

## Leadership and Communication Skills for the EHS Professional - 09/28/2005

Would you rather be a buffalo or a goose?

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Most EHS professionals are not trained in the so-called "soft skills" such as basic leadership, written and oral communication and listening. I can vouch for that. I accumulated three science-oriented degrees (B.S., M.S. and Sc.D.) and was well prepared in the technical aspects of occupational health and safety, but terribly wanting in the soft skills or "sales skills" I needed to leverage my technical expertise. I was well-positioned to work and communicate with my EHS peers, but not well-equipped to work effectively with my customers, such as labor reps, workers, plant managers and general management.

This article is intended to discuss the non-technical skills so essential in optimizing our effectiveness. Our technical skills give us the right to succeed, but it is our personal leadership and communication skills that provide the way we succeed.

### **Buffalo, Geese and Leadership**

The dictionary defines leadership as "taking others to places they would not normally go." I prefer to define leadership on a more personal basis: the taking of ourselves to places we would not normally go. Leadership does not need to mean being the boss. Leadership also can mean how well we leverage our functional responsibility as an EHS professional. For example, you may be the industrial hygienist or the safety engineer on a task force building a new plant. You are not the project leader, but you are clearly the leader in terms of your functional responsibility. No one else is as well-prepared to offer input on industrial hygiene and safety as you.

That brings us to the buffalo and the goose. Buffalo travel in herds and there is one leader. What happens when the lead buffalo is eliminated? The herd is in disarray and falls easy prey to its assailants, as you may remember from the movie "Dances With Wolves." However, geese travel in formation and rotate the leadership. That is the point; we all are leaders of our functional responsibility and therefore, need skills not typically developed by our formal training. Incidentally, what would be another term for the formation geese fly in? How about "t-e-a-m?" Geese flying in formation are 71 percent more efficient than when flying solo. No different than us HSE professionals. We need the skills to be solid team players. This article will focus on listening skills and effective business communications – both critical for personal leadership and teamwork.

### **Listening**

Listening often is described as the most important sales communication skill. It makes sense: How else would we know what the customer needs, wants and desires if we didn't listen to the customer? You say you are not in sales. Wrong. We all are in sales. As HSE professionals, we are selling injury and illness prevention and environmental quality to our customers.

Given the importance of listening, think about how much formal training you've had in listening: 2 weeks, 1 week, 1 day or maybe none for many of us. Yet listening is critical to our ability to influence change. Next, we must realize that listening is not a passive activity. Listening is actually a dialogue, not a monologue where the speaker speaks and the listener merely listens.

Listening requires the use of our eyes, mouth, brain, body and, oh yes, our ears. We need our eyes so we can see the expression and body language, our mouth to acknowledge and clarify, our brain to assimilate the message, our body to indicate we are open and understanding, and our ears to hear the words and how they are spoken. This simple model should be most helpful in growing our listening skills.

**Words, Dance, Music:** This simple model in Figure 1 demonstrates the active nature of listening and the importance of non-verbal listening. The table shows the approximate contribution each component of this model provides to effective listening. Words account for a mere one-third, the tone or inflection of the words (i.e. the music) about another third and the body language (or dance that signals if the listener is open, closed, bored or attentive) the final third. For example, you are talking to someone and he keeps looking out the window or at his watch. What signal is he sending? Most likely, this "dance" signals he really is not interested or he is in a hurry and wants you to cut your comments short. Keep this simple model in mind when listening. What signals are you sending with your words, dance and music?

**Negotiation & Conflict Resolution:** The first rule in negotiation and conflict resolution is to think win/win – not, I win and you lose. Next is the willingness to seek first to understand the position of the other party. How many times do we enter into a negotiation or conflict resolution where we are firm on wanting to be understood versus seeking to understand? There is a great deal of positive power that comes from demonstrating openness and appreciation of the other person's position. This is not power in terms of dominance but power in terms of the way the other party perceives you and, in turn, his willingness to be open to your position. A good practice is to be able to describe the other person's position as well (or better) than he can. Then he knows you understand his position and he most likely will be more open to understanding your position. This moves you closer to a win/win solution.

**Building Relationships:** Recognizing we literally can't accomplish anything by ourselves reinforces just how important building relationships are. This is true in both our personal and professional lives. Good listening skills are critical in building relationships. They send signals that we care and unless the other party is convinced you care, it is unlikely a solid relationship will evolve. A student in one of my leadership classes shared this quote, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

**Empathy:** As a chemistry major, I had a good understanding of enthalpy and entropy but not the foggiest idea of what empathy is. Just another reminder of how poorly prepared us technical nerds are for the real world. Empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to. A few keys to empathic listening are:

1. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
2. Our deepest emotional need is to be understood.
3. Empathy is not sympathy.
4. To understand is not necessarily to agree.
5. Empathy is a skill that can be learned and practiced.

**Barriers to Effective Listening:** My first "training" in listening came in the form of a 78 rpm record in 1968. No videos, CDs or DVDs back in those days. That record contained some barriers to effective listening that are worth remembering:

1. Pre-judging either the speaker or the subject matter to be poor
2. Being critical of the appearance or delivery of the speaker
3. Formulating responses, questions or rebuttals while "listening"
4. Letting emotional buttons be pushed
5. Listening only for the facts (Remember words, dance, music.)
6. Hearing only what you want to hear.

## Effective Business Communications

Effective business communications start with listening and progress to include oral and written communications. Critical elements of effective business communications include:

- Being concise
- Setting the "hook"
- Speaking in the language of the customer
- Avoiding jargon
- The modified KISS principle

**Being concise:** There is a tendency for technical types to over-communicate. They provide more detail and information than a busy senior line manager wants or needs. It is our job to know what the critical few points are and to articulate them well.

**Setting the hook:** As anyone good at fishing knows, you can't reel the fish in if you haven't set the hook. The hook is a brief statement or sentence that engages the listener or reader, i.e., makes them want to listen or read on. We all have too much to read so we need to "hook" the busy customer with something that is important to them. For example, if it is a general manager and we know she is focused on the bottom line, our hook needs to relate clearly to the bottom line. Instead of saying we reduced workers' compensation costs by X percent, we can express that savings in sales-equivalent dollars.

**Speaking in the language of the customer and avoiding jargon:** Too many times, we use our jargon and our output measures in speaking to senior line management. We need to avoid our techno-babble and speak in terms that our customer understands and values. That means translating our output measures into output measures valued by our customer. Examples include sales-equivalent dollars, competitive advantage and return on investment. We need to make it clear that EHS adds value and this is one of the best ways to do it.

**The modified KISS principle:** Traditionally the KISS principle stands for "keep it simple, stupid." The modified KISS principle stands for "keep it simple and short." Too many times, our written materials or talks are simply too long. This goes for our work products also. Long and complex EHS management systems are doomed to fail or die of their own weight. Keep it simple and short.

## The One-Page Memo

It may be tempting to think that memos in today's world are passé. However, with the advent of e-mail, memos are more prevalent than ever since every e-mail is, in essence, a memo. Before addressing electronic communications, let's deal with the classic memo. This is not to be overly prescriptive, but when writing a memo, short is better than long. One way to keep it short is to aim for no more than one page. Specific elements need to be considered:

**Purpose – Why is the memo being written?** Memos need to do something. Some reasons for writing a memo are:

- To inform
- To request
- To recommend
- To respond
- To praise.

**The subject line – This is critical.** It needs to attract the busy reader/customer.

**Opening paragraph** – Very short. A few sentences with the last sentence containing the hook. This hook has to mean something to the customer. For example, although the issue may be controlling employee exposures to a highly irritating dust, the hook to a general manager might be: "Failure to appropriate the funding for the dust control system could result in an OSHA inspection as a result of employee complaints and likely will delay getting this improved product to the market in a timely manner."

**Background** – Just a few sentences or bullet points providing essential background information. Remember, no one can eat a whole cow at one setting. Just provide the "choice cuts" in the background.

**Recommendations or conclusions** – This is the "what" and "how to," not the "why." Build from the opening paragraph. This can be all text but brief, or three to five bullets in the order of importance.

**Basis** - This is the "why" the recommendation is being made or the conclusions have been drawn. This needs to link to the hook. Again, three to five bullets should be adequate.

**Concluding paragraph** – This needs to clearly state the next steps, i.e., what needs to be done, by whom and by when. Be sure to include what you need the reader/customer to do. No more than three to five items again in the order of importance.

**Attachments** – Include them if necessary, but as few as possible. No one likes to pick up a "heavy" memo. Also, be sure to key the specific attachment page and paragraph in the memo. Don't force a busy reader to look through 12 pages to find something. Tell them, page X, paragraph or item Y.

## **Electronic Communications**

Although electronic communications have been around for several years, many of us are still learning to use them effectively. We have all seen examples where it is a tremendous time saver or, unfortunately, a tremendous time waster. Here are some important considerations when communicating electronically:

**The subject line** - You need to hook the reader here or they may hit "delete." After all, who needs more e-mails?

**First sentence** - Get to the point quickly and in terms that are important to the customer.

**Background** - Decide if any is needed. If needed, just a sentence or two or a couple of bullets.

**Message** - Be clear and to the point without using jargon.

**Action** - By whom and by when.

**Attachments** - Be sure they don't require special or unique software to download or open. Don't include too many just because they are easy to attach.

**Distribution** - It's your job to not over-distribute, forward or CC. This is tempting because, again, it is easy to do. Don't be the source of the dreaded e-mail overload syndrome.

## **The 30-Minute Briefing**

Here is the scene. You have a new CEO and have 30 minutes to brief her on your function. First, be prepared to do it in 20 minutes and for sure don't plan on running over. After a few ice-breaking comments, get quickly to the point. And the point needs to be what your function does to make the overall business successful. Engage your audience early as to why your function, for example, provides a competitive advantage or allows the business to use critical highly hazardous chemicals or processes safely.

Read the body language of the audience. Sense if they have questions and make it easy for them to ask questions or offer input. Remember, you are there to meet their informational needs, not yours. Allow time for questions and discussion. In concluding the briefing, be clear on any follow up items and by whom and by when.

## **Leveraging Your Professional EHS Skills**

Obviously, there are other leadership skills that can be addressed, but EHS professionals who can listen, write and speak effectively outside of their peer group (i.e., with general managers and senior line managers) will be much more effective than those who can't. Keep in mind our technical skills provide our right to succeed, but our personal leadership or sales skills provide the way to succeed.

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