Safety Lessons from Down Under

Culture is a common concept in the safety world these days. It seems everyone is talking about the influence of corporate culture on safety-related behaviors and attitudes. And it's commonplace to entertain the need to change culture in order to effect long-term improvement in safety performance.

Culture is defined in part by our overt behavior (including what we say) and the context in which behavior occurs (including engineering interventions). Cultures vary dramatically between countries and even among organizations within the same country. Last October I was reminded of cultural diversity and its influence on safety when returning from a two-week lecture tour across Australia.

After two weeks down under, I looked forward to returning to America and catching up with U.S. happenings among colleagues, friends, and family. But in contrast to my Australia experiences, aspects of the U.S. culture were quite contrasting. Arriving at LAX (the Los Angeles airport) from Brisbane, I was reminded of the increased security at American airports. I had experienced much fewer checkpoints during domestic travel in Australia, and was never asked to show a picture ID along with my boarding pass. Furthermore, in Australia, I never saw a traveler receive an individual security check beyond the standard checkpoint for carry-on luggage.

I do not wish to imply a value judgment about differential security procedures, but it's possible this cultural difference reflects and affects the greater interpersonal trust I observed in Australia. For example, when a store owner in Perth did not have a machine to accept my credit card, he allowed me

to leave his store with the merchandise I was purchasing and the promise that I would take my credit card to another location in the busy market for appropriate payment.

On another occasion, I was about to take a photograph of three of my Aussie friends along the active riverfront in Brisbane when a young man, about 25 years old, stepped up and offered to take the picture so I could be in it. That had never happened to me before. In the U.S., I need to ask for this kind of assistance. Then, when I find a participant, I can't help but worry that this person might run off with my camera.

When traveling on Australian airlines, I received 100% compliance with my Airline Lifesaver card. This intervention card asks flight attendants to read an announcement that reminds passengers to use their vehicle safety belts when continuing their travel with ground transportation. In contrast, on my first return flight in the U.S. (from Los Angeles to San Francisco), the flight attendant politely told me "we're not allowed to modify our announcements." I have distributed the Airline Lifesaver on more than 1,000 U.S. flights over 17 years, and less than 50% of the flight attendants have honored my safety request. It's noteworthy that Australia was the first country to pass safety-belt use laws (in the mid-1970's), and more than 95% of Australians buckle-up, compared to about 70% of Americans.

Relevance to Safety

These few reflections about my recent adventures in Australia illustrate the potential impact of culture on the success of a safety-related intervention.

Culture determines whether certain safety procedure can be implemented effectively. But cultures can also change as the result of a safety-related intervention, thereby enabling acceptance and application of another intervention.

Here are a few large-scale safety techniques I observed in Australia which would surely reduce injuries if used in the U.S. By considering the barriers we would expect to encounter when attempting to supply these injury-reduction strategies in the U.S., we can begin to define the gap between a real and an ideal safety culture.

The Challenge of Driver Training

In Australia, teens can begin learning to drive at age 16 (with adult supervision) after first passing a written test. Then they display special plates on the front and back of their vehicles to warn other drivers of their inexperience. They begin self-monitoring their driving behavior at age 16.5 by maintaining a log book that documents at least 25 hours of learning in a variety of road and traffic conditions. At age 17, teens may demonstrate they can drive unsupervised by passing a driving and hazard-recognition test. If they pass, they change their learner's license plates (a black L on a yellow background) to "proviso" plates (a red P on white background), which they must keep on their vehicle for two years.

What is Drunk Driving?

What is the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level for legal intoxication in your state – .08 or .10? For Australians the legal alcohol limit is .05, and sobriety checks for this level of intoxication are quite common. Moreover, if .05 is

suspected by an on-the-spot breathalyzer assessment, the driver is removed

from the vehicle and taken to the police station for a blood test. Young Aussie

drivers, specifically those with special L or P plates, cannot have a BAC greater

than .02 if they want to retain their license and drive home from a sobriety check

point.

Is "Big Brother" Watching?

In the larger Australian cities, cameras are installed at most major

intersections to monitor "red-light running." With photographs of license plates,

it's possible to mail perpetrators a certain financial penalty for not stopping at a

red light. Moreover, most cab drivers have a video camera in their vehicles, an

apparent deterrent of robbery and violence. It's likely these public monitoring

interventions facilitate acceptance of the interpersonal observation and feedback

procedures of behavior-based safety (BBS).

An Auditory Signal at Intersections

I was pleasantly surprised that every city intersection I crossed in

Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane included both an auditory and a visual signal

to control pedestrian behavior. Specifically, the "Don't Walk" signal is

accompanied by a pulsating tone. Then when the visual sign changes to "Walk,"

the sound changes from intermittent to continuous. This auditory signal is

obviously invaluable for the visually impaired, but I perceived a benefit for

everyone. A combined visual and auditory warning to remain on the curb is more

difficult to ignore than a sign alone, especially in the presence of other

pedestrians who are waiting for the dual signal to indicate it's safe to cross the street.

No Cell Phones While Driving

Cell phones are clearly as popular in Australia as in the U.S. However, in Australia it is illegal to use hand-held cell phones while driving, and I never saw a driver in Australia using a cell phone. This is not a new law, having been in effect for at least two years in all Australian jurisdictions.

Controlling Hotel-Room Lighting

Have you ever had difficulty finding the light switch in a hotel room? Or, perhaps you find a light switch, but it doesn't provide sufficient light to enter the room safely? To conserve electricity, do you always turn off all of the lights in your hotel room before leaving? Sometimes this is impossible because a light must be left on in order to exit the room safely.

Although I've encountered each of these lighting problems in American hotels, I experienced none in Australia. Every hotel room I stayed in across four cities provided an approach to electricity control that was unique and innovative (from my biased U.S. perspective). Adjacent to the exit/entrance door inside the hotel room is a slot for the room key, which controls all of the electricity in the room. Thus, when guests insert their key in this slot all of the lights are activated; and when leaving their room and removing their key, all of the electricity to the room is deactivated (turning off lights, television, and air conditioning). The safety and conservation advantages of this simple engineering intervention are obvious. Plus, I always knew where to find my room key.

In Conclusion

So what's the "psychology of safety" lesson in these select experiences from a two-week tour of Australia? I certainly did not see enough to define relationships between culture and behavior, nor even to delineate basic differences between U.S. and Australian cultures. However, I did sample some safety and conservation interventions in Australia that benefit human behavior and prevent unintentional injury. Each of these interventions is feasible for immediate application in the U.S.

However, some of these interventions would be very difficult to implement in the U.S. culture. Which ones? The ones that imply the most loss of individual freedom but would likely reduce the most injuries and fatalities (i.e., raising the legal driving age, improving driving instruction, and enforcing a lower BAC for driving while intoxicated). That says something about our culture and the special challenges confronting the safety professional in America.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for Applied Behavior Systems
Virginia Tech

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions help organizations develop a Total Safety Culture. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.