

Safety Pause: What does 'safety culture' mean to us?

Title: As designers, what does 'safety culture' mean to us?

Objective: To prompt a short, open discussion in our design office (or site) about what safety culture looks like in practice.

1. Opening: (2 minutes)

"We often talk about 'safety culture' but what does it actually mean here; in our team, on our project(s), today?"

Ask:

- ▶ What does 'safety culture' mean to you?
 - ▶ What are the signature practices that exemplify a good safety culture?
 - ▶ Can you think of a recent example where safety was built into a design decision?
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2. Discussion prompts: (5–8 minutes)

- ▶ How do we make sure our designs can be built, used, maintained and demolished safely?
- ▶ How confident are we in speaking up if something feels unsafe or unclear?
 - *What are the barriers? How is it likely to be received? What will be made of it?*
- ▶ In our team/office, are we learning from incidents or CROSS Reports?
 - *How aware are we of things going wrong or not as planned, not just recently but also in the past?*
 - *Do we submit and review CROSS Reports?*
- ▶ What can we do differently in our everyday tasks to promote this and strengthen our culture?
- ▶ Leadership and mentorship: How do senior engineers model, support, and guide other staff
- ▶ Learning and adaptation: How do we respond when mistakes are identified?

Optional visual prompt:

Show a CROSS Report or photo of a temporary works failure and ask "Where in design process could this have been prevented?"

3. Key takeaways: (1–2 minutes)

- ▶ Responsibility and empowerment: Safety is everyone's duty, regardless of role or seniority – we all share this
 - *Where and how can we improve?*
 - ▶ Safety culture starts with conversation: If we can't talk about it, we can't improve it
 - *How could we be more proactive in our 'learning from failure'?*
 - ▶ Good safety culture means doing the right thing even when nobody's checking
 - *Do we? Do we support our colleagues when they have concerns? Are we comfortable with how these concerns may be received and managed?*
 - ▶ Embed safety in every drawing, design check, and discussion
 - *Do we talk enough about buildability and constructability? Is site experience required?*
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4. Follow-up actions:

- ▶ Identify one practice, change or improvement to trial before the next team meeting
 - ▶ Share learning points with your wider office or professional network
 - ▶ Irrespective of the discipline or content of a meeting, encourage others to bring a short "safety pause".
 - ▶ Communication and engagement: Messages must be personal, clear, and motivating
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References:

IStructE: Embedding safety culture: <https://www.istructe.org/resources/guidance/embedding-safety-culture/>

IStructE: Making safety-based decisions and learning from mistakes:
<https://www.istructe.org/resources/guidance/making-safety-based-decisions-learn-from-mistakes/>

CROSS: <https://www.cross-safety.org/uk>

RM3: <https://www.orr.gov.uk/guidance-compliance/rail/health-safety/strategy/rm3>

HSE: Research Report 367, A review of the safety culture and safety climate literature for the development of the safety culture inspection toolkit,

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20241206191527/https://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr367.htm>

To aid the presenter, overleaf is the summary of a discussion amongst some senior engineers

Notes for presenter

To aid the presenter, the following is the summary of a discussion amongst some senior engineers:

What is 'safety culture'?

Safety culture is not a fixed policy or set of rules, but a set of collective attitudes, behaviours, and values that determine how safety is prioritised and acted upon across an organisation. It reflects how people *think, talk, and behave* about safety, especially when no one is watching. Key points:

- ▶ It's integral, not separate: Safety culture should be embedded in an organisation's broader culture—not bolted on as compliance or procedure
 - ▶ Behavioural and psychological safety matter: A healthy safety culture allows people to speak up, admit uncertainty, and challenge unsafe norms without fear. It is reflected in all activities and operations
 - ▶ Competence includes attitude: Beyond skills and experience, true competence also includes behaviours, judgement, and respect for limitations
 - ▶ Leadership sets tone: Visible commitment from senior figures encourages accountability, but younger engineers often lead by example in living safer values
 - ▶ Communication must evolve: Long reports and dense guidance documents are less effective; short, engaging, digital formats (social media, podcasts, bite-sized notes) resonate better with modern audiences
 - ▶ Education and mentoring are vital: Graduates and young engineers often lack awareness of real-world construction risk; embedding safety culture means teaching safety as part of professional identity
 - ▶ Accountability helps: The industry should hold itself accountable for safety outcomes, as has been done with carbon and sustainability metrics
 - ▶ Design decisions have consequences. Unsafe design assumptions lead to construction hazards—designers must think beyond drawings to construction realities
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Practical steps for structural engineers

In the design office:

- ▶ Start regular safety conversations: e.g. "safety pauses" as a part of team meetings (5–10 minutes focused on one design or construction risk)
- ▶ Reflect on real cases: Use CROSS Reports, incident summaries, or past near misses to discuss learning points
- ▶ Benchmark and self-assess: Use frameworks such as RM31 or equivalent maturity models to identify strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ Integrate safety in design reviews: Ensure temporary works, construction sequencing, and access for inspection/maintenance are considered. The contribution that contractors or site engineers can provide should not be under-estimated
- ▶ Encourage psychological safety: Create an environment where team members can say "I don't know" or "I'm not competent for this" without stigma. It is okay to be uncertain and learn from it
- ▶ Adopt short-form communication: Develop internal 'Technical Safety Notes' (1–2 pages) summarising lessons or good practice
- ▶ Tools and technology: Frameworks like RM3 and digital innovations can support cultural change but must be tailored and accessible

On a construction site:

- ▶ Promote visible leadership: Site visits by designers demonstrate shared ownership of safety
 - ▶ Focus on human factors: Engage operatives in dialogue, not just compliance checks
 - ▶ Recognise and reward good behaviour: Reinforce safety as a value, not a rule
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- ▶ Close the loop:
 - *Feedback site learning to design teams*
 - *Provide written feedback to site teams following site visits to document discussions and promote learning opportunities*

With clients:

- ▶ Clients fund all the parties involved in a project. Their decisions impact everyone's actions. Educate them in their responsibilities, legally and morally, and the importance of safety, health and welfare to all those involved

Bibliography:

Culture Change in the Built Environment to Improve Building Safety and Standards,

<https://competence.bsigroup.com/files/file/125-culture-change-in-the-built-environment-to-improve-building-safety-and-standards/>