Notes to Safety Culture Ladder 2.0

2023

NEN

De waarde
van normen

Notes to Safety Culture Ladder 2.0
(en)

2023

Koninklijk Nederlands Normalisatie Instituut
120001 – Commissie van Deskundigen Safety Culture Ladder

Contents

Introduction

This document explains the Safety Culture Ladder 2.0 (SCL 2.0). It includes information on why a new edition of the SCL is needed, how this is structured and its possible interpretation.

This explanation is a living document. This means that we will continue to add and adapt its content where necessary. In this way, it remains a practical tool. We offer sectors the opportunity to provide examples applicable to them in interpreting the ladder. These examples are part of this document.

This explanation is not a requirements document. In other words, it is not meant to be prescriptive. It provides points of reference to understand the ideas of the SCL. No rights may be derived from this document.

1   What is the Safety Culture Ladder?

1.1 Tools and a yardstick

The Safety Culture Ladder (SCL) supports organisations to work on safety awareness, attitude and behaviour. Any sector can use the SCL as a kind of mirror, from railways and construction to petrochemicals and service organisations (such as an architectural or law firm). The SCL is designed to understand the current safety culture of a team or organisation and to identify how to improve it. This understanding ensures that unhealthy and unsafe situations can be reduced.

In this way, the SCL increases safety awareness in the organisation and in the chain (all stakeholders, the environment and the parties with which the organisation works).

1.2 Applicable to every sector

SCL 2.0 is more generic than the first edition of SCL, which focused on the rail and construction sectors. This facilitates interpretation of the respective step descriptions in the context of the specific industry or organisation requesting the assessment.

1.3 Applicable to non-operational companies

Health and safety is not just about health and safety in your own organisation. It is also – and above all – about how someone's work contributes to the safety and health of others. Architects can do this, for example, by taking this into account in their design choices and advice. 'Others' include contractors' employees who carry out the work based on the design and advice, as well as existing and future users, maintenance staff and third parties (like visitors and passers-by).

2   What do the five steps of the SCL stand for?

Like the earlier edition of the SCL, SCL 2.0 is divided into five steps. These steps have not changed. Each step represents a company's stage of development.

2.1 Step 1: Pathological

'Ignorance is bliss'

An organisation or a team with a pathological culture has little or no safety in mind. Security is marked by the attitude 'What do we care, as long as we don't get caught?', 'Nothing will go wrong. We deliver quality, so why waste time on preventive safety?' and 'Ignorance is bliss.' Investment to improve safety behaviour in the organisation is low or non-existent. As this attitude is undesirable, it is not rewarded.

2.2 Step 2: Reactive

Attention to safety is episodic and short-lived

In a reactive culture, the organisation pays attention to safety but only acts after incidents or when things go wrong. Incident response actions are also often episodic and short-lived. The focus on safety often fades after a while. Even though supervisors point out rules and procedures to employees, they do nothing if employees do not follow them. They also pay scant attention to safety on a structural basis. Only incidents attract attention.

2.3 Step 3: Calculating

Focus is on safety management systems

In a calculating culture, the focus is on systems and oversight to manage known risks. A safety management system with rules and regulations is in place to prevent incidents. Accidents, near accidents and unsafe situations are not always reported despite the emphasis on collecting information and data. Because it is well-organised on paper, the organisation thinks it is operating safely. Managers are particularly concerned with safety and compliance with laws and regulations. Changes focus mainly on drafting or tightening rules and procedures.

2.4 Step 4: Proactive

More attention is paid to safety awareness and being alert to unexpected events

A proactive culture focuses more on attitude and behaviour, raising safety awareness and managing unexpected events. Being alert to and preventing unsafe situations is part of everyday work. People are better informed and conscious of their responsibility to work safely. People help to remind each other of what has been agreed, both internally and externally. Management facilitates and encourages active employee participation. If they do occur, incidents are used as a learning opportunity to prevent them reoccurring.

2.5 Step 5: Progressive

Being vigilant about safety and constantly learning and improving comes as second nature

Safety is given the same priority and attention as 'money, time and quality' in daily practice and in planning, designing, deciding, implementing, monitoring, reflecting and learning. There is also a strong focus on continuous improvement, on adaptability and on situational awareness. People are used to learning from events – whether desirable or not – on a daily basis. This attitude is completely natural and permeates every fibre, layer and process of the organisation. In this respect, there is also no difference between supervisors and employees. Management knows what is going on because employees feel safe sharing this information.

3 Why a new edition of the SCL?

Every five years, the Royal Netherlands Standardisation Institute (NEN) evaluates standards to see if adjustments are needed. We similarly evaluated the SCL and the following points emerged:

— An increasing number of users did not recognise the terms used (about the rail sector). These terms have been removed in the new ladder, making the model suitable for any sector.

— Users felt there were many repetitions in the descriptions.

— Users wanted step-by-step descriptions. This would be a starting point for growth to the next step.

— There was a need to make new arrangements on assessment. In the old ladder, an organisation could choose to give certain topics ('company characteristics') extra attention, so as to still reach the number of points needed for a good assessment. This is no longer possible with the new ladder. Since 'points' are no longer used, the ladder has a less calculating character. With that, it is more focused on supporting growth.

— Users of the previous SCL edition said they wanted better detail for the higher steps. Steps 4 and 5 were not fully developed in the first edition. A separate interpretation document used instead was considered inconvenient.

SCL 2.0 is the work of experts. All stakeholders were well represented in the expert group that drafted the new edition with the Committee of Experts (CoE). Regular consultations were also held with the CoE, certification bodies and the knowledge platform. This way, an effort has been made to deliver a practical content.

The draft SCL 2.0 has been tested in practice. Testing involved a validation exercise carried out during audits. Organisations and auditors could provide feedback during this round. An extensive round of comments was also carried out among all stakeholders. That way, anyone interested was able to comment.

4 What are the features of SCL 2.0?

4.1 Content adjustments

The following changes have been made in SCL 2.0:

— SCL 2.0 is more concise than the first edition: it contains much less text. This is partly due to the removal of duplicate information.

— Step 1 has been added, although the wording may seem a little negative. This has to do with the undesirable nature of behaviour on that step. Working safely only starts at step 2. However, to show the full growth process it is necessary to include step 1.

— Step-by-step descriptions are provided. This clarifies the differences between each topic's steps. It also gives organisations insight into how to progress to the next step.

— The practical arrangement of the new themes makes it easier to see what is going on by topic. The previous edition was more vertical, focusing on a specific step, but this time the assessment is more horizontal, looking at sub-themes and the differences between steps.

— The descriptions in the new texts focus much more on why and what you want to achieve. This means that the focus is no longer on how something needs to be done, but rather on the desired outcome.

— The descriptions focus more on attitude, behaviour and interaction rather than, for example, practices, methods or systems.

— More system-oriented requirements and technical or specialist references have been removed in the new ladder.

4.2 Definition of H&S

The concept of health and safety (H&S) has been explained in more detail in SCL 2.0. This makes it clear to everyone what H&S covers. H&S should be interpreted as the integral health and safety of an organisation's employees, users, others and the environment. It's broader than just occupational safety. H&S also includes psychosocial work stress, psychosocial safety, well-being and integrity. Safety can also take other forms, depending on what is going on in an organisation. Examples include cybersecurity, structural safety, machine safety or fire safety.

4.3 Assessment system

The assessment method has been changed in SCL 2.0. Assessment no longer has a cumulative character. Rather than assigning points and percentages (weighting and scoring), auditors now work with green (satisfactory), orange (not yet satisfactory but on track) or red (unsatisfactory) scores. In that way, we eliminate the unwanted effects of point scoring.

The descriptions of each step provide the auditor with a better tool to perform the behavioural assessment. In fact, these descriptions focus less on systems and activities and more on preconditions and behavioural aspects. The fact that the behavioural aspect outweighs the preconditions somewhat is also new. This puts the real focus on behaviour. What this behaviour means is much more explicit in SCL 2.0 than in the previous edition.

4.4 Reporting

Organisations get a better report because arrangements have been made on what the minimum report should be. The report, based on the assessment of the five themes, describes what is working well and what needs to be improved. This is based on the snapshot principle: the state of affairs when the assessment is made. A final conclusion is also made for each theme. This gives the organisation insight into where it stands on each step and where there are opportunities for improvement.

5 How is SCL 2.0 structured?

SCL 2.0 has five steps and five themes. Each theme is divided into sub-themes. Each sub-theme contains descriptions for each step, divided into 'preconditions' and 'behaviour'. The auditor assesses whether the description of a sub-theme matches what they see in the organisation when assessing.

5.1 Theme 1: Policy and leadership

This theme focuses on how H&S policies and objectives are set up and dealt with in the organisation. Each sub-theme is explained in more detail below.

5.1.1 Policy and objectives

In this sub-theme, the assessment focuses on the H&S policy, H&S objectives and the available H&S resources. The higher the level, the more consideration and shared thinking there is about, and the more employees are aware of, the policies and availability of resources. It is important that not only employees but also other stakeholders are involved in the process. By stakeholders we mean others who are affected by the process, either positively or negatively, and who have an interest in a good H&S environment, such as the local community.

5.1.2 Leadership

Good working conditions and trust in supervisors are important. The organisation's main focus is on developing ownership. Initially, this happens with the board of directors and supervisors. As an organisation reaches a higher step, ownership is also reflected in operators, for example. Ownership is the expectation that everyone will manage or lead work processes in their own way and try to positively influence them. This helps create a healthy and safe working environment, both socially and physically.

The organisation must continue to invest in leadership development. The higher the step, the more important investing in leadership development becomes. What is important here is that the organisation has an open culture in which feedback is given to each other and is accepted. For example, development takes place through one-to-one or group training: as a supervisor, how do you ensure a socially safe environment? Exemplary behaviour, a mentoring function or peer supervision are also examples of how employees can continue to develop their leadership skills.

Showing the desired behaviour is important in the assessment. The descriptions talk about exemplary behaviour. This means that the desired behaviour is visible inside and outside the organisation. Think of companies that are members of a trade association and active in H&S there. And to take action when the desired behaviour is not being observed, for example by evaluating or making new arrangements. The organisation must consistently demonstrate the desired behaviour.

5.1.3   Communication and engagement

This sub-theme is about how the organisation communicates about H&S. Think about whether and when employees are informed about H&S policies and goals. And whether and how often H&S is discussed. This also includes assessing how we engage with H&S both inside and outside the organisation.

5.1.4   Desired H&S behaviour

This sub-theme deals with the extent to which desired H&S behaviour can be seen inside and outside the organisation. It focuses on how the organisation defines desired behaviour, what agreements are in place to hold each other accountable for H&S behaviour, awareness of desired H&S behaviour and how feedback is given.

The organisation is assessed on the existence of a sanctions and appreciation policy. This policy allows it to self-assess H&S measures:

— A sanctions policy is used to determine which H&S behaviour is undesirable in the company. This includes a procedure to be followed if undesirable behaviour occurs. For example, the organisation may take certain actions to try and persuade the individuals concerned to change their behaviour.

— An appreciation policy is used to determine which H&S behaviour and/or performances are positive in the company. This desired behaviour could be additionally valued in some way.

5.1.5   Taking responsibility

This sub-theme focuses on responsibility for H&S inside and outside the organisation. It involves looking at who takes responsibility, how this is managed and what is achieved.

5.2 Theme 2: Knowledge and skills

This theme focuses on the H&S-related knowledge and skills in all layers of the organisation, from the board of directors to the external employee. It includes developing knowledge and skills.

5.2.1   Duties, responsibilities and powers

This sub-theme deals with how duties, responsibilities and powers for H&S are defined. It also assesses how familiar employees are with their specific H&S duties. Performing duties and the discussing duties, responsibilities and powers are also part of the assessment. This includes being mindful of who takes the initiative.

5.2.2 Knowledge and skills

In this sub-theme, the assessment focuses on the knowledge and skills that employees have in H&S. And on how the organisation has established them. Knowledge of H&S risks is also important: do employees know how to deal with them and are they aware of how important it is to have the right knowledge and skills? The way in which the organisation changes something in the required H&S knowledge and skills is also assessed.

5.2.3 Developing knowledge and skills

In this sub-theme, the assessment focuses on how the organisation works to develop H&S knowledge and skills. For example, whether the organisation understands the value of regular discussions about knowledge and skills. And how the discussions are followed up.

5.3 Theme 3: Primary and secondary processes

This theme focuses on an organisation's primary processes (the core processes of an organisation through which products or services are delivered) and secondary processes (e.g. support processes of staff departments) when dealing with H&S. The theme is about how processes are set up and the way health and safety is secured in these processes.

5.3.1 Preparing and planning the work

The assessment in this sub-theme focuses on whether H&S is part of preparing and planning the work. This includes also whether the organisation sees the value in it and who will be involved in the process.

5.3.2 Risk assessment

The assessment in this sub-theme focuses on an organisation's risk assessment practices. It looks at how and when H&S control measures are applied. The sub-theme additionally focuses on implementing risk assessments in the different layers of an organisation. It also looks at whether the organisation sees the value in this.

5.3.3 H&S in projects or execution (operations)

This sub-theme focuses on the attention to H&S in projects and/or execution. Is there an H&S plan or system? Is this customised and used in practice? The sub-theme is also about how to work together to improve H&S plans.

5.3.4 Procuring, managing and using resources

This sub-theme focuses on how the organisation deals with procuring, managing and using resources. Is there a management system and a maintenance and/or inspection plan? Are there arrangements for how resources will be handled? The sub-theme also looks at resource maintenance and the employees' role in it.

5.3.5 Dealing with change

This sub-theme is about how the organisation deals with changes in plans and how they affect H&S. Attention is paid to the control of H&S risks. Communication in and outside the organisation also plays a role in the assessment. It also looks at policies for controlling H&S risks arising from changes.

5.4 Theme 4: Cooperating with external parties

This theme focuses on working with external parties such as contractors and other external stakeholders.

5.4.1 Selecting and assessing contractors

This sub-theme focuses on how an organisation selects and assesses contractors for H&S performances. This includes checking that the H&S criteria are known to those responsible. And whether the organisation makes and implements plans to improve unsatisfactory results.

5.4.2 Encouraging and sanctioning contractors

This sub-theme focuses on how an organisation encourages and sanctions contractors in relation to H&S. This includes looking at whether the emphasis is on sanctioning or showing appreciation. It also looks at who is encouraging and in what context (broadly in the chain or only in the organisation).

5.4.3 Working together on solutions

This sub-theme focuses on the organisation's policy of working with external parties on H&S. It also looks at whether and how the organisation has set up a system to work with contractors. And how suggested H&S problems and ideas for improvement are addressed.

5.5 Theme 5: Learning and improving.

This theme focuses on H&S learning and improving in an organisation. Learning and improving focuses on the continuous improvement of H&S in the organisation. As an organisation moves up the ladder, it also focuses more energy on opportunities for improvement and becomes more active in using best practices as a learning tool.

5.5.1 Learning culture

This sub-theme focuses on how the organisation deals with sharing and learning information from H&S events and good practice. It is measured whether the organisation consistently learns from incidents and ideas for improvement. And whether and how the relevant learning points are recorded. The way of learning from external parties also plays a role here. An important part of the assessment is whether and how the organisation makes improvements in response to lessons learned, and who initiates these improvements.

5.5.2 Reports

This sub-theme focuses on the organisation's approach to reporting and recording H&S incidents. Who takes responsibility for safe and unsafe situations is also examined. Incident analysis plays an important role here. Does the organisation has an open reporting culture? And what happens with the H&S reports and ideas for improvement?

5.5.3 Assessing H&S in the working environment

This sub-theme focuses on how the organisation assesses H&S in the working environment. And how this is viewed internally and externally. Consideration is also given to the level of the organisation from which the assessment is carried out and the levels in the organisation at which H&S behaviour is assessed. Trend analyses also play a role here.

Which working environment and how it is viewed varies according to the type of organisation and the type of work. For example, this can also include the circumstances of stakeholders. As circumstances can also include physical, social, psychological and environmental factors, the term working environment must therefore be interpreted broadly. For example, in design activities, the term working environment may refer to a safe and healthy workplace for the end user.

5.5.4 Internal audits.

This sub-theme focuses on how the organisation conducts internal audits. Audits are conducted at a strategic level to determine internally which step the organisation is on, what is going well and where there is room for improvement. This sub-theme also looks at who conducts the audit and whether the audit objectives and outcomes are clear.

5.6 What does 'precondition' mean?

The descriptions under 'preconditions' say something about what an organisation must have set up and organised in relation to H&S. Consider the organisation around H&S, the availability of resources and clear duties, and the responsibilities and powers relating to H&S. These conditions can be part of a management system, although such a system is not mandatory. Nor does an organisation need to have anything on paper about this. If this is useful for the organisation, it is obviously allowed.

5.7 Strategy, culture and structure in balance

Focusing solely on an organisation's culture is unrealistic. The descriptions under 'preconditions' therefore give more meaning to the structure and strategy. For example, the organisation must set a course and show how it will stay on course. SCL 2.0 describes what must be regulated, but not how this must happen. Auditors consider how the working method works in practice.

We illustrate this with two examples.

Example for theme 1: Policy and leadership – sub-theme Communication and engagement

The auditor visits a small family business. The conversation turns to how safety is discussed. The director says he is aware of the importance of talking about safety. He explains that he holds a meeting every morning. As he lives next door to his business, he can attend every day. Employees are present at these meetings. This company therefore scores well for 'Communication' under theme 1: Policy and leadership.

Example for theme 3: Primary and secondary processes – sub-theme Dealing with changes

The company is performing well. It is thinking about opening a second branch, at a considerable travel distance from the first location. This means it will no longer be possible for all employees to attend the morning meeting every day. Is the organisation aware of the impact of spacing out meetings? The chances are that the organisation will become less aware of the importance of safety. This is due to less opportunity to talk together and more distance from management (the encouraging factor). The question now is how the company can ensure that safety remains a regular item on the agenda. In this example, the organisation will need to arrange things differently from the first example in terms of preconditions.

5.8 Desired and undesired behaviour

Behaviour is that which a person does or does not do. The organisation can encourage or curb certain behaviours. We distinguish between desired and undesired behaviour:

— Desired behaviour corresponds to a particular step and situation and cannot be determined in absolute terms. You decide together in the organisation what desired behaviour looks like. This can also change over time. Desired behaviour is thus also a kind of shared image that you have with each other in an organisation: behaviour that you collectively consider to be healthy and safe.

— Undesired behaviour is unsafe and/or unhealthy behaviour for someone themselves and/or for others. Desired and undesired health and safety behaviour may be set out in a code of conduct, for example, but is always known within the organisation.

6 Achieving a higher step on the ladder

6.1 Does an organisation have to keep moving up the ladder?

No, this is not essential. Staying at the same level means that the organisation is neither moving forward nor backwards. And if that is what is chosen, that's fine. Deciding whether or not to move up depends mainly on your own ambitions or, for example, clients' requirements.

6.2 Is it necessary for an organisation to improve continuously?

Although this is not a specific requirement of steps 1, 2 and 3, it is a feature of step 4 and certainly of step 5. It is also likely that actions will need to be taken on an ongoing basis to at least maintain the same level in a changing environment. After all, the organisational context is bound to change. For example, if an organisation does not adapt or improve, it risks becoming less and less compliant with environmental requirements. In addition, once a level has been achieved, it must be 'maintained' to avoid a relapse into old habits and an increase in the number of incidents.

7 Case study

Road safety by the Dutch Traffic Safety Association (VVN)

Employees are your company's 'capital'. You take good care of them. You fulfil your responsibility as a good employer by making sure they get to work, to customers and back home safely. This makes you an attractive place to work and employees feel appreciated. By preventing the downtime of workers and materials, you can also save money, and avoid disappointed customers and a lot of grief.

Specific tips

Ensuring road safety is essential and often easier than you think. Here are some specific tips to help you look after your employees' road safety, both for their sake and in the interest of your organisation:

— Besides workplace safety, pay special attention to the road safety of all employees who travel for work purposes. Road behaviour, driving skills and also if and when you will travel and by what means of transport.

— Agree on responsible telephone use, on being available when travelling, and organise office working procedures accordingly. This also applies to the safe use of driver assistance systems, which can give the impression that you are free to do something else, when you're actually not.

— Enforce a zero-tolerance policy on driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs and communicate the consequences to be determined for violations.

— Talk to employees who receive too many speeding fines, have excessive fuel consumption or damage claims.

Case studies

Besides the above tips, there are of course more ways to get started. Many companies already pay attention to their employees' road safety in various ways. For inspiration, see how they approach this (only available in Dutch): Inspiratie | Actueel | MONO Zakelijk.