# Cornerstones for developing a culture for safety

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SAFETY CULTURE WITH PASSION

# INTRODUCTION: TEEMU REIMAN

- Doctor in work and organizational psychology from the University of Helsinki

- Associate professor at Aalto University

- Formerly a senior researcher at VTT and safety culture program manager at Fennovoima

- Founder Lilikoi Oy

  - Trainings, cultural assessments, research, development projects


- Over 25 years of experience on researching and developing safety culture and leadership in various safety critical contexts

  - Nuclear power industry, railways, healthcare, mining industry, aviation, petrochemical

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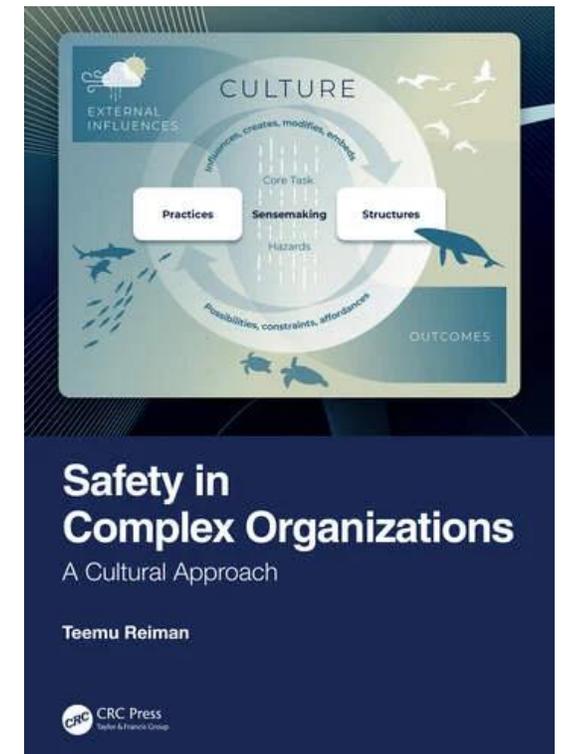
# CONTENTS

1. Challenges in safety
2. My claims
3. On culture
4. Cornerstones of culture development
5. Conclusions

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# INTELLECTUAL ROOTS

- Karl Weick – sensemaking and organizing in complex systems
- Edgar Schein – culture as shared assumptions, learned over time
- Erik Hollnagel – Safety-II, work-as-done, resilience engineering, accident models
- Mats Alvesson – culture as meaning, ambiguity, and power
- Other notable influences:
  - Barry Turner, Sidney Dekker, David Woods, James Reason, Diane Vaughan, Andrew Hopkins, Jean-Christophe Le Coze

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# Challenges in the current view on safety and culture

## SAFETY IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

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# CHALLENGE 1 – WE KEEP SEEING SIMILAR ACCIDENTS, BUT STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY HAPPEN IN REALITY



## SAFETY CULTURE IS A LAZY EXCUSE FOR A ROOT CAUSE. IT DOES NOT EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED.

**Do we really understand what is the role of culture in accidents?**

# CHALLENGE 2: SAFETY MANAGEMENT KEEPS GETTING MORE COMPLICATED BUT NOT NECESSARILY MORE EFFECTIVE



## WHAT ARE WE MANAGING? IS THERE AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO MANAGE SAFETY?

**Can safety be managed? What about safety culture?**

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# CHALLENGE 3 – CULTURE CHANGE INITIATIVES ARE MORE LIKELY TO FAIL THAN TO SUCCEED

- 'Culture change' has become a generic solution to any organizational problem
- Initiatives typically focus on visible artifacts: campaigns, posters, surveys, slogans
- Underlying logics, assumptions and structures remain untouched
- The result may be temporary compliance that fades when leadership attention shifts
- Leaders treat culture as something "they" (the employees) have, not something 'we' co-create

⇒ If culture is merely "the way we do things around here", why is it so hard to change?

⇒ What is "change in culture"?

⇒ We need a better understanding of what culture is, how and when does it change, and when is change even necessary

⇒ We need a cultural approach to organizations instead of one-size-fits-all safety culture models

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# CHALLENGE 4 – WE LOOK FOR BETTER SOLUTIONS WHILE CONTINUING TO ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS

- Why people keep breaking the rules?

- How to prevent human errors?

- How to identify and remove unsafe acts?

- How to guard the organization / technology against humans?

- How to install a strong safety culture among the personnel?

- On what level is our safety culture?

- How to measure safety – preferably with one number?

- How can we lower our TRIFR?

⇒ Do we really try to understand our organizations or to simplify them so we can better attribute blame for failures?

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# 2 My claims

## SAFETY IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

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# CLAIM 1 – MOST SAFETY CULTURE APPROACHES ARE NOT ACTUALLY CULTURAL

- They are a wishlist of issues that may or may not be connected
- They are often
  - behavioral
  - Managerialist
  - normative
- They miss
  - Sensemaking
  - Power and tradeoffs
  - Norms and social structure present in the system
  - Everyday production and reproduction of culture
- When many e.g. Safety II advocates criticise "safety culture", they criticise these non-cultural approaches

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# CLAIM 2 – ONE CANNOT FIX, CONTROL OR MANAGE SAFETY CULTURE – OR SAFETY FOR THAT MATTER

- This does not mean we are powerless against culture

- It rather means that most of our influence on culture is indirect rather than direct

- Same goes for safety – we can improve our capacity to be safe


⇒ The cornerstones are based on the idea that organization is the system to be managed while culture and safety are its emergent properties

⇒ Focus on the organization, not on culture or even safety as such

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# CLAIM 3 – THE SAME PROCESSES THAT BRING US SUCCESS CAN ALSO CAUSE ACCIDENTS

- Adaptation, efficiency, and expertise are essential for success
  - But under certain conditions, the same adaptations can push the system closer to failure
- Structure, rules and procedures are needed
  - Yet we may find our adaptive capacity diminishing if we over rely on them
- Safety culture normative models simplify reality
  - There is no one-size-fits-all solution to safety
  - Implementing them in a non-reflective way can actually hide what is in the system

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# CLAIM 4 – WE HAVE MISLOCATED CULTURE IN INDIVIDUALS RATHER THAN IN SYSTEMS

- Culture forms and is sustained in interaction

- Culture shapes behavior and behaviors shape culture
  - But they are not the same

- What individuals think and do matters
  - However, culture is sustained by the systems, incentives, and constraints that make certain choices normal and others difficult.

- Cornerstones are based on the idea that culture is enacted in daily trade-offs and embodied in structures, not stored in people's heads.

⇒ They highlight the importance of separating behavior and culture

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# 3. On culture

## CULTURE IN COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS

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# WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IS

- Culture is a learned system of meaning
  - It develops as people work together, interact, and adapt to their environment over time
  - It is grounded in common practices, routines and rituals
  - It is embedded in structures such as technology, tools, and organizational structures
- Culture simplifies complexity to enable action
  - Shared explanations, assumptions, and expectations that make action possible under uncertainty.
- Culture is grounded in practice
  - And embedded in routines, tools, technologies, structures, and ways of working
- Culture is contextual
  - There is no "one best culture"
  - Organizational cultures develop around the work people do, the risks they recognize, and the constraints they must manage

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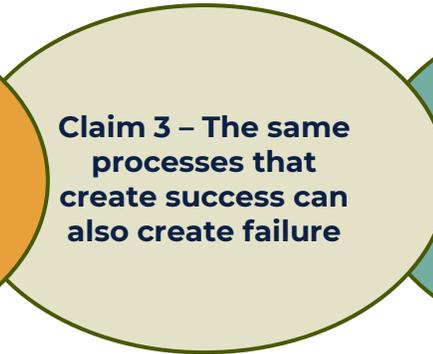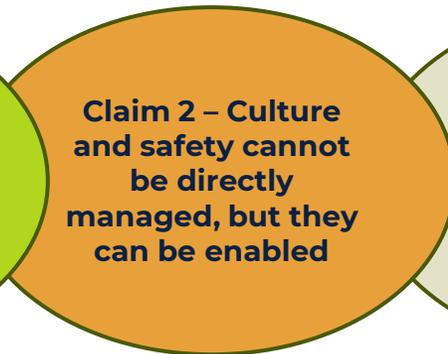# CULTURE SHOWS IN WHAT WE DO – AND WHAT WE DON'T DO

- Culture is visible in everyday choices and trade-offs
- Culture shows in how we respond to problems and failures
- Culture shapes how "we" and "they" are defined
- Culture is continuously created through action
- Leadership shapes conditions where people work – leadership shapes culture

*What do we really value when we need to choose and make compromises? How do we react when we fail – blaming or learning? How do we treat each other? How about our stakeholders?*

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# THE CLAIMS MOTIVATE THE CORNERSTONES

**Challenge 1 – We see similarities in accidents but struggle to understand how they happen**

**Challenge 3 – Direct attempts to change culture are typically perceived to fail**

**Claim 1 – Most safety culture approaches are not truly cultural**

**Claim 2 – Culture and safety cannot be directly managed, but they can be enabled**

**Claim 3 – The same processes that create success can also create failure**

**Claim 4 – We mislocate culture in individuals rather than in systems**

**The cornerstones of developing a culture for safety**

**Challenge 2 – We keep on trying to manage culture and safety, but this is not possible**

**Challenge 4 – The problem is not our solutions, but how we define the problem**

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# 4. Cornerstones of developing a culture for safety

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# CORNERSTONES OF CULTURE DEVELOPMENT

## (REIMAN 2026)

1. Do not focus only on "culture"
2. Develop in a goal-oriented, contextual and systematic way
3. Connect development to the core task and actual work

Orientation –
what to develop

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# ORIENTATION - WHAT TO DEVELOP 1/2

- How do we see the <u>object</u> and the <u>objective</u> of development
- Design interventions around real tasks, not abstract values
  - Remember that safety cannot be managed but an organization can be
- Avoid launching 'safety culture' campaigns disconnected from operations – or countercampaigns
  - 'Culture' is not a separate project
  - Start from: what problems in work and organizing do we need to solve?
  - Clarify why safety and culture matter in THIS organization (strategy, risk profile)
  - Plan development as a long-term, resourced program – not a one-off

**1. Do not focus only on "culture"**

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# HOW DO WE, AS SAFETY LEADERS, CONNECT (OR DISCONNECT) SAFETY FROM EVERYDAY OPERATIONAL REALITIES?

- How often we discuss safety through metrics and indicators rather than the work itself?

- How often we discuss safety through following (or not following) procedures rather than understanding and work conditions?

- How often we discuss safety in the field rather than in the meeting room?

- How often do we discuss safety when making operational or strategic decisions, rather than after-the-fact, when something negative occurs?

- How often do we invite discussion about uncertainty, ambiguity, or doubt, rather than seeking clear problems and simple solutions?

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Orientation – what to develop

4. Develop the system, not only individuals
5. Consider what needs to be integrated, what differentiated, and what can remain fragmentated

Design – how to develop

6. Acknowledge that culture development is a dynamic process

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# HOW TO DEVELOP 1/2

- Resist the temptation to 'fix' people instead of conditions
- Develop structures, tools, technology, leadership and interaction patterns
- Avoid campaigns focusing only on behaviour ('be more careful')
  - Instead question what in the organization makes this behaviour likely or even necessary?
- Do not seek consensus on everything – it is not possible or even desirable

**4. Develop the system, not only individuals**

**5. Consider integration, differentiation, and fragmentation**

**6. Acknowledge that culture development is a dynamic process**

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# HOW TO DEVELOP 2/2

- Culture is emergent, never fully predictable or controllable
- Development should be iterative
  - plan – act – sense – reflect – adapt instead of linear PDCA
- Work with existing strengths; avoid trying to change everything at once
- Maintain psychological safety to experiment, fail and learn
- Monitor for surprises and use them as learning opportunities

**4. Develop the system, not only individuals**

**5. Consider integration, differentiation, and fragmentation**

**6. Acknowledge that culture development is a dynamic process**

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# CORNERSTONES OF CULTURE DEVELOPMENT (REIMAN 2026)

1. Do not focus only on "culture"
2. Develop in a goal-oriented, contextual and systematic way
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5. Consider what needs to be integrated, what differentiated, and what can remain fragmentated
6. Acknowledge that culture development is a dynamic process
7. Realize you are part of the problem (and the solution)
8. Realize what change means to professional identities
9. Mind your language when developing culture – use stories and sensemaking not just slogans

Orientation – what to develop

Design – how to develop

Being in the system

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# HOW TO CHANGE AN EXISTING SYSTEM 1/2

- Leaders co-create the culture they later complain about
- Avoid '*they* need to change *their* culture' narratives
- Shift language from '*they*' to '*we*' – shared ownership
- Culture change cannot be outsourced to consultants or HR alone
- "how do my decisions, priorities and signals shape what is normal here?" "How do I connect or disconnect safety and work?"

**7. Realize you are part of the problem (and the solution)**

**8. Realize what change means to professional identities**

**9. Mind your language – stories and narratives**

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# HOW TO CHANGE AN EXISTING SYSTEM 2/2

- Work is part of who people are – change can feel like an identity threat

- Methods, tools and models are often tied to professional pride

- Criticizing cherished practices easily triggers strong emotional resistance

- Engage personnel in co-design, not just implementation

- Language shapes how people think, feel and act about safety
  - Be careful with absolute slogans ('all accidents are preventable', 'zero harm')
  - Check: do our words invite openness or pressure and hiding?

- Use locally resonant stories that connect to real work and dilemmas

**7. Realize you are part of the problem (and the solution)**

**8. Realize what change means to professional identities**

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9. Mind your language when developing culture – use stories and sensemaking not just slogans
10. Select the tools and models to fit the purpose, and not the other way around
11. Focus on meanings, assumptions and shared logics of actions as the core of culture
12. Avoid an oversimplified or shallow approach to culture

Orientation – what to develop

Design – how to develop

Being in the system

Depth and purpose

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# A CULTURAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZING

- Culture development is not a one-off survey or a campaign
  - Shallow projects risk reinforcing scepticism: 'yet another culture initiative'
  - Real change needs involvement across levels, functions and sites
- Look at issues systemically
  - Tools, practices, structures, incentives
- Look at how the organization creates safety daily and what is the effort it puts into it
  - Adaptations, sacrificing decisions, system pressures
  - The effort can tell us the gradient of change
- Combine preserving what works with stopping outdated practices
  - Ask regularly: what do we need more of, less of, and what must stop? What are we missing altogether?

**10. Select the tools and models to fit the purpose, and not the other way around**

**11. Focus on meanings, assumptions and shared logics of actions as the core of culture**

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# SEEING CULTURE AS STRUCTURE AND AN UNDERLYING CURRENT (REIMAN, 2026)
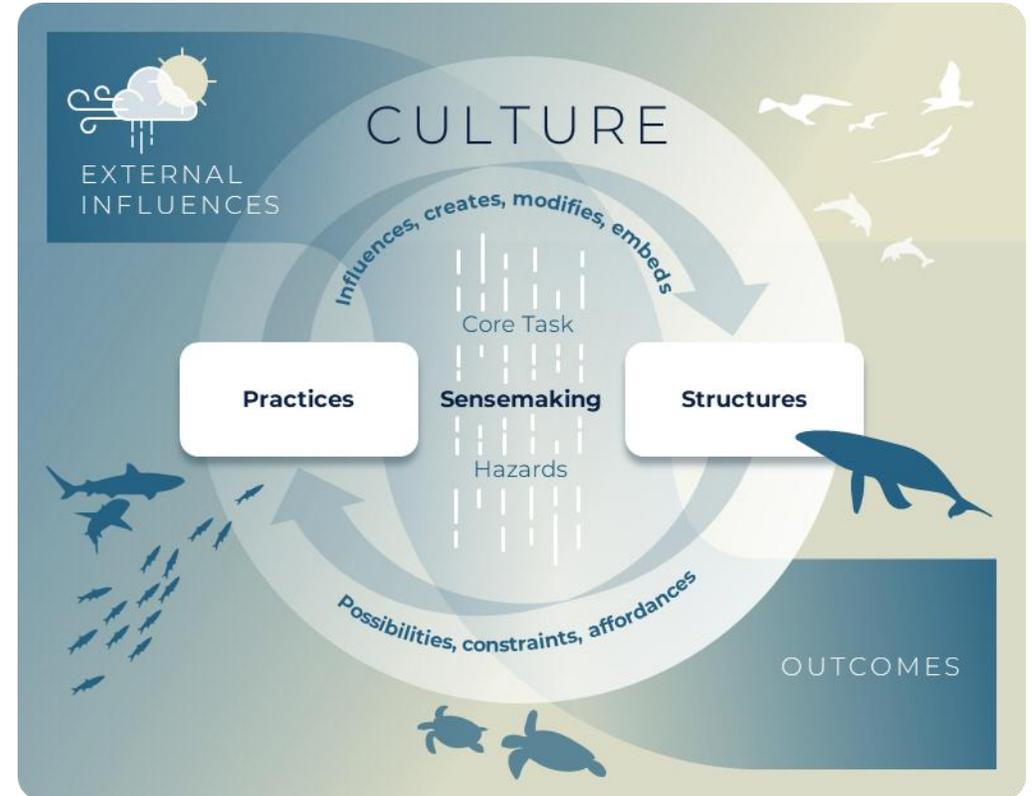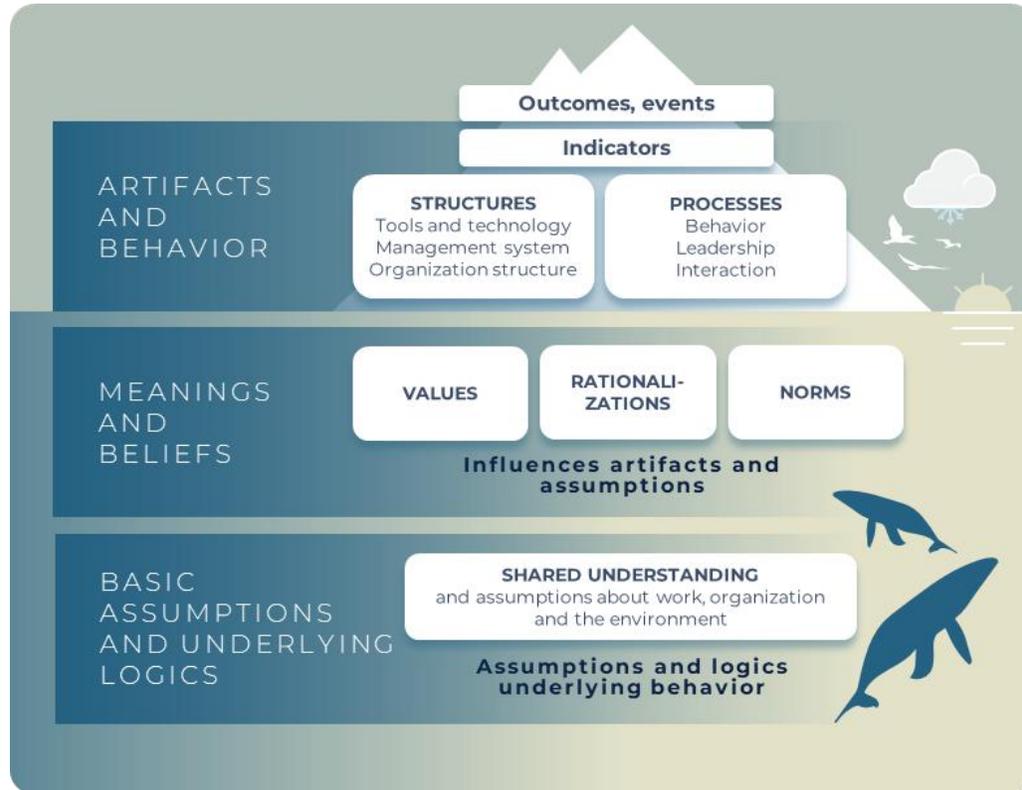


*Culture is both a structure and a process – changing the structure implies changes in basic assumptions whereas changing the process means changing how people make sense*

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Culture initiatives and campaigns can reinforce a message and surface resistance to it, but they can never be the message itself

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# 5 Conclusions

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# THE TWELVE CORNERSTONES

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**2. Develop in a goal-oriented, contextual and systematic way**

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# FROM SAFETY WORK TO CULTURALLY INFORMED PRACTICE

- **Acknowledge indirect influence**: Safety professionals shape culture through how they frame problems, ask questions, conduct investigations, and interpret data, not through culture programs.

- **Shift from explaining failure to understanding normal work**: Use incidents, audits, and deviations as opportunities for sensemaking: *How did this make sense in context?*

- **Change conditions, not people**: Pay attention to goals, constraints, interfaces, incentives, and schedules that shape everyday decisions.

- **Enable rather than control**: Use procedures, indicators, and reviews to reveal system tensions and surface questions, not only to check compliance.

- **Use surveys to trigger discussion**: Let numbers trigger questions and conversations, not judgments or rankings.

- **Be reflective**: Your language, assumptions, and reports already influence culture, whether you intend it or not.

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# QUESTIONS WE SHOULD ASK OURSELVES

1. How do we, as leaders and professionals, contribute to culture every day - with our actions and our inactions?

2. When we talk about "culture", what problem are we actually trying to solve?

3. How do we know how safe we are? How are we creating safety daily?

4. Do our safety management systems facilitate systemic understanding as well as individual compliance?

5. How do our organizational structures, goals, decision-making practices, and incentives intentionally, or unintentionally, shape safety and culture?

6. How do we challenge our own assumptions about people, risks, and control?

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# CONCLUSIONS

- Culture change is not a project but a shift in how work is understood, organized, and led
  - Culture develops through everyday decisions, not slogans or campaigns.
- The cornerstones are not tools, but lenses for choosing what to change and how
  - They help design development efforts that are contextual, systemic, and honest
- Meaning and action co-evolve in complex systems
  - Culture develops through how organizations act and make sense of those actions over time
- Small changes can have system-wide effects, if they are connected
  - Culture develops through coherent patterns, not isolated actions

**Safety culture is not something we implement; it is something we create every day through how we understand work, make decisions, and respond to uncertainty. It does not change by talking about it - it changes when we reorganize work, learn to recognize what really matters, and act on it**

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