

# **The National EMS Advisory Council**

## **Final Advisory**

Approved on December 14, 2011

Committee: Safety

Title: The Role of Leadership in EMS Workplace Safety Culture

### **Issue Synopsis**

#### **A: Problem Statement**

Safety culture refers to an organization's core safety values related to patients (i.e. the prevention of adverse medical events), providers, (i.e. prevention of occupational injuries) and the general public.<sup>1</sup> These core values provide a frame of reference for EMS providers who reveal their perception of core values in the form of shared beliefs, practices, rituals, norms, and behaviors related to safety.<sup>1</sup> Workplace safety culture is formed both at the initial and ongoing stages of an organization's development. Safety culture, whether positive or negative, is influential in affecting the identity and behavior of workers over time.<sup>1,2</sup> A positive safety culture is associated with fewer errors, adverse events, and other negative safety outcomes.<sup>3-5</sup>

There is reason to believe that poor or inadequate leadership contributes to poor or non-positive safety culture. Differences in the perception of safety culture between leaders and front-line workers are common and show that leaders often have a higher perception of safety culture than frontline workers.<sup>6-9</sup> Further, recent research shows that many frontline workers have a non-positive perception of EMS management commitment to safety and this perceptions of workplace safety culture vary widely across Emergency Medical Services (EMS) organizations.<sup>10</sup>

#### **B: References**

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**C: Crosswalk with other standards or related documents**

Our understanding of EMS in the U.S., the components of an EMS system, and its deficits have been shaped by resource documents such as the Institute of Medicine's report, *Emergency Medical Services: At the Crossroads*, the EMS Agenda for the

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Future, and related documents.<sup>11,12</sup> This understanding is enhanced by position statements authored by the American College of Emergency Physicians, National Association of EMS Physicians, and other organizations. These statements provide specific guidance on medical oversight, leadership, and other components of EMS delivery.<sup>13-15</sup> These position statements and resource documents do not address the role of leadership in creating, sustaining, or inhibiting a culture of safety.

The Commission on Accreditation of Ambulance Services (CAAS) and other accreditation bodies establish standards for EMS managers and leaders. The role that these standards play in affecting the relationship between leadership and workplace safety culture is unclear.

The literature on what constitutes positive leadership is wide-ranging and opinions often vary by source.<sup>16-18</sup> There is evidence that certain types of leadership may have a negative impact on workplace and patient outcomes in healthcare settings.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear how any one or multiple styles of leadership identified in different healthcare settings fit prehospital EMS.

#### **D: Analysis**

There is significant work underway to assess and understand the EMS industry's culture on safety through the NHTSA and EMS for Children (EMSC) Culture of Safety project with the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). We have reason to believe, through early evidence, that EMS leadership plays an important role in promoting safety culture.<sup>5,10</sup> The NHTSA / EMSC / ACEP culture of safety project will synthesize literature and research of non-EMS systems and describe components of leadership that have a positive or negative impact on EMS safety culture.

We believe the current research suggests that leadership that is accountable, engaged, motivated, adaptable, and persistent is required to instill and sustain a positive EMS safety culture.<sup>2</sup> Further, an *illusion of safety* is created when the perceptions of safety culture among leaders is different from the perceptions among front-line workers.<sup>19</sup> Core elements of leadership as regards safety culture include:

- Setting and regularly promoting the expectation for safe operations;
- Communicating a vision of a safe workplace, develop a process for achieving that vision, stimulate and arm co-workers with the resources needed to achieve that vision;<sup>2,20</sup>
- Adopting safety and a positive safety culture as a value rather than a priority because the latter are susceptible to change over time;<sup>2</sup>
- Developing and sustaining processes for regular internal and external evaluations of safety conditions in the workplace and disseminate findings to create an 'informed culture';<sup>2</sup>

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- Providing an avenue for management and front-line workers to recognize the need or availability of innovations that improve the workplace safety; and
- Facilitating a variety of processes and interventions in and out of the workplace that promote the safety of workers and their families.

**Recommended Actions or Strategies:**

**National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

**Recommendation #1:** The NHTSA Office of EMS (OEMS) should address the role that leadership plays in creating and maintaining a positive workplace safety culture. NHTSA should consider augmenting existing efforts (e.g. the EMS Safety Culture Project) by developing and disseminating an implementation guide (a companion document) for EMS leaders. Such a companion document will complement the national Safety Culture Strategy by outlining specific tools and resources that leaders and managers could leverage in their pursuit of improving EMS safety culture. The guidebook may provide guidance on how leaders and managers could evaluate their own workplace safety culture, how they can compare their findings to peer organizations, and how organizations can respond to findings.