

Directing the SH&E Function

*Leadership and communication skills
build support for safety*

By Jay R. Harf

PLANNING, LEADING, ORGANIZING and directing the SH&E function in a 24,000-employee global manufacturing company is a staggering challenge. Most maxims taught in Management 101 can easily be encapsulated in the job of a director of global safety. To be successful, this professional must possess more than just knowledge of domestic and international SH&E legislation, property loss prevention, workers' compensation and international social security laws. S/he must also possess the leadership and communication skills that allow him/her to become the trusted confidant of the company's global leadership team.

By cultivating leadership skills, the SH&E professional empowers not only himself/herself, but the corporate safety function as well. These relationships translate into upper management support of financial allocations for SH&E initiatives and broad-based implementation of safety programs. Thus, emerging as a leader and trusted confidant of senior executive staff is at least as important as a solid foundation of SH&E knowledge. Developing leadership skills adds another dimension to supporting the safety function and is an alternative to the sometimes-arduous task of cost justification.

To effectively direct the safety function, an SH&E professional must:

- 1) develop and adhere to a safety code of conduct as a decision-making tool;
- 2) master and continuously improve communication skills;
- 3) select leadership skills that are a best fit with individual style and are compatible with an organization's culture.

Using these techniques, a safety director can become an integral part of the corporate leadership team and less prone to spending time justifying the investment in safety.

Code of Conduct as a Decision-Making Tool

Codes of conduct are an outgrowth of company missions, visions, strategies and values. Thoughtful, effective corporate codes provide guidance for making ethical business decisions that balance conflicting interests. To be effective, these codes must be living documents, not just framed pieces of paper hanging on the wall. Such codes must be encouraged, practiced and valued at the highest levels.

Adhering to a code of conduct provides leaders with an established framework for making decisions—they need not waste time determining the "right" course of action during changing times and conditions. Investors likely wish executives at Enron, Tyco and WorldCom had adhered to a code of conduct. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 has begun to reign in corporate financial mismanagement that erodes investor confidence in U.S. business.

These factors also impact the SH&E profession. Adhering to a safety code of conduct allows management to comfortably invest in the safety function. Decisions must be made quickly in today's fast-paced business environment. With an established guideline, key decisions can be made faster, leading to swifter implementation of core strategies.

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The SH&E director must build his/her relationship with senior executives through influence, sound safety business investments, effective decision making, accountability, reliability and work ethic. Ethical behavior ensures that the SH&E professional maintains the highest standards of professional conduct and personal integrity in every situation and solidifies senior executive confidence in that person.

Organizations such as ASSE, AIHA and the Board of Certified Safety Professionals have codes of conduct/ethics that cover most issues with regard to the SH&E profession. The professional repercussions and risks to the safety professional who acts unethically or mismanages the safety function are significant. Such actions can damage one's reputation, erode executive support and may, ultimately, lead to loss of employment. Thus, when faced with a decision, the answers to three key questions (which also serve as a litmus test for an employee code of conduct) should guide the process:

- 1) Would I be comfortable telling my friends and family?
- 2) Would I be comfortable reading about the incident in the newspaper?
- 3) Am I worried what people would think about me if someone were to find out?

Answering these questions strengthens one's internal values and integrity, and helps ensure that actions are consistent.

Because the decisions made by an SH&E director can affect a corporation's employees, production and reputation, s/he must be confident in those decisions. When this is the case, senior executive staff and employees are more likely to support the decisions. "Self-assurance can be very important to leaders for several reasons. To a point, self-confidence and leadership are interconnected. Self-assured leaders inspire confidence in others. As the level of confidence in the leaders rises, the likelihood that their followers will accept their leadership and

act and behave as they want them to increase" (Billick 196).

Consider this example. The SH&E director of a Fortune 500 manufacturing firm receives a call from OSHA. An anonymous complainant alleges that the plant manager knowingly ordered 50 cranes to operate even though they were officially 30 days out of inspection. Two hours lapsed between the time of the alleged incident and the time the SH&E director received OSHA's call. The plant manager allegedly issued this order after being informed by the plant safety manager that the action was not only illegal, but would also inevitably put workers at risk.

An immediate investigation revealed the allegations to be true. Faced with this situation, the potential risk to employees and the impact on production, the SH&E director adhered to his own code of conduct by answering the three key questions noted earlier:

1) No, he wouldn't feel comfortable telling his friends and family that he allowed such a willful act to occur which put the lives of the employees at risk.

2) No, he would not feel comfortable reading in the local newspaper that due to a willful act of disregard for safety, employees were endangered.

3) Yes, he worries what others would think of him if they knew this type of action had been permitted.

As a result, he ordered production to be stopped for two days (which would increase costs, lead to overtime and rescheduling, etc.) while the cranes were inspected. In addition, the plant manager was reprimanded and removed from his position. Because the safety director acted promptly and decisively, OSHA did not conduct an inspection and the issue was handled internally. Subsequent media inquiries and negative publicity were also avoided. And, a key message was sent to all involved: Employee safety is not to be compromised—in any way, at any time.

In this case, consciously adhering to a code of conduct acted as a reminder of an internal commitment to conduct interactions with employees, clients and coworkers with the highest level of integrity; to be mindful of how one's conduct affects others; and to recognize that a person's actions reflect his/her discipline and character. Leaders must be positive role models of ethical behavior and personal values.

One of Billick's leadership principles states, "Values provide the moral authority for skillful leadership" (21). This could not be more true for the SH&E function. He goes on to say that "values provide leaders with a moral compass that is essential if an appropriate vision is to be created and a suitable plan to accomplish that vision is to be implemented" (20). Values also enable a person to know the difference between merely doing one's best and doing what is right. To effectively advocate for employee safety, an SH&E professional must do both his/her best *and* what is right. With a clear understanding of all organization standards, more effective and decisive action can be taken without repeatedly justifying the motivations and reasoning behind each decision. Implicitly, motives are clear.

Communication Skills

Most current publications addressing leadership reference the value of being a good communicator (e.g., Drucker; Carnegie; Billick; Covey; Maxwell). Understanding people, engaging their personalities, listening carefully to others, being dependable and understanding human behavior are all key to effective communication. Drucker believes the four basic requirements of effective human relations are communications, teamwork, self-development and development of others (214). These four requirements center on interpersonal communication. The role of the SH&E director is no different from that of other leaders. In fact, strong communication skills may be his/her single most important characteristic. After all, who else, in a given day, may need to investigate a fatality, meet with the media, interact with federal agencies, talk to an employee's family and summarize the entire episode in a report? Another common thread among these publications is the need to communicate with the utmost confidence.

Three critical avenues of communication are personal speech, voicemail and e-mail. To be a good communicator, a person must master basic skills in all three. The following guidelines will help ensure success:

- Convey an infectious enthusiasm about work. This allows the safety director to expand his/her circle of influence. "Proactive people focus their efforts in the circle of influence. They work on the things they can do something about. The nature of their energy is positive, enlarging and magnifying, causing their circle of influence to increase" (Covey 83). Maxwell echoes this sentiment: "True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed or assigned. It comes only from influence" [(a)23]. The SH&E director must influence senior staff in order to achieve the status essential to effectively directing the safety process.

- Treat all employees, vendors, contractors, brokers and consultants with dignity and respect. Proper treatment within these circles of influence can pave the road for future ease of operations. Such relationships reflect on a company's personnel as well. In other words, one will receive the same type of treatment and work results that s/he projects on others.

- Change and personalize a voicemail greeting daily. This shows the caller that s/he is calling someone who is organized and views voicemail as an extension of his/her desire to communicate.

- Return employee voicemails on the same day they are received, even if all questions cannot be answered. Same-day responses project initiative, as well as respect and organization. As Fox asserts, "Whenever you return a phone call the same day, a person feels respected, important and listened to" (59-60). The same rules apply to e-mail.

- Be personable with all coworkers. People are more than their jobs; acknowledging their unique interests helps to build strong relationships. Others are then more open to views and ideas.

As Maxwell powerfully summarizes, ". . . without [communication], you travel alone [(a) 23].

It is up to the SH&E professional to determine which leadership and communication skills and techniques are the best fit.

Select Best-Fit Leadership Skills

From the thousands of leadership techniques, articles and publications that exist today, one can glean many best practices and skills. It is also important to learn from successful upper management members, insurance professionals and other SH&E professionals. An SH&E professional may develop his/her own leadership style or may adopt another's. Much like safety interventions, what may work for leadership authors may or may not work for a specific individual or within a particular organization's culture. It is up to the SH&E professional to determine which skills and techniques are the best fit.

Berg has identified eight traits of success. A successful person is:

- 1) a dreamer, who has the ability to visualize success by focusing more on what s/he wants to happen, rather on what s/he fears may happen;
- 2) disciplined enough to set goals and priorities, and devise plans, yet flexible enough to change those plans should a new opportunity arise.
- 3) dedicated enough to know that success demands total commitment, and carrying a contagious enthusiasm that motivates others;
- 4) decisive enough to make more decisions and to make them more quickly;
- 5) daring enough to risk more, to welcome change and to view mistakes as a chance to learn;
- 6) devoted to a program of lifelong learning and self-improvement that finds a person constantly learning new skills and developing more interests;
- 7) dependable to a fault, always keeping promises;
- 8) able to delegate and know that time is best spent doing what s/he does best (5762+).

Elements of these traits of success are also mentioned in ASSE's Code of Professional Conduct. They are reflective of leadership skills as well. The principles of focus, discipline, emotional intelligence, careful listening, dedication, decision making, continuous improvement and dependability are all characteristics of a leader and should be emulated by an SH&E director. Ultimately, however, the leadership style employed will be unique to each person and to the work culture in which s/he works.

The leadership principles presented by Carnegie reflect not only traits needed to lead the safety function and conduct business, but also those necessary for understanding people by showing them dignity and respect (Carnegie). Since understanding human behavior is critical to leadership success, the SH&E professional must develop and use these skills. Carnegie offers nine principles for understanding and leading others:

- Principle 1: Begin with praise and honest appreciation.
- Principle 2: Call attention to people's mistakes indirectly.
- Principle 3: Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person.
- Principle 4: Ask questions instead of giving direct orders.
- Principle 5: Let the other person save face.

- Principle 6: Praise the slightest improvement and praise every improvement.

- Principle 7: Give the other person a fine reputation to live up to.

- Principle 8: Use encouragement. Make the fault seem easy to correct.

- Principle 9: Make the other person happy about doing what you suggest (248).

These nine principles capture critical employee relations techniques that any leader can employ. They are also often integral components of behavior-based safety programs. As with most initiatives, behavior-based safety, which advocates positive reinforcement of safe work behaviors, cannot reach its full potential without leadership. To truly achieve a safe work environment, the SH&E director and safety managers must be able to communicate positive feedback.

Action Plan for Improving Leadership Skills

SH&E directors can and should improve their leadership skills. Contrary to the expression that "leaders are born," an SH&E professional who possesses some leadership skills can become a better leader through self-improvement and professional development.

It's just pure myth that only a lucky few can ever understand the intricacies of leadership. Leadership is not a place, it's not a gene, and it's not a secret code that can't be deciphered by ordinary people. The truth is that leadership is an observable set of skills and abilities that are useful whether one is in the executive suite or on the front line, on Wall Street or Main Street, in any campus, community or corporation. And any skill can be strengthened, honed and enhanced, given the motivation and desire, the practice and feedback, and the role models and coaching (Kouzes and Posner 386).

The following action plan may help one become a better leader.

- 1) Personally adopt a code of conduct. Either through membership in a professional organization or as an internal requirement of the company, choose a code of conduct, and take actions and make decisions that reflect its canons.

- 2) Strive to constantly improve communication techniques in the three critical avenues of personal speech, voicemail and e-mail. Communicators are, by default, leaders.

- 3) Recognize and understand that diversity is a characteristic of leadership. Read diverse publications on leadership. Two good examples are *The Leadership Teachings of Geronimo* by Fielder and *Women in Power: The Secrets of Leadership* by Cantor and Bernay. Hesselbein notes that diversity is a leadership trait in that "the leader builds a work force, board and staff that reflect the many faces of the community and environment, so that customers and constituents find themselves when they view this richly diverse organization of the future" (Hesselbein 8).

- 4) Research and improve leadership skills by

reading and taking courses; this will also help to expand one's comfort level with leading others.

5) Interact with employees at all levels. Developing and strengthening interpersonal ("people") skills will facilitate a greater comfort level with being in a leadership role.

6) Always understand the company's strategic goals and integrate SH&E objectives accordingly.

7) Understand the company's financial business.

To work more effectively with accounting, finance, marketing, quality management and human resources professionals, SH&E professionals must become better versed in the common language of business. To convincingly demonstrate that safety can positively affect the bottom line, safety managers must use business language and terms, and be able to provide actual examples of savings generated by safety efforts (Adams 23).

It is also important to understand fundamental risk management techniques (such as risk financing, net present values, risk transfer and risk avoidance) that ultimately reduce a company's total cost of risk. Personal communication skills are critical when explaining the business concepts of safety. To become a trusted resource, the SH&E director must understand and speak the language of executives—namely, money and finance. By understanding a company's financial position, the safety director can engage executives in discussions about more than just safety.

To be effective SH&E professionals, we must understand the business side of the process. By expanding our thought processes to encompass the big picture, we are better able to understand what factors drive decisions that affect the bottom line. This empowers us to become trusted advisors and key players on the leadership team (Greer 13).

8) Understand the five components of emotional intelligence at work. By doing so, one can understand and recognize how personal self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills are hallmarks of being a leader (Maccoby, et al 6).

9) Research effective leadership styles and develop an integrated style of leadership. "Develop and articulate a clear vision of future safety goals and measure progress toward those goals through one-on-one discussions with employees" (Williams 6).

10) Market the SH&E profession through internal and external support of the safety function (Ferguson). Become a contributing member of an organization such as ASSE by attending chapter meetings and professional development seminars, or by writing articles of interest supporting the safety function.

11) Understand that the keys to leadership are communication, influence, motivation, innovation, creation, focus, discipline, dedication, decision making, continuous improvement and dependability, and how one treats people.

Conclusion

Ferguson's suggestion to market the SH&E profession is a clear sign that it lacks respect and needs greater publicity. He adds that "safety professionals must recognize the need to establish a specific identity—in other words, a specific name—for the profession" (Ferguson 36). Beyond this, SH&E professionals should also market themselves internally—within their corporations—through effective leadership and communication, in order to be seen as a trusted source of guidance, opinion, understanding and decision making.

Adopting a code of conduct as a decision-making tool, and combining leadership and communication techniques from respected authorities are easy steps toward building senior executive support for the safety function. By investing in personal communication and leadership attributes, the SH&E professional builds his/her stature and reputation into that of a recognized, trusted colleague. The reward is commitment to the safety function by senior executives, the board of directors and budget allocators. ■

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