

Trial by fire

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How to pass the leadership test

These are times of extreme economic, social and political uncertainty - even threat. The good news: Corporate America is coming around in many ways to acknowledge the importance of safety to control losses, boost involvement and enlist morale. But are we as safety professionals ready and willing to take the lead?

First, we have to de-victimize ourselves. We have to change. If we want more management support, we must start by asking ourselves (ala root cause analysis):

"While I know there are many factors involved outside of my control, what have/haven't I done that contributes to the current level of support - or lack of support - I'm receiving?"

"How might I change the way I approach my work so that everyone, not just me, becomes an expert on their own safety?"

"What am I most uncomfortable doing? Have I been avoiding reformatting our safety approach (by spreading the work load) due to my own discomfort or fears?"

For many professionals today, self-evaluation, personal responsibility and skill-building are critical.

Leadership skills

According to MIT's Edgar Schein, there are three levels of leadership skills. Here's how they apply to safety and health work:

Strategic - skills that focus on setting mission, direction, planning, change mastery, trend analysis, handling finances, etc.

People - skills of persuasion, listening, directing conflict to positive outcomes, developing teamwork, etc.

Technical - skills of accessing information, reporting, tracking changing regulations, hands-on methods for compliance.

How confident are you of your skills in these areas?

Schein contends, and our experiences corroborate this, that "lower level leaders" predominantly focus on technical skills, some people skills and relatively little strategic skills.

"Mid-level leaders" focus on an even mix.

"Upper level leaders" mostly focus on strategic skills, secondarily on people skills and very little on technical skills.

To move to a position of higher influence and power, you must recalibrate your skills mix. Safety "technicians" absolutely serve an important function, though they may also be perpetually in danger of replacement or perhaps not being highly regarded by corporate leaders who live in a strategic world.

Remember this as you move up the ladder of influence and power: Leaders are not born, but are developed and honed, according to renowned leadership expert Dr. Warren Bennis. Dr. Bennis concludes that leadership is not explained by intelligence, birth order, family wealth, family stability, level of education, ethnicity, gender, or race. There is no one type of leader. Instead, there is great variance from one leader to another.

Dr. Bennis also points out that many leaders have gone through a "crucible experience"- a significant event, either negative or positive, that provides the motivation and self-perspective necessary for the personal vision and perseverance that leaders need. For some leaders, this "crucible experience" was being in combat or facing a life-threatening illness (to themselves or to a loved one). For others it was an energizing time of getting great approval for doing what they felt was "right."

Haven't had that "crucible experience" in your life? You might consider these past few years of layoffs and job uncertainty as your crucible, as your trial by fire.

Shift your focus

We don't profess to have a crystal ball that illustrates the future. But we do believe that, in order for safety, health and environmental professionals to thrive and survive, to work satisfyingly toward fulfilling their mission, we all must think of ourselves less as technicians and more as strategic leaders.

We must spend time doing new things, while finding a way (perhaps through developing the skills and perspective of involved line staff) to get our baseline activities accomplished.

Take personal control of your own leadership development. Now is the time. The payoff: We help make real and significant improvements in the lives and work of millions of people worldwide.

SIDEBAR: Climbing the ladder

Skills needed to climb the leadership ladder include:

- Strategic thinking;
- Strategic planning;
- Strong communication/listening skills applied to the broadest range of people (most notably with those who have different approaches/styles than do we);
- Being able to create culturally-appropriate solutions;
- Hone old skills and develop new ones;
- Overcome resistance;
- Persuasively motivate people to look ahead toward protecting themselves and others and ultimately focus on increasing bottom line results.

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