and the context in which I came to coin the term *safety culture*. Putting it all together, creating a safety culture was—is—the route to influencing individual behavior. That's how my passion for culture change was born. To this day, I feel as though, in actualizing the relationship between the one and the many, I continue to get a two-fer.

**PS: How have you benefited from being an ASSE member?**

**Steve:** ASSE is the natural forum for exchanging ideas with discerning professionals in the field. As such, it has been a source of best practices for me and also a creativity-catalyst, whether in the context of sharing case studies of initiatives in safety culture change or in connection with my presentations at the annual PDC and SeminarFest where the ASSE audiences have kept me at the top of my game for 20-some years.

**Steven I. Simon, Ph.D.,** president of Culture Change Consultants Inc., is a pioneer and nationally recognized leader in guiding companies through successful culture change to improve safety performance. Using the Simon Open System Model™ to analyze influences on organizational culture, Steve has been designing and implementing culture change processes to reduce injuries in the workplace for the past 20 years. He is a frequent speaker at ASSE's annual conference, National Safety Congress and company meetings. He coauthored -book *Grassroots Safety Leadership*

Steve is a member of ASSE, a trustee for Safety Executives of New York, and is listed in Who's Who in the Safety Profession. Steve holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from Harvard University.