

Providing a context for a discussion on Safety Culture

Summary: Comprehensive transportation interventions recognize the critical role that culture plays in traffic safety. While engineering, materials and design greatly impact safety, so too do the decisions made by individuals. People make decisions in contexts which are strongly influenced by culture. It is critical that we seek to improve transportation safety by influencing these decisions by transforming cultures.

Despite substantial improvements in traffic safety over the past fifty years and the recent drop in motor vehicle deaths over the past two years, traffic fatalities remain an unrecognized and underappreciated public health crisis. As traffic safety professionals, losing even one life is unacceptable but losing one life every fourteen minutes is outrageous. Accordingly, we need to treat this as a public health issue and should focus on trying to improve it, not only locally but across the nation and internationally.

We need to think about traffic safety from more than just a systems perspective. Traffic crashes are not the result of isolated factors such as an icy road, but rather the combination of factors such as a driver deciding to speed on an icy road. The impact of a crash may be focused on the driver, but the factors that precipitated the crash may reside at higher layers in the system including vehicle, traffic, infrastructure, environment and society. We need to recognize that the events that result in a crash happen in the context of society - the beliefs and attitudes society has toward traffic safety. Unless we tackle the outer shell of this system, we are not going to get the change we want inside the system. Thus, we must focus on culture and trying to change society's attitudes and beliefs toward how people act in the societal activity of driving. These attitudes not only affect people's own behaviors, but their views as citizens and their support for public actions (e.g., laws, enforcement actions, investments) aimed at improving safety. We must learn to drive for each other and not just ourselves.

Definition: Health and safety cultures encompass the values, beliefs, and perceptions of driver communities' transportation agencies related to traffic safety norms and expectations

1. What are the critical behaviors we want to affect by changing culture?
 - a. What are the key cultural components of these behaviors (perceptions, attitudes)?
2. What are the challenges to changing highway safety culture in the US?
3. What specific strategies are currently available that are working or are promising? (What examples can we learn from?)
 - a. What are the challenges to more wide spread implementation of these?
4. How do we implement these strategies across the nation?
5. How do we measure progress?
6. What are the knowledge gaps, or key questions, remaining in traffic safety culture?
7. What additional programs can be developed?
8. What are some "cultural shift" methods that are designed to change culture and affect those behaviors?
9. What is the broader vision for using culture to affect change in traffic safety?
10. What are the critical steps to move forward with this vision?

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