

## **EDITORIAL COMMENTS: Swimming with the sharks**

Office politics? Jump in, the water's fine

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We recently asked about two dozen readers to give us questions for this year's White Paper survey on the state of the EHS nation. It's a pivotal time to ask what's going on. Many readers work in plants with below-average injury rates. Exposures are largely under control. Nationally, work injury rates rest at an all-time low. OSHA is quiet, with little standards-setting action.

Many EHS pros aren't sure where they stand in their organizations. Not that EHS has ever been on the strongest footing, but things used to be more black and white — for better or worse. Back in the 1970s and '80s, executives saw EHS pros as compliance cops. OSHA was the name of the safety game. Confining expectations for pros, but clear.

Thirty-five years after the OSH Act was signed into law, it's a new game. Compliance? Been there, done that, most large companies say. Plus, support functions like safety and health are often outsourced. "Dirty jobs" are automated or shipped overseas. "Empowered" employees do the work of supervisors — including safety training and inspections. Push-button instruments reduce the need for technical experts.

Where does this leave the EHS pro?

In the dark, judging by questions submitted to us by readers. "What's driving EHS in plants today?" "What are companies doing about staffing?" "What other duties is the EHS pro taking on?" "What are people doing to bring value to the business?" "What do executives really believe about us?"

You can react to this kind of uncertainty several ways. Beef up credentials. Maintain certification points. Take shorter vacations. (It's estimated that more than 100 million earned vacation weeks — almost two million years — won't be used this year in North America.) Polish the résumé. Reread Stephen Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People."

### **Office awareness**

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It's also a good time to sharpen your political skills. That's one way to find out about priorities and future decisions in your shop. And it will give you an edge: Only about one in 20 bright people are seen as being politically savvy by colleagues, according to research by Joel DeLuca, Ph.D.

That's because most of us duck politics faster than a telemarketer's call at dinner. Who spent any serious couch time this summer watching the two conventions? How often do you hear, "It doesn't matter who wins in November, they're all the same"?

Maybe it's time to test your political savvy IQ. Dr. DeLuca has a quiz on his Web site, [www.politicalsavvy.com](http://www.politicalsavvy.com).

Surprise number one: Politicking can be above-board. Put aside the negative campaign ads for a minute. Those with a "leadership style" look at it positively, in terms of making a contribution, says Dr. DeLuca. Politics, after all, make the corporate world go 'round.

Surprise number two: The politically savvy aren't all back-slapping extroverts. Their people skills often aren't exceptional, says Dr. DeLuca. What they do possess is the mindset of a chess player. They see the whole board, and think in terms of strategies and tactics.

But the goal is not to maneuver everyone else off the board. Here's where re-reading Covey's "Seven Habits" can help. Seek first to understand (your boss). Look for the win-win. Sure "win-win" can be an empty cliché, and some sharks do intend to swallow everyone in the corporate pool. But that's not the only way the game's played.

## **Be a player**

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With that in mind, here are ten habits of responsible politicking:

**1 – Give more credit than you take.** "Only a fool acts as if he or she is an island and does it all alone. It just isn't possible," says Professor Allan Cohen of Babson College. Research shows that people good at getting things done are generous about spreading the credit around.

**2 – Don't take risks, manage them.** This is natural for EHS pros. You tend not to last long in organizations otherwise.

**3 – Give people something they care about.** Give the boss your knowledge of emerging risks, cost-saving information technologies, employee safety concerns, opportunities for process improvements. Frame your arguments in terms of the things the boss cares about — growth, technology, cost-savings, corporate citizenship, whatever his hot-buttons are, says Professor Cohen.

**4 – Connect with people long before you know what you need from them.** "Organizational players who acquire influence have a vast and wide network in the organization. They have friends everywhere," he says.

**5 – Be seen as someone worth talking to.** Get in the habit of thinking about what matters to other people. They're worried about their own future. If they're not worried about you and your "agenda," but see you as someone who listens, you might be surprised at what you can learn.

**6 – Have many more connections than you're going to use.** It's quite helpful in today's revolving-door business world. Get a reputation as someone who cares about people (EHS pros walk in the door with that), who's easy to talk to, who just isn't peddling his or her own stuff all the time, who isn't totally self-absorbed. It's a reputation that draws people in, says Professor Cohen.

**7 – Monitor your convictions.** Is it ego that has you swimming against a tide of strong opposition? Cowardice or a desire to be liked that has you going along with the boss, even if you know he's wrong?

**8 – Create new metrics.** "The best way to overcome historically deep-rooted, dated assumptions and beliefs is to create new metrics that reflect new realities," says business consultant Bruce Merrifield. Such as leading indicators of safety activity. Or financial measures to make the business case.

"Hard core, old believers just want the new data to disappear, but we have to gently keep pressing the new data and the new performance gaps they underscore," says Merrifield.

**9 – Keep at it.** "Keep selling until the customer (your boss) complains about being tired of hearing how good and valuable you are for his bottom line," says Merrifield.

**10 – Stay visible.** Out of sight, out of mind, out of work? Make the invisible (good safety performance means no one got hurt) visible, says Merrifield. Explain who benefits from the intangible, and how. Make it real. Promote accomplishments. Merrifield used to grab his fast-moving boss for monthly ten-minute progress reports.

*"No leadership education is complete until it is grounded in the political realities of organizational life." — Peter Drucker*

— Dave Johnson, Editor