Mastering Safety from the Top Down

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An abstract of The Geoholics Podcast – Episode 109 & 112

A strong and safe company culture isn't created in a vacuum. It comes first and foremost from a company's leadership.

Culture is woven from the daily choices made by employees at every level, but the stage is set by those at the top.

From employee onboarding to safety toolbox talks to the difficult decision of knowing which employees need to be let go, perfect culture and zero-incident safety are a target that you'll never hit. It's something that you're always striving for.
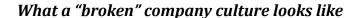
Helping to shape company culture can be an art form.

Kent Groh and The Geoholics podcast team recently interviewed two titans of culture: Mike Bontrager, VP General Manager for Alston Construction's Arizona office, and Brian Owens, VP of Safety & Team Development for the Buesing Corporation.

Mike described his days as a turnaround specialist helping struggling offices make incredible comebacks, while Brian shared why safety culture should be approached as an inverted pyramid.

Together, their advice provides a strong foundational approach for companies both large and small.

What a "broken" company culture looks like

Mike was working at The Weitz Company as President of the Southwest division when the great recession of 2008 hit hard.

As things slowed down, Mike's superiors complimented him on the job he'd done building the Southwest office, and asked if he'd be interested in turning around a company in another division that was struggling.

The company in question was headquartered in Honolulu. Mike soon found himself in a tropical paradise—but facing a tough challenge.

Yes, the company was doing poorly. But the main issue was a cultural one. And it stemmed from the person who was running the company. It took about 18 months to train the owner to run a large operation versus a small operation, and took a lot of behind-the-scenes effort. After that success, Mike found himself with a new career title: the turnaround guy.

The most toxic culture he encountered was an office in Arizona.

Mike had never seen a culture this broken, ever.

"People lied to each other. People gossiped about each other. People stole from the company," Mike said.

In one case, three employees were responsible for ordering snacks for the office kitchen. The would purposefully over-order each week so that they could load the extra supplies into their cars and take it home every Friday.

In another instance, a superintendent would buy Home Depot gift cards with the pretense of handing them out as a safety reward on his job site. It turns out he was keeping them for himself—to the tune of over $10,000.

These examples sound extreme, but it's a clear picture of what can happen when key values like honesty and integrity aren't allowed to flourish.

Turning a negative culture around

Here's what Mike would typically do when faced with a struggling company with severe cultural problems:

1. Interview all employees
2. Remove employees who don't fit
3. Hire employees who are motivated

Interviewing employees

Mike's process of turning around a company would begin with an interview of every single employee. He found that it was important to talk to everyone one-on-one in order to take the pulse of the company and see the big picture.

"I asked everybody the exact same questions and put it all on a spreadsheet. What I was doing is getting a picture of the company, getting a picture of the people, trying to figure out what was wrong. So I was just learning," Mike said of these exercises.

Mike commonly asked questions like:

- What's wrong with this place?
- How do you get along with your colleagues?
- What markets do you think we should be in?
- Why aren't we succeeding here?

"The reason I asked everybody the exact same question, I never deviated, was because I wanted to hear the different answers that everybody was giving. It was pretty clear that everybody had somewhat of a different idea of what was going on there," Mike said of the Arizona office.

"We figured out we needed a vision," Mike said. "We really needed to reinforce the values we had to get the bad actors off the place."

Terminating employees

In many cases a totally broken culture requires letting people go. At one office, Mike interviewed 34 employees. Afterwards, his instinct was that only 4 of those people were keepers who should remain with the company.

"Of course, you can't just walk in one day and go 'you 30 people are out.' You can't do that," Mike said. It's a careful process that starts with hiring a stellar management team to turn things around and set the tone for the culture you want.

Next, it's a process of carefully explaining to employees what's needed versus what they are doing, and letting them go in a respectful way.

Mike would tell employees: "You've got strengths that you can use at other companies. You just don't fit here. It's not that you're bad. It's you just don't fit where we're headed," he said.

It's never easy. Mike estimates over the years he's been responsible for laying off about 200 people, yet he's done it in a thoughtful way. This means that he still has employees he's terminated who stay in touch with him and use him as a professional reference.

And in the case of that Arizona office that was so damaged and hadn't made money in six years? Under Mike's oversight, they increased revenue by $60 million in just three years.

Hiring motivated employees

Once negative or poor-fit employees have been weeded out, the next step is to find people who are truly motivated to succeed.

"If you have to motivate people all the time, you probably got the wrong ones," Mike said. "You need people that are achievement-oriented, and they have an ethical compass that points in the right direction."

To this end, Mike would hold strategic cultural meetings. He regularly gather his management team to talk about the culture they wanted to build and the results they wanted to see.

"It's not big grandiose things. It's Hey, when somebody emails you, email them back in 12 hours. If somebody calls you, call them right back even if you don't have the answer. It's just simple little stuff. Be positive. Lean into problems, never run away from them. Just all the cliche things that you do," Mike explained.

His advice to professionals is this: if you want to find opportunities, look for the challenges that everyone else is running away from. That's where the learning and growth will truly happen.

How safety culture connects to company culture

In the surveying world, there's perhaps nothing more important that a company culture that prioritizes safety.

Workers in the engineering and construction industry face many hazards. Construction sites in particular are perhaps one of the most dangerous places to work in the world.

Legally, for example, a general contractor can't place all the burden of safety responsibility onto subcontractors. In other words, safety is everybody's responsibility. And just like company culture as a whole, an ethos of safety starts at the top.

As VP of Safety & Team Development for the Buesing Corporation, Brian Owens oversees all the safety programs for the company and speaks publicly on safety topics. He's even written a book called Inversion and the Perspective-Based Safety Culture.

His focus on safety started in the military, and reached new heights when he entered the mining industry after leaving active duty. While undergoing the MSHA training required for mining, the president of operations shared that only two days earlier, an employee had been killed on the job.

"It never occurred to me that I could still get hurt or even killed at work, just doing a regular job. I thought all that was in my rearview mirror. Now that I was home [from Baghdad], nobody was shooting at me anymore," Brian said. "Watching this man break down openly and sob in front of all of us that hit me so hard that it actually launched my career into safety. That was the turning point for me."

Today, he is always in the pursuit of "zero incidents" when it comes to safety. Accidents will always happen, of course. But when a company prioritizes safety at every level, it can make a big difference.

Many small survey companies tend to fly by the seat of their pants in the quest to pay bills. Many of them are working as quickly as they can, and don't even have safety policies in place.

Brian says that type of work environment puts you at risk.

"We're not even talking safety. We're talking safety being the by-product of investing in your company culture, and you don't even need a safety person to do that. You need leadership, you need the buy-in from management and ownership and the core group of the company to set the tone. The trickle-down effect is improved safety," said Brian.

To reiterate: you do not need a safety department or a safety manager to prioritize safety. Yes, that person can help pave the way. But as mentioned previously, culture starts higher up than any one individual.

"As far as companies that simply don't have the budget or the manpower to put a pedigreed safety professional in those roles, that's not even what we're talking about. The leaders in your organization are torchbearers of culture," Brian said. "It can become safety-related, but we're way upstream from safety."

Safety cannot be reactive

If you only make one mindset change when it comes to safety, Brian said it should be this: take a proactive approach, rather than a reactive one.

Many companies operate by looking around for things that are already wrong or hazardous and then fixing them.

But when you take that route, sometimes you're already too late.

Brian offered this analogy of seeking out the root causes of unsafe situations:

"Let's use the analogy of a farmer walking through an orchard and looking for trees that are not putting off fruit. What most companies do is they walk through and look at things that are not going well, the things that are dangerous, and point at it and say 'that's going to cause an incident,' or 'that's why that incident got caused.' It is very reactive. My question is, what is happening to cause that tree to put off bad fruit? To me, you need to get into the root. What is it that is not allowing that tree to be optimal in its production?"

This is where Brian's concept of the inverted safety pyramid was born.

The concept was first inspired during a safety meeting at the mining company he worked at. The safety manager at the time was using a pyramid example during a meeting, with examples of fatal and catastrophic recent safety issues at the top. His plan was to use those incidents as scare tactics to get employees to be safer.

"I couldn't help but feel that was way too late in the game, that we were missing valuable opportunities earlier in the process to be more proactive. And that is what created the idea behind inversion," said Brian.

The inverted safety pyramid literally puts the old pyramid on its head in the quest to get ever-closer to zero safety incidents.

Brian doesn't act like a safety policeman and use scare tactics. Instead, he works as a companion and peer alongside employees, helping them to recognize how to make smart choices.

"I just look for opportunities for improvement. And I come in underhandedly. Hey, what do you think about this? And then we have an educated conversation about it," Brian said.

He also solicits employees' advice. As part of Buesing's continuous improvement team, he gathers employees from every corner of the company to brainstorm ways to improve the company—both in terms of safety and other matters.

A key finding was the employees actually wanted more safety trainings and refreshers on topics like fall protection and working in confined spaces.

"If you're using safety to punish and oppress the workforce, that doesn't do anything for you. If you're using it the other way, to help create policy change and actually make things easier for them and safer for them and they see you as an advocate, that's what you need," Brian said.

Why it's not enough to be compliant

While some companies gloss over safety altogether, others consider it but simply think of it as a box to be checked off a list.

That's where the key different between safety and compliance comes in.

"They're two different things. Yes, they play in the same arena. But there are things you have to be compliant with for insurance reasons or OSHA or regulatory agencies. But that doesn't necessarily have anything to do with safety," Brian said.

He's seen compliant companies that have terrible safety records, and companies that are nowhere near compliant that have fantastic safety records.

Checking a box leads to safety concepts that go in one ear and out the other, without sticking around in a meaningful way.
Picture a dartboard, Brian says.

"If you take a look at a dartboard you've thrown darts at before, have you ever missed the wall or missed the target completely and hit the wall? Yes. Okay. So it's never what you intended. It was just a bad day. If you compare that dartboard to a business model, a lot of companies operate by trying to just stay on the dartboard—remain compliant. You hit the dartboard somewhere. Our approach is that the bullseye is the only acceptable approach. That is our target, period. We simply do not tolerate any deviation from a bullseye effort every single time. Does that guarantee that we are going to hit the bullseye every time? No. But on our bad days, we still wind up on the board."

Compliance and safety are often conflated, but compliance is really just the bare minimum. If you really want to be safe, you need safety to be a cultural value of your company.

It comes down to teaching employees how to bake in safe practices to routine tasks, so that they become second nature.

The importance of onboarding

When it comes to both safety culture and company culture as a whole, there is one key period that has a big impact: the employee onboarding process. This is where you have an opportunity to make your company culture and values clear from day one.

In his current role at Alston Construction, Mike says he brings in the CEO to talk about the company culture in his own words during every new employee orientation. He thinks this top-down approach is a missing ingredient in many companies.

Alston is also very clear about setting expectations for employee behavior when it comes to things like speedy client communication and problem-solving on the job site.

Here's one example from Mike:

"Say you're on a project out in the field and there's a big problem. This is a major thing, we've got a big goof-up. How do the people in the field respond to that? Do they cower away in the corner and go, we got to figure out who to blame this on?" asks Mike. "That's one way. The other way is, let's get everybody together and figure out how to solve this thing. And then let's bring in the architect, the surveyor, everybody. Let's bring them together and go look, we got a big problem. Let's figure this shit out. And then let's take a solution to the owner as quickly as we possibly can. Those are two very real things that happen a lot. So that story we tell, we don't want to be [scenario] A. We want to be B."

At the end of the day, Mike said that most problems are the product of poor decisions, and successes are the product of good decisions.

Since you can't constantly look over your employees' shoulders, you have to trust them. And that means giving them the vision and training they need to make the right calls.

"The construction business is tough," Mike said. "We can have people at the entry-level of the company make a five-minute decision that can cost you millions of dollars. And that's a scary thing that some people just can't get their mind wrapped around. And so having those things in place and having them understand how to make those decisions is hugely important."

Brian agrees that hiring and onboarding are critical to instilling the right behaviors.

A new hire may have a perfect resume, but you also must consider the pre-existing behaviors that they have picked up earlier in their career.

Sometimes in addition to teaching the behaviors you want to see, you may have to help people un-learn previous behaviors.

"I compare employees coming through the door to an arrow mid-flight. They've already been launched from other things, and you didn't have anything to do with that. They came in that way. They were on a course that was already established long before they got there. But what I suggest is just a gust of wind can change the direction of an arrow mid-flight," said Brian.

"If you set that tone hard day one, what happens beyond that point is they actually toe the line much harder than if you just let them be who they were when they walked in."

The right training can help mold behavior, which in term shapes your company culture for the better.

Why culture and safety are a long game

Part of the reason why a good company culture is so difficult to focus on and attain is because it takes time to see the results of your effort. It's also a never-ending process.

"I think the reason accompanies don't focus on it as much is because this is a long game. Culture is not six months. It's not a year. It's years. And you're never really there. Culture is somewhat aspirational," said Mike. "A lot of the people that run

companies now, they're so short-term focused that they just forget about it and they don't pay any attention to it. It drives me nuts actually. But it's a long game. I'm such a firm believer in that as a strategic advantage."

No matter what size your company is, that investment is worthwhile.

"It doesn't matter the size of the company," Brian said. "You have those pre-established behaviors that are coming through your door. And if you're not doing something formal about ensuring that it is changed or embraced the way it is, then you're really just leaving it up to chance."

While culture is always important, there's no doubt that it becomes even more vital the bigger your company is. At The Weitz Company's height, Mike said that they had about 600 employees.

"That's where I learned that culture's so important. And I don't know if it eats strategy for breakfast, but you can't do anything without, it that much I know. You have to work on it. You can't just not talk about it," he said.

At that scale, it's often helpful to create a formalize culture roadmap that verbalizes where you want your culture to go.

If you're lucky enough to already have a great culture, then the process becomes about upkeep more than creating from scratch.

"Weitz had a great culture anyway, so we weren't really changing it. We were just improving it and making it what we wanted it to be, because we had to work there. So we want to create the place we want to work," said Mike.

Culture and safety may start at the top, but it's a team effort through and through.

"I think it's really important to make sure that you're listening to what we would call the little guy. Nobody's saying that the best ideas are coming from the top," said Brian.

"There's nothing anywhere saying that the best ideas are coming from people with fancy letters after their name or pieces of paper framed on the wall. Some of the best ideas that I've come across that really stopped me in my tracks that really made me pause came from just your ground level employee. And you have to find a formal way to recognize that and give them a voice."

When every employee is working from the same instruction manual when it comes to culture, you'll have a healthy foundation for safety, happiness, and growth.