

## **EDITORIAL COMMENTS: Prospects for selling safety**

Rate commitment, capacity and pressure

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With all the talk in safety circles about the impact of company cultures on safety initiatives, here are three factors to consider:

- 1)** What is your company's capacity to implement safety programs?
- 2)** What is the degree of commitment?
- 3)** How much outside pressure exists for safety improvement?

Three scholars — Mayer Zald at the University of Michigan, Calvin Morrill at the University of California at Irvine, and Hayagreeva Rao at Emory University — used these three drivers to try to predict "compliance readiness." Specifically, how organizations would respond to environmental regulatory requirements.

Their model can be readily expanded. Let's take it beyond enviro regs to give you an idea how your organization might respond to proposals you put on the table for safety and health improvements. And your initiatives can either be compliance-based, or have nothing to do with OSHA requirements.

### **Bucks and brainpower**

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First, rate your organization's capacity to implement your ideas. In their model, Zald, Morrill and Rao define capacity in terms of bucks and brainpower. Do adequate financial resources exist to make the kind of investment your proposal requires? And what about know-how — are the skills and expertise available to execute your plan?

Next, estimate your management's level of commitment. Are decision-makers sympathetic to your goals? Are you philosophically on the same page? Do they agree with your assessment of costs and benefits?

Finally, turn your attention beyond the plant gate. How much, if any, pressure exists on your company to follow through on your recommendations? The three researchers talk in terms of "surveillance and sanctions."

Who's watching and reporting your company's moves in ways that might help your case — the news media? Competitors? Unions? Consumer watchdogs? Stockholders? Regulators?

What are the sanctions, or more broadly the consequences, for following or not following your proposals? Lawsuits? More profits? Flattering or unfavorable press? Employee complaints or better morale? Government inspections and possible penalties?

To get a handle on your chances for selling your idea, rate capacity as either low or high, commitment either low or high, and pressure low or high.

### **Where you stand**

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Let's see where you stand. For instance, if your idea is going up against low capacity, low

commitment, and low pressure, the researchers would expect your organization to treat your project as irrelevant. You might have trouble getting past the boss's secretary.

On the flip side, if your company is a Voluntary Protection Program "Star" site (high commitment), resources are readily available for what you suggest (high capacity), and a new standard is on the way that will eventually require what you propose (high pressure), then you're probably looking at a green light.

Things get more interesting — or confusing — when these cultural factors that can kill or pump life into your proposal are not so black and white. Say you come back from a safety conference on culture assessment and you believe it's time for an employee perception survey. It's been years since anyone asked your workforce what it thinks about safety and health issues at your site.

You feel you might have a chance because the boss has said all the right things about employees as valued assets, success depending on trust and communication, and so forth. Empowerment is a core value. So you rate commitment as high.

Capacity, though, is another matter. You have no experience administering perception surveys. You'll need help. The human resources department is understaffed, so you might have to hire a consultant. That's not in this year's budget. Score capacity low.

Now what about pressure? OSHA certainly doesn't force anyone to conduct perception surveys. This isn't about compliance. You can't get sued for ignoring perceptions. And perception surveys are not a management fad you can leverage. There's no *BusinessWeek* cover story you can point to. Score pressure low.

## **Predicting a reaction**

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So what might be management's reaction? Commitment is high, but capacity and pressure score low. Sound familiar? This is often the organizational climate for non-compliance safety initiatives. Philosophically, executives will commit to what you say. But resources typically run low, and there's no real pressure to act. Seldom are safety issues pushed by communities or grassroots groups — forces that drive environmental issues.

Back to our perception survey. Execs might well express initial interest. Yes, good idea. Fits with our culture. You might get what the researchers call "symbolic conformity" — with little real change. Leaders give speeches or do public relations work that implies agreement with what you propose. But that consultant will cost too much, and the benefits from polling perceptions are too "soft" to quantify.

Bottom line: Initial feedback from the corner office might be encouraging. But then you're strung along. Eventually you cross perception surveys from your to-do list.

Go back and review the fate of some of your proposals. How receptive was the culture — high or low — in terms of commitment, capacity and pressure? You might learn something that can shape your approach the next time you try to sell an idea.

*Note:* The paper describing the model by Zald, Morrill and Rao, "How do Social Movements Penetrate Organizations? Environmental Impact and Organizational Response" can be downloaded at — <http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/organizations/smo/2002paper.html>

— Dave Johnson, Editor