



A Contextual Maturity Model

An alternative to an employee survey



“Context is critical.”

This is one of the key principles of human and organizational performance, yet many of the ways we get information does not account for this. Surveys often fall into this category. Surveys are one of the most difficult ways to assess people, yet they are used prolifically. Often, context is not able to be communicated through a radio button Likert scale, and survey recipients are left at best wanting, at worst frustrated with an experience that they believed would allow them a voice, but felt stifled and forced to communicate through cryptic statements and choices that did not represent what they wanted to say.

This “contextual maturity model” allows for more richness of the area being interrogated and asks further for the reason behind choosing a particular description. Firstly, let’s look at a 3-stage maturity model that gets at the motivation to undertake action.¹

Stage 1 – Rule based

At the 1st stage of maturity, the reason one engages is because of a rule. The law requires it, my boss told me to do it, the procedure says to do it. Basically, if an expectation can be prescriptively written down and following this prescription is the reason people do what they do, then this is a rule-based maturity. There is little agency at this level, as people feel as though they have little control over the rules, and any rule breaking becomes a shortcoming of the rulebreaker.

Stage 2 – Goal based

At this level of maturity, the focus is not as much on rules, but on goals and targets. The reason one engages is to help progress towards a goal. This can be more collectively focused, as goals and targets can be shared, often inviting input from those who are contributing to the goal. There is a finality once the goal is achieved, which necessitates setting a further goal. If people are doing what they do in pursuit of a goal, this is goal-based maturity.

¹ This is based very heavily on REGDOC 2.1.2 Safety Culture Appendices B & C, available at <https://nuclearsafety.gc.ca/eng/acts-and-regulations/regulatory-documents/published/html/regdoc2-1-2/index.cfm>



Stage 3 – Continual Improvement based

At this level of maturity, instead of rules or goals, the focus is very principled and looking at the ethereal “right thing to do”. Very steeped in values and appreciating a diversity of voices gets to the best answer, all are very engaged at this level of maturity, as the dignity of the human person reigns supreme. Drama and victimhood are replaced by continual learning and responsibility.

These levels could be used on their own, but let’s walk through an example of a particular aspect of work.

Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Response to errors	Most mistakes are hidden by work-arounds. Only mistakes with severe consequences are identified and are blamed on individuals for their failure to comply with rules.	Management’s approach to mistakes is to put more controls in place via procedures and retraining; blaming individuals is less prevalent.	Almost all mistakes are viewed in terms of work process variability. It is more important to the organization to understand what has happened from those to whom it has happened; this understanding is used to modify work processes and reinforce individual perceptions.

People may be able to see themselves in this description, which then allows for a fuller, richer engagement with this assessment over a survey that might only have checkboxes for each stage beside each indicator. There might also be cross over – maybe predominantly goal based, but occasionally rule based. The next stage is to *ask for the reasons behind* choosing the level chosen. How this is done can be variable – maybe orally in a 1 to 1 interaction, maybe orally at a team level (if there is enough trust in the team to do so), or maybe in a written form.



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What represents your perspective best?		X	
<p>Reason behind your choice above: Normally mistakes aren’t completely a blame game, but we do get into a lot of training. One time, there was someone who had a tonne of stuff to do, and we were running behind, and he entered the wrong value for some setting just before he left. We needed to deal with the consequences of that mistake, but instead of coming down hard on him his next shift, he was told what happened, and then was sent to retraining. So, it’s gotten better.</p>			

You can even come up with your own indicators that suit your processes.

Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Downloading free content	I was told to check out a website and download the material.	I want to engage with new material every month to assist in my personal development.	I have a voracious appetite for learning for its own sake and read and appreciate all materials people are giving away.
What represents your perspective best?	X		
<p>Reason behind your choice above: I was on a webinar and a website with its free download came highly recommended. The link was put in the chat, and I clicked on the link and downloaded the material.</p>			

Or maybe



What represents your perspective best?			X
Reason behind your choice above:			
I am a lifelong learner and get excited to dig into new topics and expand my horizons. I feel very blessed to have access to such rich information that I can assess for myself and learn more about myself and the world in the process.			

These stories are “rich, thick” descriptions of what the workplace actually looks like and can give you a far better understanding of what is motivating individuals to do what they do. Once these stories are grouped together, they can be thematically grouped to highlight certain issues, they can be used in corporate communications as case studies, they can be used in meetings and pre job briefs to enable shared learnings, they can be used in recognition programmes, and above all – they can be used in improvement efforts to address any problems highlighted.

Anonymity is often critical with workplace assessments, and there is no silver bullet here. If the trust in the organization is so low that people do not feel as though they can share anything, the contextual maturity model could be used as a survey (but the richness of the approach would then be lost).

If you feel as though you would like to administer the “contextual maturity model” but would need some help to do so, perhaps even to customize it to your own processes, I would be honoured to serve you. Please feel free to reach out.



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Contextual Maturity Model

Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Planning	Problems are not anticipated, and the organization reacts to each problem as it occurs.	The organization concentrates primarily on day-to-day matters, with limited long-term focus on building value through safety.	The organization acts strategically with a focus on the longer term as well as awareness of the present. It seeks to anticipate problems and deal with their causes before they happen.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Communication and teamwork	Communication between individuals and departments is poor. Collaboration between departments and functional areas is not encouraged.	Management encourages cross-departmental and cross-functional teams and communication. Senior managers function as a team and coordinate departmental and functional decisions.	Individuals recognize and demonstrate the need for collaboration between departments. They receive management support, recognition and resources needed to collaborate.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			



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What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Role of management	Management is seen primarily as endorsing the rules, pushing individuals, and expecting results.	Management’s role is seen as applying management techniques.	Coaching individuals to improve performance is a part of management’s role. Management is accountable for modelling continual safety improvements.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			



Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Learning	There is little listening to or learning from safety-related experience inside or outside the organization. A defensive posture is assumed in the face of constructive criticism.	The organization is somewhat open to learning from other organizations, especially techniques and best practices.	Learning from others both inside and outside the organization is valued; time is made available and devoted to adapting such knowledge to improve safety performance.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Importance of values	Values are viewed as a required nuisance. Short-term profit or productivity goals are seen as all-important and often take priority over values.	Values is thought to imply higher cost and reduced production.	Values and production are seen as interdependent.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			



Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Stakeholder relationships	Regulators, suppliers, and contractors are treated cautiously or in an adversarial manner.	The organization’s relationship with regulators, suppliers, and contractors are kept distant rather than close; there is a cautious approach where trust must be earned.	Collaborative relationships are developed between the organization and regulators, suppliers, customers, and contractors.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Value of diversity	Individuals are viewed as “system components” who are defined and valued solely in terms of what they produce. Diversity is seen as a weakness.	Diversity is acknowledged as important, but rarely exploited. Diversity is used intermittently in decision-making.	Individuals are respected and valued for their contribution to overall performance and for their knowledge of safety as applied. Diversity in opinions is sought and embraced.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			



Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Adherence to processes	There is little or no awareness of work or business processes. Expectations are not put in writing and are often assumed.	There is a growing awareness of the impact of influence of culture in the workplace. It is not understood why added controls do not yield the expected results in safety performance. Expectations are written and adherence is expected.	Individuals believe in and follow work processes in the organization and help managers to oversee them.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Conflict management	Dissenters are punished for their viewpoints. There is an adversarial relationship between management and other individuals.	Dissenters are tolerated but not encouraged. Conflict is seen as disturbing and is discouraged in the name of teamwork.	Questions are encouraged and dissenters' viewpoints are appreciated. Conflict is recognized, and it is addressed by finding mutually beneficial solutions. Management and individuals have a respectful and supportive relationship.
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			



Indicator	Stage 1 – Rule Based	Stage 2 – Goal Based	Stage 3 – Continual Improvement Based
Systems view	Individuals perform in isolation; “not my problem” is commonly heard.	Individuals are cognizant of how their role and tasks performed affect the organization.	Individuals are fully aware of broader organizational goals and how they contribute to them. Decisions are made in the full context of their safety impact on work or business processes, as well as on departments and overall safety performance
What represents your perspective best?			
Reason behind your choice above:			
Any final thoughts or insights you would like to share			



Be sure to reach out to Tanya at tanya@beyondsafetycompliance.ca, phone her at 613-878-3163, visit her website at www.beyondsafetycompliance.ca, and/or connect with her on LinkedIn. Beyond Safety Compliance can help your company to go beyond the minimum bar of compliance, and start to realize heights you might never have imagined!