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The influence of organizational culture on the emergence of a blaming culture and its implications for workplace safety: A review article

Gilang Arya Ramadhan^{1*}, Didik Mustakim¹, Achmad Jusuf Zulfikar²

^{1*} Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, Jl. Blimbingsari No.37, Blimbing Sari, Caturtunggal, Depok, Sleman, Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta 55281, Indonesia

² Universitas Medan Area, Indonesia, Jl. Kolam No. 1, Medan Estate, Medan, 20223, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author: gilangaryamadhan@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Organizational culture plays a fundamental role in shaping employee behavior, including how occupational safety and health (OSH) practices are implemented and sustained. A toxic organizational culture can give rise to a blaming culture, in which individuals are unfairly blamed for workplace accidents or incidents without addressing the underlying systemic causes. This review article aims to explore the connection between organizational culture, the emergence of blaming culture, and its implications for workplace safety. Using a narrative literature review methodology, the study analyzed 30 peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2024, sourced from reputable databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The review revealed that rigid organizational structures, top-down communication styles, and a strong focus on outcomes over processes often contribute to the formation of blaming cultures. Conversely, organizational cultures that encourage transparency, open communication, continuous learning from errors, and transformational leadership are more likely to foster a just culture, which balances accountability with learning and supports proactive safety management. The article concludes that cultural transformation within organizations is essential for dismantling blame-oriented practices. Implementing supportive and inclusive cultural strategies can significantly enhance employee trust, encourage reporting of safety concerns, and ultimately create a safer and more resilient working environment.

Keywords: Organizational culture; blaming culture; just culture; work safety; work organization

1. INTRODUCTION

Occupational safety and health (K3) is an essential foundation for every organization, especially those engaged in production, services, or industries with high-risk levels. The main objective of implementing the K3 system is to protect workers from potential physical, chemical, or psychosocial hazards that can occur in the work environment [1]. But more than that, K3 also plays a strategic role in ensuring the continuity of company operations through the creation of a safe and efficient work system. Organizations that are consistent in implementing K3 tend to have low work accident rates, decreased absenteeism rates, and increased work productivity [2]. A safe and healthy work environment contributes to increased job satisfaction, employee loyalty, and the organization's reputation in the eyes of the public and stakeholders [3]. However, the effectiveness of K3 implementation does not only depend on the availability of policy instruments, standard operating procedures, or safety equipment alone [4]. Non-technical factors such as work climate and organizational culture play an important role



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in shaping work behavior that is in line with K3 principles [5]. Organizational culture, which includes the system of values, beliefs, norms, and patterns of interaction between individuals in the organization, is the foundation for building collective awareness of the importance of safety [6]. If the organizational culture is positive, participatory, and supports risk reporting, then the implementation of OHS will be more effective. Therefore, organizational culture transformation is one of the keys to building a sustainable OHS system [7].

One form of organizational culture that has the potential to greatly hinder the successful implementation of an occupational safety and health (K3) system is blaming culture [8]. This culture is characterized by the tendency of the organization, especially management, to directly blame individuals for every error, accident, or work incident that occurs, without conducting an in-depth analysis of the systemic root causes [9]. Excessive focus on finding the guilty party results in the loss of the main essence of safety evaluation, namely the overall improvement of the work system [10]. In a work environment influenced by a blaming culture, workers will feel emotionally and psychologically unsafe. Fear of possible sanctions or punishment makes them reluctant to report unsafe conditions, near misses, or even work accidents that occur [11]. As a result, the potential for early preventive and corrective action is severely limited. This blame culture also undermines teamwork, reduces trust between employees and management, and inhibits innovation and open discussion of risk and safety [12]. When organizations prioritize punishment over learning, the OHS system becomes reactive, only moving after an incident occurs, rather than being proactive in preventing harm [13]. Therefore, organizations need to recognize that building a fair and open work culture is more supportive of the long-term success of the OHS system than an approach that focuses on individual errors [14].

The impact of blaming culture on the effectiveness of occupational safety and health (K3) implementation cannot be underestimated. One of the most obvious consequences is the emergence of resistance or reluctance from workers to report unsafe conditions, near misses, or minor incidents that can be early indicators of the potential for more serious work accidents [15]. When employees feel that reporting risks will result in punishment, reprimands, or even stigmatization from superiors or colleagues, they tend to choose to remain silent. This situation is very detrimental to the organization because important information that should be used to improve the OHS system is withheld. Potential hazards that could have been identified and prevented early on develop into major incidents that have a wide impact, not only on individual safety but also on the reputation and sustainability of the Company's operations [16]. In addition, blaming culture creates a stressful and psychologically tense work atmosphere. Employees feel as if they are being watched at all times and are not given room to make human errors. This leads to decreased engagement in safety activities, weakens the sense of ownership of the K3 system, and ultimately hurts overall team performance [17]. Therefore, organizations need to build a supportive culture, encourage open reporting without fear, and make mistakes as learning opportunities. This kind of work culture is the main foundation for a sustainable, effective, and continuously improving OHS system.

This article aims to provide an in-depth review of the role of organizational culture in shaping blaming culture and to analyze the extent to which the existence of this blaming culture affects the effectiveness of the implementation of occupational safety and health (OHS) in the work environment. In this context, organizational culture is understood as a set of values, norms, and collective behaviors that influence how individuals and groups respond to work situations, including when errors or incidents occur. Blaming culture, as a negative manifestation of organizational culture, not only impacts relationships between individuals but also creates structural barriers to incident reporting, risk evaluation, and safety-based decision making. By reviewing various scientific literature and relevant case studies, this article attempts to identify the mechanisms of the formation of blaming culture, its impact on the implementation of OHS, and strategic recommendations for building a more supportive, transparent, and learning-oriented organizational culture and continuous improvement.

2. METHOD

The method used in this study is a narrative literature review, which is a systematic yet flexible approach that aims to collect, evaluate, and synthesize relevant literature narratively, without following the stages of quantitative meta-analysis. This approach was chosen because it provides space for the author to explore complex and multidimensional themes, such as the relationship between organizational culture and occupational safety. The literature search and selection process was carried out carefully through various internationally reputable scientific databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. These sources were chosen because they provide publications from academic journals that have gone through a peer-review process, thus guaranteeing the quality and validity of the information cited. The articles analyzed cover a variety of disciplines, including organizational management, industrial safety, work psychology, and organizational behavior, which are relevant to support the objectives of the study.

The inclusion criteria in the selection of articles were formulated to ensure that the literature used was truly closely related to the main topic of the study. The selected articles must have been published between 2018 and 2024 to reflect the latest developments in research on organizational culture and occupational safety systems. In addition, only articles written in English and Indonesian were considered so that they could be analyzed thoroughly by the authors. Articles included in this study must also contain a focus on discussing issues such as blaming culture, just culture, and safety culture, both theoretically and based on empirical case studies. From the initial search results, more than 80 articles were identified. However, after a screening process based on abstracts, topic relevance, and full-text accessibility, a total of 30 articles were selected as the main analysis material. These articles represent a variety of organizational contexts, ranging from the oil and gas industry, manufacturing, and healthcare, to the construction sector.

The analysis was conducted qualitatively with a thematic approach, where the authors identified important patterns, similarities, and differences in the findings of each article reviewed. The main focus of the analysis is how a particular organizational culture can encourage the formation of a blaming culture and vice versa, and how the implementation of a just culture and safety culture can strengthen the implementation of a proactive and sustainable occupational safety system. This study also examines various strategies proposed in the literature to change a blaming culture into a learning culture, including the role of leadership, a non-punitive incident reporting system, and strengthening two-way communication between management and workers. The findings are then synthesized to produce a complete picture of the role of organizational culture in the effectiveness of the OHS system. The results of this study are expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to organizational management, especially in designing cultural interventions that support occupational safety comprehensively and sustainably in various industrial sectors.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organizational culture and its influence

Organizational culture is a set of values, norms, and beliefs that develop within an institution and serve as guidelines in determining behavior, attitudes, and communication patterns between individuals within it. This culture is formed from the accumulation of managerial practices, leadership, reward systems, and collective experiences of the organization over time. In the context of occupational safety, organizational culture influences how individuals perceive risk, respond to incidents, and participate in the safety system. Organizations that implement an open and collaborative culture tend to encourage active worker participation in incident reporting and improvement efforts. Conversely, hierarchical and authoritarian cultures often create fear and distrust among workers, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the overall OHS system. Therefore, understanding the characteristics of organizational culture is very important as a basis for developing appropriate intervention strategies to strengthen the occupational safety system [18].

In practice, organizations that have rigid hierarchical structures, excessive control, and one-way (top-down) communication patterns are at high risk of creating a work environment that is closed to criticism and learning. In this context, mistakes or work accidents are more often seen as individual failures rather than systemic failures, thus giving rise to a blaming culture [19]. This causes workers to be reluctant to admit mistakes or report potential hazards, for fear of punishment or negative stigma. As a result, opportunities to analyze root causes and make systemic improvements are lost. This kind of culture not only hinders innovation and learning, but also has a direct impact on the overall effectiveness of the OHS management system. Therefore, transforming the organizational culture towards a more adaptive, transparent, and learning model is an important step in building a sustainable occupational safety system that is oriented toward risk prevention [20].

Characteristics of Blaming Culture

Blaming culture is a condition of organizational culture characterized by a tendency to blame individuals personally for every mistake or work incident that occurs, without considering systemic factors that may have contributed. In organizations that adopt this culture, open feedback is rare, and discussions about failure are often avoided because they are considered individual weaknesses. Leaders in such organizations tend to avoid collective responsibility and instead look for "scapegoats" when a failure occurs. Furthermore, the disciplinary policies implemented are often repressive and disproportionate, which adds to the psychological stress for employees. Fear of sanctions and personal consequences makes workers reluctant to report mistakes, even though such reports are important for preventing similar incidents in the future [21].

Various studies have shown that a culture of blame hurts on the implementation of occupational safety and health (OHS) programs. When workers feel psychologically unsafe to report unsafe conditions, minor incidents, or operational errors, organizations miss important opportunities to make system improvements. As a result, the true root of the problem is not properly identified, and safety risks remain hidden until they become more serious. In addition, a culture of blame also contributes to increased work stress, weakened trust between team members, and decreased active participation in OHS activities such as safety training, internal audits, and incident reporting. This fearful work environment creates an unhealthy organizational climate and inhibits collective learning and innovation in risk management [22]. Therefore, managerial efforts are needed to shift the organizational culture towards a more supportive and continuous improvement-oriented approach, such as the just culture concept [23].

Transition towards just culture

Just culture is presented as a fairer and more constructive approach than blaming culture, emphasizing the balance between individual accountability and organizational learning. In this framework, organizations do not immediately blame individuals for errors, but rather evaluate the context behind the incident. Errors are systematically categorized based on the level of intent and type of violation, whether it is pure human error, reckless behavior, or deliberate violation (reckless behavior) [24]. In this way, just culture enables organizations to recognize systemic issues that are often hidden behind individual incidents. This approach aims to build a psychologically safe work environment, where workers feel supported to report incidents without fear of punishment, making reporting an important tool for learning and preventing future workplace accidents [25].

Transitioning from a blaming culture to a just culture is not a simple process. It requires a strong commitment from top management to change the mindset, reporting structure, and incident handling system that has been reactive. Ethical and learning-oriented leadership is a key factor in this cultural transformation process [26]. In addition, training on just culture principles needs to be provided to all levels of the organization, so that the new values can be understood and applied consistently. Changes must also touch on formal policies, including incident reporting mechanisms that are more transparent and free from unfair sanctions. By implementing just culture, organizations not only create a safer and

more collaborative work environment but also increase the effectiveness of the overall safety system [27]. Empirical evidence shows that organizations that successfully implement a just culture tend to have higher incident reporting rates and a significantly decreasing trend in work accidents [28].

Implications for work safety

Blaming culture has serious implications for the effectiveness of occupational safety and health (OHS) implementation in an organizational environment. A work environment that does not support open risk reporting tends to hinder the process of early hazard identification and mitigation. When workers are afraid of sanctions or negative stigma, they are reluctant to report incidents, unsafe conditions, or potential hazards they encounter in the field. This situation causes critical information related to safety to go undetected by management, so that risks cannot be managed optimally. In addition, this kind of closed information also hinders collective learning from mistakes and failures that occur, so improvements to the OHS system are slow or even stagnant [29]. Empirical studies show that organizations that tolerate a blame culture experience more workplace accidents due to the absence of effective feedback and incident reporting mechanisms [30].

In contrast, organizations that implement a just culture generally succeed in creating a safer, healthier, and more productive work environment. In this culture, reporting incidents and unsafe conditions is not seen as an individual weakness, but as an important contribution to improving collective safety. Workers feel psychologically protected and are more open to reporting problems, which in turn improves the organization's ability to detect potential risks and implement preventive measures proactively [31]. Research shows that the level of work accidents tends to be lower in organizations with a just culture, because adaptive and learning-based safety systems can develop optimally [32]. Therefore, the transformation of work culture from a blaming pattern to a just culture not only increases the effectiveness of the K3 system but also builds worker trust and commitment to sustainable work safety goals [33].

4. CONCLUSION

Organizational culture plays a crucial role in determining the success of implementing an occupational safety and health (OHS) system in the work environment. An authoritarian, hierarchical organizational culture that emphasizes finding individual mistakes has been shown to encourage the formation of a blaming culture, a pattern of interaction that emphasizes the imposition of sanctions for mistakes without a systemic root cause analysis. As a result, workers tend to be reluctant to report potential risks or incidents for fear of punishment, which ultimately hinders the early detection and prevention of work accidents. On the other hand, this article emphasizes that the transition to a just culture is a sustainable strategic solution. Just culture promotes a balance between individual accountability and organizational learning through psychologically safe incident reporting. With this approach, incident reporting is no longer considered a weakness but rather a contribution to improving safety. Therefore, transforming organizational culture towards a more open, adaptive, and collaborative direction is an urgent step to improve the effectiveness of the OHS system as a whole. This article suggests the need for top management involvement, training in just culture principles, and fair incident reporting policies as the main pillars in building an occupational safety system that is oriented toward continuous improvement.

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