How Ethnic Culture Affects Workplace Safety Culture



The notion of “safety culture” recognizes that workplace safety isn’t just about machines and industrial processes but human behaviour. That’s great insight. The problem is in positing a world of human beings holding the same basic values, beliefs, and conceptions. The byproduct of seeing the workforce as monolithic is the assumption that the steps we take to “build a safety culture” affect all employees the same way.

That can’t be right. Every person is wired differently. One differentiating factor is ethnicity. People from Mexico don’t see the world the same way as people from Japan. This culture of ethnicity is bound to have some impact on safety culture.

The Korean Air Experience

In his book, *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell uses the example of Korean Air to illustrate how the ethnic makeup of workers can affect a company’s safety record. Airline crashes, mercifully, are a rare occurrence. So, for one airline to experience seven of them in a decade is unfathomable. But that’s what happened to Korean Air.

From 1988 to 1998, United Airlines had a loss rate of 0.27 per million departures. In other words, United lost a plane in an accident once every four million flights. Over this same period, Korean Air’s loss rate was 4.79 per million departures. The airline’s safety record was so dismal that Canada almost revoked its landing privileges.

In 2000, Korean Air hired an outsider from Delta Air Lines named David Greenberg to run flight operations. Greenberg did a thorough evaluation of the language skills and training of airline flight crews and concluded they “were trapped in roles dictated by the heavy weight of their country’s cultural legacy.” **Translation:** Certain aspects of Korean culture were increasing risk of crashes on Korean Air flights.

The specific problem was the Korean deference to authority. Gladwell points out that the Korean language includes six conversational levels indicative of hierarchy. These language levels apparently played a role in the 1997 Korean Air crash in Guam. Tapes from the flight’s Blackbox revealed that the first officer and flight engineer recognized the captain was tired and oblivious to the plane’s mechanical dangers. But

they could only “hint” at the problems; confronting the captain directly was out of the question even after it became clear that disaster was imminent.

So, Korean Air completely revamped its language protocols and training procedures. Among other things, flight crews were required to communicate with one another in English during flights to reduce their inhibitions about questioning authority.

Things improved dramatically. From 1999 to 2009, Korean Air had no crashes. In 2006, the airline received the Phoenix Award for its safety transformation and experts now consider it one of the world’s safest carriers.

Takeaway

Gladwell isn’t suggesting that ethnicity determines or is even a dominant factor in safety performance. What he is saying is that nationality, language, and culture may impact how safely workers do their jobs. That’s worth considering when setting out to build a safety culture at your own company.