

CORPORATE EXPERIENCES OF ZERO-HARM CULTURE IN INDIA: A QUALITATIVE SURVEY

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Abstract Based on literature reviews and field visits to 10 project sites across India during 2023–24 and interactions with a sample of 480 managers, this article depicts a host of experiences of implementing zero-harm culture in Indian corporates carried out as part of a longitudinal national research. Seven themes were identified based on this qualitative survey. Change in positive safety culture if implemented wholeheartedly with proper methodology is not only incremental, but exponential. Top managements' concerns are to understand certain issues clearly before they introduce any safety culture intervention in their organisation or units. Personal safety values of employees differ from those of professional safety culture. Safety culture is not a deal or a benefit or a tool but a value for life. Any distractions that halt safety culture need to be controlled. Companies need to be aware whether the safety violations or fatalities at workplaces are ethical scandals. Zero-harm cultural transformation prerequisites meeting certain challenges. It is important to strengthen beliefs amongst corporates that the zero-harm based safety culture is not a pot of religious stories or flowery contents, but a set of behavioural science interventions. Qualitative data has added a special value to this paper.

Keywords: Zero-Harm Culture, Indian Corporates, Safety, Business, BBS

INTRODUCTION

Executive director of a company employing 30,000 plus manpower is showing a deep concern over two workplace deaths that everyone in plants must come together to ponder what we are lacking and what must be done to rejuvenate a culture of zero-harm to people, plants and community around? And she would review its actions and progress each month.

Without tackling serious HSE issues, the businesses are hard to sustain, failing all of us in our ambitious zero-harm goal. All organisations obviously seek for zero incidents. But they are not equipped to achieve the same. Zero-harm is truly possible when all in an organisation value people more than anything else. Corporates need to take insights beyond the safety culture and safety systems. A positive safety culture helps organisations achieve their ultimate goal of achieving better safety performance. However, the process of understanding and improving a safety culture can be way much beyond for achieving vision zero. The best way to do this is by tracking the right data efficiently, which is best achieved by using an automated safety data management system (Easton, 2011).

What organisational values are supportive of health, safety and well-being (HSW) of people at work? Health, safety

and well-being are values in themselves. The 2nd OSH Strategy Conference representatives from governments and several European and international institutions agreed that Vision Zero should be valued as both the foundation and the objective for a culture of prevention to focus on rational and informed behaviour when dealing with HSW risks (Gerard, 2013).

Organisations (with a background of huge number of incidents) implemented zero-harm culture and were transformed into positive organisations with reportable zero incidents for years (Kaila, 2018). In August, every year, there is a celebration of Suraksha (safety) Rakhi Festival by which all behaviour safety observers actively care and ensure zero-harm (SEIL, 2023). Thyssenkrupp sites do it since last 5 years. To promote zero-harm culture at workplaces, employees are trained with a principle that they are a human chain to care for each other.

Quite often, business leaders or government officials or project management consultants or clients speak up to their contractors and employees that their aim is zero fatalities. This indicates an indirect message to people that the only severity of incidents is to be emphasised than just any minor incidents. Hence the aim of zero-harm is nullified understanding that unless the risk is severe, one need not raise voice for safety. A comprehensive HSE approach is required

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for an organisation to achieving zero-harm. Potential systemic failures are highlighted that could exist within organisations, which create error traps where accidents become inevitable. Safety and health leadership strategies and the interdependencies between leadership components and health and safety systems become the cause and effect. Human factors approach along with an application of behavioural safety methodological framework, facilitate to understand people in and out of an organisational context (de Jager, 2018).

Daily small and regular HSE events are as relevant as big celebrations to achieve the missions of vision zero, zero harm, zero tolerance and lessen costs significantly on medical, insurance, property losses and save human lives. Most organisations tend to focus safety celebrations only periodically rather than as a daily safety feature of work culture. Our emphasis is to make every individual a good corporate citizen with an aim on people empowerment in HSE and get the behaviours, barriers and basics of safety, health and environment right and active. Safety means, think of all aspects, but keep it simple for execution. Many companies or authorities conduct safety events merely as ritual or business tactics, whereas the events are meant to be associated with open and honest communication, continuous organisational learning, cross-unit teamwork and improvement (Mrayyan, 2022).

Main principle of Vision Zero is to achieve a state of absence of workplace accidents and incidents. The highest priority is the prevention of fatal and serious incidents at workplace or any place. Research indicated that most countries adopting comprehensive Vision Zero approach are remarkably showing reductions in disability and fatalities. This requires a set of five actions such as an advanced risk assessments that forms the backbone of this proactive strategy, effective engagement and communication, safety-economics - the strategic integration of safety practices with the organisation's economic objectives, the role of safety professionals with a unique combination of open-mindedness and radical empathy, and an urge to re-evaluate and strengthen their foundational safety practices (Harris, 2024).

OBJECTIVE

To explore experiences of implementing zero-harm culture in Indian corporates and suggest an action plan to implement the same in other organisations in their businesses towards achieving a goal of Vision Zero harm.

METHOD

This article is an interim paper extracted from a longitudinal action survey on nation-wide implementation of zero-harm

culture in organisations. The sampling method utilised was random sampling. Executives, supervisors, department heads, professionals, leaders, directors and EHS/HR specialists from the private and public sectors of industry constituted the study sample. Site locations were the industries spanning across India, such as steel, construction, chemicals, oil, gas and electricity. To gather primary data, 60 interviews, 30 training seminars and 20 focused group discussions were conducted. The literature reviews, field visits to 10 project sites in India during 2023–24 and interactions a sample of 480 managers brought out the following results of the qualitative data categorised here below into 7 themes.



Fig. 1: Site Location Example

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Though research in this field is somewhat limited on how to implement a zero-harm strategy in the workplace, one study reported that implementing zero harm principles can reduce the incident frequency rate by nearly three times. Researchers also indicated that embedding a zero-harm culture improved workforce alignment, safety leadership and lessened the impact of incident-causing factors (Lucidity Team, 2023).

Seven themes were identified based on this qualitative survey (Fig. 1) as below:

- Connect between workers and managers are weak.
- Basic questions top managements often asked.
- Employee's personal safety culture is not the organisational safety culture.
- Companies don't take safety culture in enormity.
- Zero down all safety distractions to have tight risk controls.
- Safety ethics are the soul of any corporate business.
- Zero-harm cultural transformation prerequisites meeting certain challenges.

Connect between Workers and Managers

If the connect and dialogue between workers and managers is bleak, it disables the safety culture in any organisation. Connect and dialogue amongst people help making positive organisations. Industrial relations in Indian organisations have changed positively with the changes in corporate antecedents. The industry is now moving from reactive practices to more collaborative and progressive practices that look at workers and unions as partners rather than adversaries. Some chemical and petrochemicals organisations, with such best practices have demonstrated better business results. Change in positive safety culture (if implemented wholeheartedly with BBS methodology) is not only incremental, but exponential in nature (Piniseti, et al., 2023). Managers and leaders plan activities without adequate safety procedures. They hurry up completion of work (Lal, 2023). Managers must be held accountable to carry out the work with complete safety adherence and achieve zero-harm culture.

Questions Top Managements Often Asked

There are issues related to the top management that are responsible for weak safety culture at the corporates as well as sites resulting in incidents and fatalities. Nearly 80% professionals from industry reported weak management's support in safety culture, which amounted to a critical lapse in business sustainability. Top managements need guidance about interventions leading to safety culture transformation (Kaila, 2022).

Top managements' concerns are to understand the following issues clearly before they introduce any safety culture intervention in their organisation or units.

- What is safety culture all about?
- How can it be brought about, measured and improved?
- Where has it been implemented already so as to understand the outcomes?
- What are its impacts in general and economic benefits in specific?

Employees Personal Safety Culture is Not the Organisational Safety Culture

This needs to be discussed and clarified amongst employees as it is important that the organisational SOPs become the personal safety behaviours of all employees. Personal safety values of employees differ from those of professional safety culture. Unless corporate values become personal learning and practiced regularly, the safety culture doesn't sustain. Hence an organisational emphasis must be on the transformation

in personal safety culture of employees. Safety culture interventions and perceptions benefit most from how positively the superior-subordinate dynamics manifest in an organisation (Morgan et al., 2020).

Companies Don't Take Safety Culture in Enormity

They want to strike a kind of deal between business and some fast safety benefits if possible. Safety culture is not a deal or a benefit or a tool but a value for life that everyone maintains to see that no one gets injured as they came without an injury to the workplace. The beliefs and values about safety in certain nationalities do affect the organisational safety outcomes. Understanding practical implications is a precondition for embedding the growth of safety culture. The need to investigate the effects of national cultures on safety antecedents, behaviours and outcomes, has already been recognised in safety literature (Carmen & Marco, 2024).

Zero Down All Safety Distractions to Have Tight Risk Controls

Any distractions that halt safety culture need to be controlled. This requires in-depth focused discussions on what hinders supportive safety culture into the work areas. The research findings suggested that workplace distractions can adversely affect hazard recognition, safety risk perception and safety performance. The distracted employees could not recognise and attend to the risks and hazards. Failure in risk perception, such as underestimating risk, has been found to contribute to the occurrence of unsafe behaviours (Namian et al., 2018). K. K. Sharma director EHS, DCM Shriram focused that raising awareness among all stakeholders is the key to achieve goal zero target. It's unfortunate that the lack of it (which is common in all industries) creates an imbalance in an organisational safety culture transformation and fatalities continue at sites (Personal Communications, 2024).

Safety Ethics are the Soul of Any Corporate Business

Any injury or fatality of a worker would have gradual damaging effects on the business of any organisation. MIT Sloan noticed that the influx of standards and products are making our companies more compromising to ethical steps. Stakeholders are gauging corporates against parameters of social, environmental and corporate governance. Employees are expecting increased inclusion, equity and diversity. Customers prefer companies that are inclined strongly to corporate social performances (Weitzner, 2022). Companies need to be aware, whether the safety violations or fatalities at

workplaces are ethical scandals. After all, a combination of business strategy along with safety ethics would reduce the quantum of fatalities. To make it zero, would be depending on the thrust of management towards accident prevention. Mallikarjun HSE Head of Gharda Chemicals felt concerned that the accident statistics especially fatalities are a huge issue (Personal Communications, 2024).

Zero-Harm Cultural Transformation Prerequisites Meeting Certain Challenges

- Everything that is connected to business directly and indirectly is affecting zero-harm status of the corporates. Hence it requires a host of such actions in achieving zero-harm culture.
- Reinforcement of zero-harm culture without enforcement standards provides an inadequate result. Hence the companies must essentially balance out the enforcement and reinforcement strategies.
- Organisational triggers and dynamics that impede employees not to participate in the zero-harm goals need to be discussed openly and communicated to all.

Companies strive for zero-harm to people, the environment and the community by adopting best-in-class practices and advocating risk-based HSE culture across the organisation and its stakeholders (IndiGrid, 2024). People catch up to safety culture faster when companies connect it with employees' personal lives, religion values, spiritual experiences and examples. Zero-harm goes beyond physical. We must address stress, bullying and workload to prevent emotional harm. Safety extends beyond the workplace. Encouraging healthy habits and awareness of external risks minimises overall incidents. Zero-harm implies a strong organisational mind-set, without which achieving excellence is not possible. Though emotional injuries vary from person to person and company to company, but its frequency is more in companies that follow reactive safety culture. By focusing on behaviours that influence both physical and emotional safety, organisations create a truly holistic culture. Focusing on individual behaviour is a temporary solution but positive culture is permanent and sustainable. Culture is an organisational behaviour and beyond. So, organisations must focus on culture not consequences. Consequences are natural by-products of positive safety culture interventions.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Since the implementation of Zero Harm culture, organisations have reported measurable improvements in both safety and financial results year over year and resulted

in reduced insurance claims. Though zero-harm is a new buzzword, it is hurdled due to many reasons and on many fronts. First, it is the differential risk perception among people due to their cultural exposures that they understand risk or not. The management keep trying through systems to increase their risk perceptions. Still the difference of perception remains and incidents continue, and zero-harm becomes difficult. Open dialogue about risk identification and its management is missing at sites/plants which impedes zero-harm process in organisations. Experienced managers with longer years of experience shun being corrected by young engineers for their at-risk behaviours. Safety awards are becoming commercialised, which attract companies for short term recognition rather than opting for long-term interventions. Pressures to follow deadlines and completing jobs in short time has led to several fatal incidents, especially during visits of VIPs or festival celebrations which involve a huge amount of workload. Scaring people down the levels is common practice by seniors at sites. Managers ignored following procedures as it involved lengthy process. Despite digitisation, behavioural issues remain, like work starts before the PTW (permit to work) is released online. Top managements become serious about safety when incidents are impacting their businesses. That is too late to respond to safety culture, managers need not be reactive but proactive in safety. Most companies lose their assets in fires and experience fatalities but do not spend in safety culture. Developing zero-harm culture is a key for corporates.

A deeper sense of commitment to ethical values and principles is utmost essential for meeting a standard of safety ethics as a corporate drive. Not only the managers themselves but also board members, independent external supervisors and government regulators need to embrace these practices for meeting zero-harm goals (Lindhout, 2021). Also, there is a need to allow more time for managers and workers to talk about safety issues (Quenon et al., 2020) in order to achieve zero at-risk behaviour. Think of human factors towards the realisation of a safe, secure and well-being society (The Vision Zero Summit Japan, 2022). Vision Zero action plan implementation consider the ethics and value of human life (Safarpour et al., 2022), and how quick the organisations are in decision-making and utilise their safety resources.

Zero-harm culture has the potential to develop sustainable economies and business success in enterprises, particularly given the high rates of work-related injuries in developing countries (Abeje & Luo, 2023). The following zero-harm experiences (Table 1) for business perspectives are suggested as an action plan to implement based on literature reviews and industry practices.

Table 1: Action Plan to Implement Zero-Harm Culture

1. Change in positive safety culture if implemented wholeheartedly with proper methodology is not only incremental, but exponential. 2. Top managements' concerns are to understand certain issues clearly before they introduce any safety culture intervention in their organization or units. 3. Personal safety values of employees differ from those of professional safety culture. 4. Safety culture is not a deal or a benefit or a tool but a value for life. 5. Any distractions that halt safety culture need to be controlled. 6. Companies need to be aware whether the safety violations or fatalities at workplaces are ethical scandals. 7. Zero-harm cultural transformation prerequisites meeting certain challenges.

Zero-harm culture implementation journey is a behavioural science long-term supportive intervention well tested in India and outside with measurable results. Safety culture or zero-harm steering teams, if committed, can really fetch zero-harm outcomes. Steering teams work in unison and become a strategic drive for safety culture maturity in planned manner? How do all teams draw synergy from actions of the entire manpower to culmination and fulfil a zero-harm goal? How much time does each individual employee (from first to the last one) spends on safety at workplace, and then each day each one is safe and returns home as he/she came to work? Do people at work continue to be sensitive to each risk and speak up to correct immediately? These questions are the source of synergy that drives safety culture maturity. Not a single person can afford to ignore the risk or look the other way. Do all questions and barriers to safety receive spot-solutions as a motivation? There is no shortcut to safe workplace. On a positive note, each employee stops for few minutes to approach the risk as one family and serves a risk control while actively caring for each other. It's important that corporate employees are aligned to achieve unity, and the monetary rewards to an aligned workforce are clarified to meet an objective of zero-harm. Deloitte found that greater collaboration creates value and saves time inside organisations and leads to higher-quality work output (Altschuler, 2020). Develop a shared sense of vision and value amongst all businesses of the organisation aligned to the safety strategic direction and execution through a clear and coordinated approach (WSSA, 2022). Harvard Business Review found that 72% of strategies fail not because the strategy was wrong, rather because the execution was poor (HSE Global, 2022). Companies enjoy best level of cultural maturity when multilevel steering teams gradually sync on the core principles of safety culture concepts, its approach, analysis, monitoring, support, handholding, reviews and follow-ups for benchmarking across businesses within an organisation.

General Manager of ONGC expressed that the 'behavioural safety culture awareness programme' is very interesting, learning and motivating towards achieving organisational goal of 'zero-harm' to people and environment. It is a very good initiative taken under the vision of company Director to create a pool of trained observers in a mission to achieve 'Zero Unsafe Behaviour'. To achieve zero

unsafe behaviour, this is very useful everywhere either at workplace or home and every moment in all parts of life. We are very much benefitted and would continue it throughout the life to enhance safety culture. This will be reflected as value addition in our organisational culture. Towards a common goal of zero-harm - everyone speaks up on safety. Employee's safety is a pre-condition for work and business growth (Personal Communications, 2022) as safety culture is a facet of organisational culture and zero-harm (Claxton et al., 2022). Let's stop saying that we believe zero harm is achievable and start doing it (Hillaby, 2023). It would become Bharat Bane Surakshit, when everyone brings behaviours into safety (Personal Communications, 2024).

Zero-harm first is a new buzzword for building a culture of safety in most organisations. But it is to be understood very critically as most companies lacked a committed response and used it as a slogan on the ground. Hence this article reviewed the myriad aspects of zero-harm safety-first scenario in the corporates and reinforced this concept proactively to be an important factor towards zero-harm or vision zero objectives. Companies' major goal is Zero Harm for People, Plant and Property. Zero-harm needs to be understood in terms of not only physical injuries but also emotional injuries which are more frequent. Also, zero-harm from workplace to anyplace as many incidents happens outside workplace. Organisations fail in the balancing act of enforcement and reinforcement for zero-harm and invite bad news of incidents, accidents, fires, fatalities, injuries, disabilities, loss of assets and so on. Leadership of some companies demonstrated their safety excellence journey towards the aim of zero-harm. Zero-harm is not delivered by a speech or slogan; rather it is saving someone's life who feeds a family. It is care, care and actively care. The mental health initiatives at the workplace have been growing in numbers over the past few years. Addressing mental health wellbeing comprehensively and aligning organisation's policies are crucial (Pandya et al., 2022). How much do employees feel positive in organisations is important for their psychological safety and health (Kaila, 2024).

Zero-harm both at work and at home is crucial to understand and implement safer culture (Clarke Energy, 2024). Workmen who go home safely every day and also return to their workplace safely, bag a huge benefit of zero-

harm safer culture of an organisation. Risks if not managed efficiently can also negatively affect the business outcomes. Zero-harm from workplace to anyplace is the key for long-term planned cultural transformation. Harm is a harm whether it is physical, emotional, ethical, environmental, property, or any way, anywhere. Organisations can do it, once they take it to practice. Positive organisations make it easier to develop zero-harm objective than reactive ones. All employees! Let's do BBS (behaviour-based safety) once a day, enjoy zero-harm every day!

Harm is defined beyond limits. In our societies, we witness that people get killed while visiting overcrowded religious places. Senior academicians like Dr Jitendra Mohan and Dr Gautam Gawali are of the opinions that undue religiosity fostered by our politicians to convert mass voting behaviour in their favour is another important dimension. It is a great tragedy that politicians use religion but fail miserably to protect the followers (Personal Communications, 2024). A national conference on safety culture was held at IIM Mumbai on 3rd Feb 2024 (Financial Express, 2024) on the theme "One Nation One goal - Zero-harm" which discussed myriad aspects to achieve freedom from incidents, fires and fatalities. Only single goal of the positive safety culture is that "nobody should get injured".

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