

## A New Perspective on Safety Management - Safety Communication for Safety Culture in the Swedish Pulp- and Paper Industry

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Safety management is a central management activity in high-risk industries. We propose a new way of thinking about safety management by exploring the role of safety communication for safety culture, as opposed to understanding safety communication merely as an artifact of safety culture. Applying an in-depth qualitative interview study approach with 39 participants from a Swedish pulp- and paper mill, the study identifies enabling and hindering factors of safety communication for safety culture. Enabling factors include leadership commitment, employee engagement and involvement, knowledge sharing, psychosocial wellbeing, and effective reporting and risk management. Hindering factors involve organizational fragmentation, neglect of psychosocial aspects, lack of mentoring and training, dysfunctional reporting systems, and a culture of silence regarding safety. Theoretically, the study contributes with shedding light on the role of safety communication for shaping and aligning safety culture dimensions and processes throughout an organization via targeted, engaging and holistic safety management. Further, we advance theory by observing a greater role of psychosocial aspects in safety communication than previously recognized. Practical implications manifest in the need to incorporate psychosocial aspects in safety management as well as actively leveraging the aligning power of safety communication. Further research can depart from this study and can further deepen our understanding of mechanisms through which safety communication influences safety culture. Managers, policy makers and practitioners are equipped with insights on how to strengthen enabling factors and improve hindering factors to foster safety culture via safety communication.

*Keywords:* workplace safety, occupational safety, safety management, safety culture, safety communication, pulp industry, paper industry, forest industry

### 1. Introduction

The pulp- and paper industry has a particularly dangerous work environment (Mathiassen et al., 2023; Torén et al., 2023; Neitzel et al., 2022; Ulvenblad and Barth, 2021). Although many companies in this industry improve the physical work environment, physical safety issues can only be improved to a certain point, making intangible safety aspects equally important. Safety culture is an established concept to understand these intangible safety aspects and their effect on safety performance (Bisbey et al., 2021; Kalteh et al., 2021; Zwetsloot et al., 2017).

Although the close relation between safety communication and safety culture is a consensus in previous literature, it often remains unclear

how exactly safety culture and communication are linked to each other (Kalteh et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2013). One common proposition is that safety communication is an artifact or result of safety culture (Gallier and Duarte, 2025; Tappura et al., 2022; Vierendeels et al., 2018). While this perspective is a theoretical and practically proven direction of correlation, it also potentially misses the chance to acknowledge the effects safety communication can have on safety culture in reverse. If safety communication is one of the most important artifacts of safety culture, it is worth researching safety communication factors that can influence safety culture.

Thus, we want to open an alternative way of thinking by exploring the meaning of safety

communication for safety culture, providing a new perspective on safety management. To better understand how safety communication influences safety culture, we explore enabling and hindering factors. Consequently, the research questions can be formulated as the following:

RQ1: What is the role of safety communication for safety culture and what are enabling and hindering factors of safety communication?

The aim of the research is to explore the role of safety communication for safety culture by unveiling enabling and hindering factors. The theoretical contribution lies in proposing a new direction of influence where safety communication affects safety culture in a context that has not been researched in this regard before. Thus, the study contributes to understanding and utilizing safety communication for safety culture in dangerous manufacturing contexts. These insights into how physically dangerous industries can leverage safety communication for safety culture are applicable to comparable work environments in other manufacturing industries. Moreover, industry representatives, workers, union members, policy makers and managers get a comprehensive account of the role of safety communication for safety culture, and how to incorporate knowledge about hindering and enabling factors in safety management.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Safety culture is often conceptualized as reciprocal cycle of situation, person and behavior (Cooper, 2000) or of actions such as plan, do, check and act (Reniers et al., 2011). Another classical safety culture definition refers to safety culture as a value through behavior-based and person-based principles (Geller, 1994). Safety culture is also often defined as the artefacts, values, attitudes and assumptions regarding safety, relating the concept to organizational culture and culture in general (Guldenmund, 2000). However, safety culture is also conceptualized from different theoretical perspectives, for example by considering social identity theory (Tear and Reader, 2023), or by relating the concept to safety climate and safety performance (Kalteh et al., 2021). Safety culture definitions also often highlight different layers and dimensions, for example (a) normative, anthropological and pragmatist notions, (b) safety culture integration, differentiation and fragmentation, (c) linguistic, knowledge-based

and philosophical levels, (d) human, technological and perceptual domains or (e) psychological, situational and behavioral dimensions (Ismail et al., 2021; Vierendeels et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2013; Haukelid, 2008). Further, commitment of management, supervisors and employees are critical safety culture factors, with a special emphasis on the relevance of communication for employee commitment to safety culture (Tappura et al., 2022). Another safety culture model integrates different enabling factors forming the assumptions, values, norms and artifacts of safety culture that in turn results in behaviors like communication, collaboration and reporting. These enacting behaviors then influence safety outcomes that recursively affect safety culture and its underlying assumptions, norms and values (Kilcullen et al., 2022; Bisbey et al., 2021).

Communication is a critical factor of safety culture (Kilcullen et al., 2022; Bisbey et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2021). Safety communication directly supports employee commitment as the biggest factor of safety culture satisfaction (Tappura et al., 2022). Communication as the triangulation of trust in the organization, leadership and management commitment is central for shared perceptions on safety (Vierendeels et al., 2018). Listening to workers, adapting to safety subcultures and related organizational learning as integral part of safety communication is proposed as central leverage point of safety culture improvement (Gallier and Duarte, 2025). Also, communication is a mediator between safety culture and safety performance, highlighting that safety communication enhances working conditions, positively impacts employee's safety behavior and attitude and all in all reduces incidents (Naji et al., 2022). Symmetrical, leadership-supported, open, effective and multidirectional safety communication leads to employee satisfaction, contributing to achieving safety goals (Zara et al., 2023). Further, safety communication is positively related to higher degrees of safety behavior, safety knowledge, compliance, safety participation, lower accident rates and greater success of safety programs (Cigularov et al., 2010). Vertical safety communication means safety communication flowing up and down in the organization's hierarchical order (Curcuruto and Griffin, 2023; Kines et al., 2010), while horizontal safety communication is about safety communication on the same hierarchical level, for

example between employees, teams or departments (Paolucci et al., 2021; Motter and Santos, 2017). Communication strengthens social bonds and fosters a sense of community among employees, resulting in heightened hazard recognition, lower accident rates and improved safety culture (Huang et al., 2018; Albert and Hallowell, 2017; Alsamadani et al., 2013).

### 3. Materials and methods

Data was collected at a Swedish pulp- and paper mill that produces different paper and board types for use in medicine, industry and packaging. The qualitative data collection process is based on a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that focus group interview participants are equipped with relevant and extensive knowledge and experience that contributes to fulfilling the research aims. Also, purposive sampling is suitable because it allows for controlling for participants to represent different worker groups, which contributes to a more diverse dataset. Because the aim was to investigate a communication topic, we opted for collecting qualitative data through semi-structured focus group interviews, because this approach recognizes both dialogue between researchers and participants as well as interactions between participants themselves (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013). Cross-validation and comparison between the different groups is used as a countermeasure for common problems in focus-group interview designs like group-thinking and dominant voices (Denzin, 2023). In total, 17 focus groups with 39 participants (Table 1) were interviewed in May 2024.

Table 1. Overview of semi-structured focus group interviews.

Focus group	Number of participants	Number of focus groups
New employees	10	5
Experienced employees	5	2
Very experienced employees	6	3
Health and safety representatives	9	4
Leaders and managers	9	3

The semi-structured focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed to yield complete data so that the researchers could focus on the conversation. The groups were divided into (a) new employees with up to four years of experience, (b) experienced employees with four to ten years of experience, (c) very experienced employees with over ten years of experience, (d) health and safety representatives and (e) leaders and managers.

For qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis was used. Coding was conducted in three cycles (Saldaña, 2021), with the first cycle producing more descriptive codes, the second cycle providing codes that pay more attention to inference in the data, and the third cycle resulting in reflective codes that relate to theory and concepts. Also, related codes were subsumed in categories and related categories are condensed in themes to account for similarities, differences, contrasts and relationships in the coded data (Lester et al., 2020). An overview of the coding process is given in table 2.

Table 2. Overview of coding and categorization in qualitative data analysis.

Raw data	Codes	Categorization
Transcripts from semi-structured focus group interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership commitment</li> <li>Employee engagement and involvement</li> <li>Knowledge sharing</li> <li>Psychosocial wellbeing</li> <li>Reporting and risk management</li> </ul>	Enabling factors
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizational fragmentation</li> <li>Neglect of psychosocial aspects</li> <li>Lack of training and mentoring</li> <li>Dysfunctional reporting and feedback systems</li> <li>Cultural obstacles</li> </ul>	Hindering factors

Following this process, in the first coding cycle, codes were created by primarily utilizing wording from the participants themselves, while gradually shifting to codes that correspond to prior literature and conceptual perspectives when progressing to the second and third coding cycle. In the third cycle, coding is oriented at the key concepts of this study.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 *Enabling factors of communication for safety culture*

Leadership commitment to safety and safety communication is an important factor for safety culture. Safety communication is facilitated by leaders being actively engaged in the dialogue around safety and prioritizing safety in action and conversation. This becomes clear in employees saying that “leaders value and appreciate when you take up safety questions” or that “leaders emphasize safety in every meeting and conversation”. Thus, leaders not only initiating, promoting and partaking in safety conversations, but also taking ideas, concerns and viewpoints of employees seriously is key for leveraging safety communication as a means for safety culture, as leaders “talk to employees and show interest”. Also, leaders “always try to set a good example themselves when they are in production”, which shows the importance of role modelling and creating a close relationship between employees and management that enables collaboration and horizontal communication across hierarchies for improved safety.

Employee engagement and involvement is equally important. This promotes peer collaboration and information exchange, which facilitates barrier free vertical communication. For example, employees state that they “work very closely with supervisors and other leading staff”. This ensures that safety and safety communication is open to anyone to participate, and it contributes to an atmosphere where there is no hesitation to speak up about safety concerns. This is shown in statements such as “there are no barriers in being critical in addressing safety issues” or “it is easy for us to speak up about safety problems with our supervisors”. Another important factor is that safety communication is ongoing and continuous. This can be in informal conversations where “safety is talked about every day” or in regular meetings where “safety is always the first that is talked about”. Moreover, employees feeling responsible for “reminding

each other about risks, because you can become a little routine-blinded” and for “sharing knowledge and experience, for example about earlier incidents” leads to employees being motivated to shape their work environment and the organizational safety work proactively. In this way, safety communication involves employees in decisions regarding safety issues.

Informal and formal knowledge sharing is a vital aspect of safety communication for fostering safety culture. For example, a structured introduction program for new employees is essential. This is important for every new employee, but especially for employees who have not been working in the industry before, as “there are a lot of new impressions when you start, and then you need an experienced mentor who shows how it is done in practice”. However, it is also important that new employees are also informally welcomed by the existing team, and that experienced and skilled employees provide guidance and mentorship by sharing experience and best practices. In this sense, new employees value “being welcomed by the whole team” and “following someone who has a lot of experience” when being onboarded, which “creates a safe feeling, even when working on unfamiliar tasks”. Similarly, all employees should be included in an ongoing training scheme to deepen and update knowledge and skills. Employees value when they “can check and book training events” as this gives them access to an overview of their learned skills and training occasions. Also, continuous education is valued by employees because “they remind you about work safety issues”.

Psychosocial well-being also is a crucial factor for enabling safety communication, because it ensures employees feel safe about raising safety concerns. It also contributes to an atmosphere where everyone feels invited to share their viewpoints. Signs of a safe psychosocial work environment are employees feeling accepted as they are with their background, personality, opinions and experiences, as well as an open and visible conversation about addressing psychosocial work environment factors themselves and how they affect employees in their work and safety behavior. Several employees appreciate when they “feel safe about addressing personal issues”. Furthermore, employees feel “encouraged to speak up and to ask questions” about insecurities to contribute without fearing not being taken seriously.

Reporting and risk management can also serve as a forum for safety communication. Many employees think that “reporting makes safety work accessible and transparent to everyone” and that it “drives the company forward by giving everyone the opportunity to participate in improving safety”. Consequently, reporting serves as point of departure for including all employees in dialogues about safety and improvement decision and implementation. Conversations in the workforce often lead to issues being reported, for example when employees “discuss about an issue in the team which leads to writing a risk observation”. This process is facilitated by clear communication and reporting procedures which lead to immediate action. Ultimately, risk reporting schemes provide an accessible, transparent and comprehensive overview of risks, incidents and countermeasures to all employees while also enabling them to directly shape safety work.

#### ***4.2 Hindering factors of communication for safety culture***

Organizational fragmentation as hindering factor manifests in different ways. On the one hand, there are barriers in vertical communication between hierarchies and organizational layers, where employees state that “management is far away from us” or “leaders are not visible in production”. Further, there can be a feeling of management working against employees and vice versa. Here, employees often feel that “management does not want to really understand what happens in production” or that “leaders do not always listen to us and take us seriously”. This gap between employees and management often leads to employees not understanding why certain safety rules exist, because of “rules coming only top-down and are not discussed with us employees”, which in turn reduces compliance. On the other hand, fragmentation entails also horizontal communication barriers. Examples are “information loss in handovers between night shift and morning shift” or “poor feedback about how and when a task is done”. This can also lead to unclear responsibilities and differing safety practices in varying teams and departments, adventuring safety due to inconsistencies.

Further, the neglect of psychosocial aspects can significantly hinder safety communication as employees do not feel psychosocially safe to discuss sensitive or critical issues. Such ignorance of psychosocial can happen if “there is big focus

on physical safety, but we have little dialogue about how people feel and how they experience things” or if employees feel that they “cannot report on psychosocial issues because the system is not anonymous”. This also shows that without suitable forums, dialogue about psychosocial safety aspects is severely obstructed. This is aggravated when there is no systematic organizational support or understanding for talking about psychosocial issues. “Wanting to keep the group dynamic”, “feeling uncomfortable”, “not knowing whom to talk to” and “being afraid of negative consequences” are reasons for employees not being safe in raising psychosocial concerns.

A lack of training and mentoring is a further hindering factor, for example when “education is low in quality”, training “being conducted sloppily and hastily” or “being very general and unspecific for the different departments”. Thus, inconsistent training processes, insufficient resources provided for training or a lack of formal skill training through absent development, documentation and evaluation of employee’s competences can be subsumed under these hindering factors. Also, if the “introduction of new employees varies in different departments, it is somewhat better and somewhat worse in some shift teams”, the result is unstructured introduction schemes that contribute to organizational fragmentation. New employees feeling unsafe and stressed because “they have no one to ask” and because of leaders “not having the competence to lead” lead to problems with mentorship. If mentoring problems occur due to mentors “not being educated to train” or “showing unsafe practices”, the introduction of new employees can also become a hindering factor for safety communication.

Dysfunctional reporting and feedback systems are serious hindering factors, as this directly hinders both vertical and horizontal communication. In this sense, employees miss “direct verbal communication” compared to reported issues for which “you never get any feedback” as “important reported issues drown in the sheer number of reports” due to the requirement of writing a specific number of reports per year. This can lead to a feeling of safety problems being discussed, but without following action, making safety communication through reporting appear meaningless. This is worsened by inherently inefficient and untargeted reporting schemes. An overemphasis on quantity

of reported issues instead of quality and relevance leads to under- or overreporting with important issues getting lost in the mass of reports. This makes it hard to initiate an inclusive and meaningful conversation about safety issues because reporting schemes can be perceived as irrelevant and hampering action, undermining the relevance of safety communication through reporting.

Moreover, cultural obstacles themselves can serve as hindering factors for safety communication, connecting back to psychosocial safety communication issues. Here, a culture of silence plays a big role in hampering communication through not providing an environment where open dialogue about addressing safety issues is encouraged. This culture of silence can show itself by for example employees being reluctant to speak up or ask questions as some employees “do not dare to report negative issues because they fear that their contract is not prolonged” or “fear of being exposed in meetings together with sensitive reported issues”. There could even be silence about psychosocial and physical work environment aspects, where “conflicts are swept under the carpet” rather than being enacted constructively and openly.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

It becomes clear that communication is at the heart of different safety culture processes and dimensions. Many different scholars highlight that some form of knowledge and value sharing is a central defining dimension of safety communication for safety culture (Kilcullen et al., 2022; Tappura et al., 2022; Bisbey et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2013; Guldenmund, 2000; Geller, 1994). This can be confirmed by the results of this study that highlight the importance of knowledge sharing as well as employee engagement and involvement as enabling factors of safety communication for safety culture. Other studies emphasize the importance of vertical safety communication that is open, symmetrical between employees and managers and spanning different organizational hierarchies (Zara et al., 2023; Naji et al., 2022; Cigularov et al., 2010). This is reflected in this study through the result that leadership commitment and engagement to safety on the one side and active incorporation, feedback and equal dialogue and collaboration with employees on the other side are crucial enabling factors of safety

communication. Research also identifies horizontal safety communication being essential to safety culture, as it strengthens hazard recognition, fosters a sense of community through mutual support and acts as direct preventive safety measure by raising awareness (Paolucci et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2018; Motter and Santos, 2017). In our study, this is reflected in employees strongly valuing peer support and informal knowledge exchange.

The results also confirm that training interventions and introduction programs play an important role in facilitating safety communication, as this improves social bonds, creates a sense of community and raises safety awareness through informal peer-to-peer support (Paolucci et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2018; Motter and Santos, 2017). However, what current literature about safety culture and safety communication does not cover quite yet is that reporting systems, introduction schemes for new employees and training interventions can have a two-sided role for either enabling or hindering safety communication. For example, reporting schemes can serve as enabling communication forums for equal dialogue between employees and managers that results in collaboration for safety improvement, or it can significantly hinder safety communication if there are barriers to clear, relevant and timely feedback for reported issues, hindering feasible and relevant improvement measures. It is the same for the introduction for new employees and training: If introduction programs are inconsistent, unstructured, irrelevant and undocumented, they severely obstruct effective safety communication. On the other hand, introduction programs and training provide progress for safety culture if they are implemented in the opposite way.

Safety communication was also found to have a fundamental bridging function. Safety communication has a connecting property that aligns domains and dimensions of safety culture (Ismail et al., 2021; Vierendeels et al., 2018; Reniers et al., 2011; Haukelid, 2008; Cooper, 2000). We can confirm that safety communication contributes to developing safety culture from a state of fragmentation to a differentiation or even integration state (Haukelid, 2008), utilizing safety communication to adapt safety subcultures in the workforce (Gallier and Duarte, 2025). On the contrary, psychosocial wellbeing and work environment aspects are significant enabling and hindering aspects for safety communication in our

results but are not as represented in safety communication and safety culture literature. Of course, there are some accounts of the role of psychosocial aspects for safety communication and safety culture (Zara et al., 2023; Paolucci et al., 2021; Motter and Santos, 2017; Cigularov et al., 2010; Kines et al., 2010). But, and that is the interesting point, not in a direct and explicit way that identifies these psychosocial aspects as valuable conditions for safety communication and safety culture.

In summary, to answer RQ 1 (What is the role of safety communication for safety culture and what are enabling and hindering factors of safety communication?) safety communication facilitates core safety culture aspects and processes. Further, safety communication plays a bridging and aligning role for safety culture, helping to build transparency, collaboration, inclusiveness and a sense of community for a shared understanding of safety. Safety communication bridges different safety attitudes, individual backgrounds, group identities, organizational entities and hierarchies horizontally and vertically to foster a safety culture that engages everyone in the organization. Enabling factors of safety communication are leadership commitment, employee engagement and involvement, knowledge sharing, psychosocial wellbeing as well as effective reporting and risk management. Hindering factors manifest in organizational fragmentation, neglect of psychosocial aspects, lack of training and mentoring, dysfunctional reporting and feedback systems as well as cultural obstacles.

When it comes to theoretical implications, this study shows the effects of safety communication for safety culture, proposing an alternative to the dominating view of safety communication being an artifact or result of safety culture. The study revealed the importance of psychosocial safety and work environment aspects for safety communication. However, there is a theoretical gap in psychosocial aspects in safety communication that needs to be investigated further. Another theoretical contribution lies in identifying the bridging function of vertical and horizontal safety communication that connects and facilitates multiple important safety culture dimensions. Untangling the complex mutual relationship between safety communication and safety culture further is another future research possibility. More research is also needed about how safety

communication can help to align fragmented safety cultures.

Practical implications arise in organizations needing to pay more attention to actively incorporating psychosocial aspects in safety work to foster employee engagement and involvement. This could be done by for example implementing a possibility to report on psychosocial safety risks as well and not only on physical risks. Also, being aware of and addressing potentially differing safety cultures allows organizations to leverage safety communication more effectively in aligning safety culture. Strengthening enabling factors and actively improving on hindering factors of safety communication is an important takeaway for practitioners who seek to align and develop safety culture in their organization. Industry representatives should also recognize that safety culture and safety communication influence each other, meaning that changes in one affect the other.

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