

# Introduction to organisational culture: understand

## IOSH guides

This free *Introduction to organisational culture: understand* is part of a series from IOSH aimed at workers, supervisors and managers (including senior managers) and links to the competency framework theme identified on the next page. The series provides general information on a range of important occupational safety and health (OSH) topics, helping the reader to understand better the role they can play in ensuring that OSH risks are well-managed.

For other titles in this Introduction series, search for 'IOSH guides'.

Readers who are IOSH members can access more in-depth information in a parallel set of guides, which include the principles underpinning various topics, with practical examples and case studies. These guides cover all competencies specified in IOSH's competency framework and can be downloaded from our [members' resources page](#).

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## The IOSH competency framework

The framework covers all the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed by occupational safety and health professionals. It has 69 competencies, divided into 12 areas which together make up three categories:

- 1 technical
- 2 core
- 3 behavioural.

These guides align with the framework with four levels:

- 1 understand
- 2 implement
- 3 lead
- 4 innovate.

Some guides are aligned to multiple levels. The levels indicate your career stage and your experience as an OSH professional.

[Find out more about the competency framework.](#)

This guide aligns to the following technical competencies:

- organisational culture: understand level.



# Introduction to organisational culture

Culture is a way of doing things. It's the characteristics, knowledge, values and attitudes of a group of people encompassing elements such as language, religion, beliefs and social habits. It is a shared pattern of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understandings, that are learned through socialisation and often shared, taught or copied.

## Organisational and safety culture

Organisational culture is mainly created by organisations developing their own way of doing things. Cultures have some generic characteristics such as structure, rules, conduct and ways of thinking (for example, shared knowledge, beliefs, values and implicit assumptions).

It could be argued that there is no difference between safety culture and organisational culture. The key characteristics of an organisation's culture will certainly influence attitudes and approaches to managing health and safety issues.

The term 'safety culture' is used in a holistic way, incorporating health in the culture of the organisation. It is used in many organisations and sources of information instead of 'health and safety culture'.

The word 'health' is often omitted because health issues are harder to recognise from observation alone and are not always manifested immediately.

A poor safety culture can encourage a social perception where not complying with safe or healthy working practices is acceptable. This doesn't help an organisation to take effective action to solve problems.

Organisations that have this kind of culture can have the same underlying attitude to all processes and procedures. This can result in poor product quality, poor service delivery (eg, in its performance) and financial control as well as poor safety practices.

Some organisations work with the mindset that safety culture is important and the point of many discussions around the workplace. There is no real clarity around this or a single specific model to work with: it is often the subject of conflict and can be misunderstood.

# Cultural maturity models

Safety maturity models are a popular way of establishing the safety culture in organisations and a good framework that OSH professionals can use to assess an organisation. These models enable an organisation to decide on the cultural values that are most appropriate for them to adopt.

There are various models and tools available: no one size fits all.

Models usually show various stages of cultural maturity. Organisations at the highest stage (sometimes called integrated, mature or proactive) have spent many years investing in the organisation and their workers.

Cultural maturity takes time to develop and there is no one simple method to achieve this level, as there are many factors that are specific to each organisation and sector.

For some organisations, remaining at an embryonic level is suitable and sufficient for the nature of the activities they undertake. The risks they face may be low, or they are at the early stages of conception or their economic situation does not allow them to develop beyond this level.

Characteristically in an integrated (mature) organisation:

- a pragmatic business-focused and challenge-based culture drives innovation in processes and approaches
- OSH is placed against the broader context of the organisational governance framework and across the entirety of the value chain
- the safety team is viewed as an enabling function, driving broader business value
- risk profiling differentiates between operational and significant risks and drives focus on major risks
- strong visible leadership behaviours are evident through all layers of the organisation and are credible and impactful.

# Improving safety culture

Before improving the safety culture of an organisation, it's important to understand the current level of maturity.

There are three aspects which build towards an integrated safety culture:

- The workplace. Ensure the workplace is legally compliant and organised for safe working. Take into consideration the physical aspects of the working environment, which will influence workers' attitudes towards safe and healthy working. Are the tools and equipment well maintained? What is the standard of housekeeping?
- Management systems. Put systems in place to maintain standards and critical elements of risk control. Ensure workers are informed, trained and comply with safe systems of work.

- Human factors and behaviours. Understand the underlying issues of leaders and workers and how this is demonstrated through behaviours. To influence and shape desired behaviours in the workplace the organisation must recognise and commit to occupational safety and health.

The focus of these three elements will change over time. Figure 1 shows the proportionate shift over time from early stages through to later stages of maturity.

## Focus shift during OSH cultural maturity

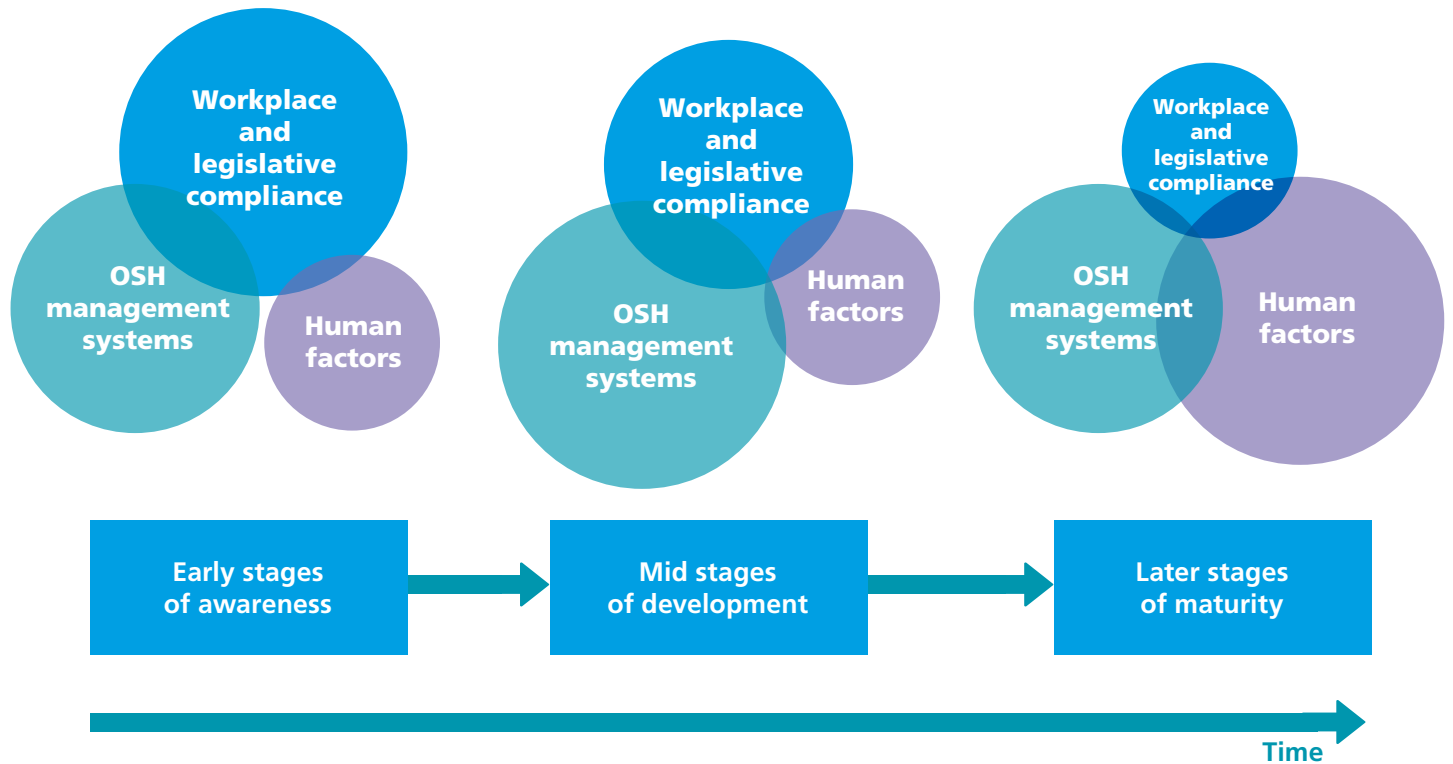


Figure 1: Focus shift of OSH cultural maturity

# Continuous improvement

Although the organisation may feel it has covered these three areas, there is always room for improvements to be made.

In safety the common framework to continuous improvement is the plan, do, check, act model. A simple description of the PDCA cycle for continuous improvement is:

- **Plan** – identify the opportunity and create a plan for improvement
- **Do** – test any planned changes where the results can easily be seen and measured
- **Check** – evaluate the results from the test and lessons learned
- **Act** – if the test worked, implement the change and monitor the results.

Using the PDCA cycle will highlight gradual improvements the organisation can make to health and safety practices and procedures.

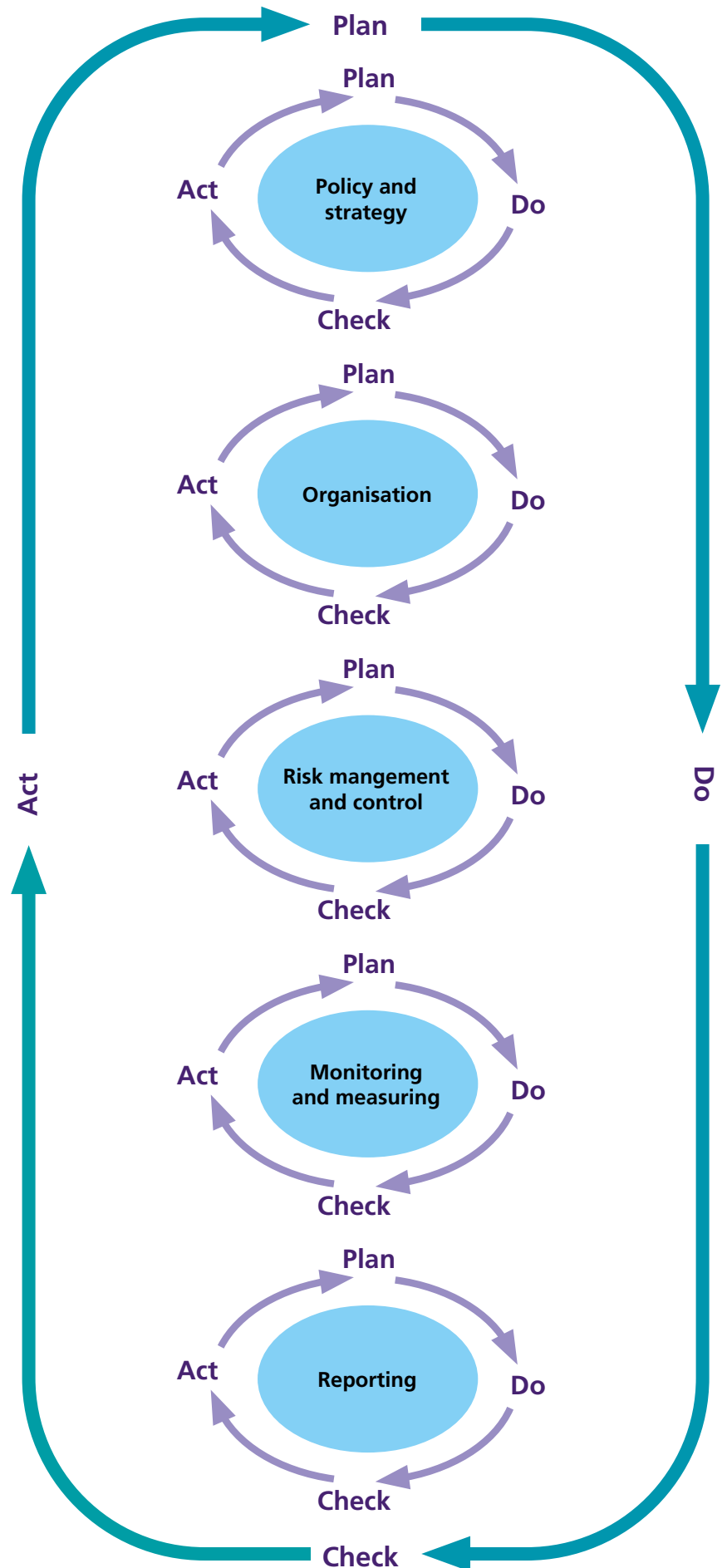







Figure 2: IOSH's 'Plan, Do, Check, Act' model

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We set standards and support, develop and connect our members with resources, guidance, events and training. We're the voice of the profession and campaign on issues that affect millions of working people.

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