



Short Line Safety Institute: Positive Perceptions of Safety Culture Assessments

By Julia Leone, Ph.D.

Summary

The Short Line Safety Institute (SLSI) conducts Safety Culture Assessments for interested short line railroads. An evaluation of the current Safety Culture Assessment program allows SLSI to learn from its past participants and to continually make improvements to best serve short line and regional railroads across the United States. SLSI conducted an analysis of feedback surveys that were provided to participants in its Safety Culture Assessments. Participants provided positive feedback about the program, and also provided SLSI with suggestions for improving the program.

Background

The Short Line Safety Institute (SLSI) is dedicated to the continuous improvement of safety and safety culture across all short line and regional railroads in the United States. As part of this mission, SLSI conducts Safety Culture Assessments free of charge to interested railroads. The Safety Culture Assessment includes various methods of data collection including interviews, document inventories, field observations, and online surveys. Data is then combined into a report for the participating railroad outlining both positive and negative Findings as well as possible Opportunities for Improvement to enhance aspects of its safety culture.

Objectives

This paper presents summary information collected in feedback surveys from participants in SLSI's Safety Culture Assessments. Participants' responses suggest which aspects of the program are helpful and effective, and which may have opportunities for improvement.

Methods

SLSI Assessors distributed a feedback survey to management and senior leadership at the conclusion of each Safety Culture Assessment. This survey allowed participants to anonymously answer specific questions about their experience during the Safety Culture Assessment, as well as provide any comments or feedback in open-ended responses. Participants were thanked for their voluntary participation in the Safety Culture Assessment as well as the feedback survey.

SLSI then analyzed data from the feedback surveys. Scores from the multiple-choice questions were calculated, and open-ended responses were transcribed and "bottom up" line-by-line content coded. This free form of coding allows codes to be generated from the data itself, providing insight into the topic

that may not have been otherwise detected. General overall themes were then extracted from the content codes and summarized.

Results

SLSI distributed the feedback surveys to management and senior leadership at 95 different railroads. 97 individuals from 60 railroads completed the survey (63.16% response rate) between May, 2016 and December, 2021.

Across all 97 feedback surveys, 98.99% of participants would recommend a Safety Culture Assessment to other railroads. Additionally, 93.81% (N = 91) of participants requested additional help and/or communication from SLSI to continue to support their safety culture change efforts in the future. Requests included follow-up visits in the future (42.86%), provide more resources such as webinars and templates (18.68%), Hazardous Materials Training (16.48%), Leadership Development Training (16.48%), and provide updates on industry best practices (7.69%). Please note that percentages exceed 100% as some participants provided responses that included multiple themes.

Of the 97 participants that completed the feedback surveys, 85.57% (N = 83) of the participants responded to the open-ended question asking them to provide additional feedback and comments on the program. General themes are displayed in Figure 1. Positive feedback on the program included an overall appreciation of SLSI and the Safety Culture Assessment experience (54.22%), professionalism of the Assessors (18.07%), industry knowledge of the Assessors (9.64%), and fairness of the Safety Culture Assessment process (6.02%). Opportunities for improvement included more communication and advanced planning before the visit (8.43%), more time dedicated to field observation (7.23%), improvements in the interview process such as timing and scheduling (7.23%), and improvements in the survey such as length and format (7.23%). Please note that percentages exceed 100% as some participants provided responses that included multiple themes.

Conclusions

Past participants of SLSI's Safety Culture Assessment highly recommended this program to other railroads. The Assessors were perceived as professional and knowledgeable and overall, the Safety Culture Assessment was perceived as valuable and fair. Opportunities to improve the program included providing more communication and advanced planning, more time dedicated to field observation, and improvements in both the interview and survey processes. Adjustments based on these considerations will help improve the overall quality of Safety Culture Assessments and support SLSI's goal of continuous improvement of safety and safety culture across all short line and regional railroads in the United States.