

## **Giving Back: Making a Difference as a Safety Professional**

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### **Introduction**

There is a great deal that safety professionals can do to positively impact the world; they do it every day in their companies and organizations. However, there are a large number of organizations, large and small, that serve their local communities that could benefit from what a safety professional has to offer. Most, if not all, non-profits and community service organizations have a need for some type of safety and health assistance. Those needs however, are not always apparent to them nor can they often afford to purchase a consultant's services.

### **What a Safety Professional Has to Offer**

Many safety professionals take their knowledge, skills and abilities for granted. They work every day with the broad spectrum of safety-related information, they promote safety in their organizations or influence other's organizations, and they attend meetings and conferences with other safety professionals. A great number of safety professionals don't know how valuable their knowledge is in greater society; it's simply what they do.

Within greater society and specifically the non-profit arena, what safety professionals have to offer is invaluable. Most people have some idea of safety, "how to be safe," or what exposures and controls are, through a variety of sources. It could be their workplace training programs, some experience that they have had or the media. While some of this knowledge is good, it tends to be narrow in focus, limited or in some cases wrong. Many times the information that people pick up about safety, especially from the media, is wrong. As a safety professional, you are in a unique position to bring a broader view to the safety and health issues that organizations face. In addition to providing accurate information, a safety professional can provide perspective. For

instance, many people hear asbestos and immediately have a visceral reaction, acting out of fear brought on by the media and legal advertisements. But as a safety professional, we have the opportunity to stand back and analyze the exposure and communicate that information in a meaningful manner. If needed, we can formulate a plan that minimizes or eliminates the hazard without undue burden on the organization.

The knowledge and experience that you as a safety professional can bring to a non-profit organization is limited only by your imagination. We have the ability to educate, inspire, reduce exposures, mitigate losses, prevent injuries and losses, and bring reality to a situation.

## **Who Needs Your Help**

While there are many organizations that could use the assistance of a safety professional, we will focus on the non-profit sector, as that is where volunteering is most highly leveraged. There is a broad range of organizations that might benefit from what you have to offer. We'll explore that from a broad perspective as well as more specific examples.

The mission of many non-profit organizations is to assist those in need or serve a population of people or community in some way. Their resources and revenue streams are generally directed toward bringing services or programming to people in some way, and unless the organization is larger, they generally are not directing much toward safety or compliance. Like businesses, safety can often be seen as a necessary evil that they will expend a minimum amount of effort to deal with. These efforts can be so misdirected or ineffective as to be counter-productive. For-profit enterprises have had the advantage of years of work by safety professionals to help make the connection between the profit margin and safety efforts and the dramatic effect it can have on an organization. Non-profits are generally at a distinct disadvantage with their institutional knowledge of how losses can impact their revenues or surpluses. This view is potentially revolutionary to organizations that have not been exposed to it previously as well as impactful on the safety of those served and those who serve.

Functionally, there are many ways to serve as a volunteer from the highest levels of an organization to right out on the front lines. Some examples are as follows:

- Board Member – provide a high level of focus on risk management and safety protocols and controls for the activities of the organization.
- Consultant – provide high level consulting type services to the organization in your area of expertise
- Inspector – provide a trained eye to evaluate buildings, grounds and activities
- Trainer – provide training to staff and other volunteers on safety and safety related topics that they would otherwise have very little access to
- Facilitator – act as an impartial party to facilitate solutions to problems with safety components or aspects
- Reviewer – provide review of proposed new or altered facilities or operations
- On-site Safety Coordinator – provide an on-site safety presence and expertise
- Developer – provide tailored safety programs

Any of the previously mentioned functions in addition to others can be applied to a wide

variety of organizations. A limited list follows to provide an example of the broad range of possibilities:

Boy Scouts of America – Board Member, Consultant, Inspection of Camps, Risk Management knowledge, Merit Badge Councilor (Safety and Traffic Safety)

Girl Scouts – Similar to above

YMCA/YWCA – Board Member, Inspection of facilities and camps

Homeless Shelter – Inspection of facilities, food preparation

Habitat for Humanity – On-site Safety Coordinator, Trainer

Shelter – Inspection of facilities

Schools – Consultant to activities

Food Bank – Trainer (proper lifting), food storage, facilities inspection

Church – Board, Consultant

There is no lack of opportunities for a safety professional who is interested in volunteering their time and talents.

## **Capitalizing on Opportunities**

The aforementioned list gives a few ideas for what organizations may benefit from and have an interest in what you have to offer them. But, how the leadership of the organization is approached is very important to achieving a successful outcome for them and for you. Opening with, “I’m a safety professional and I’m here to help you,” might prove counterproductive. Even though it is heartfelt, non-profit leaders may not understand the separation you have from regulatory agencies that they interact with and the negative baggage that can go along with it. The first step in approaching an organization should be viewed as relationship building, even before you get into what you have that the organization can use. Remember, in some cases, leaders are used to getting cash donations or material goods. This may be a different type of donation for them to understand and embrace. Offering to get together with them to describe how you might help them or that you have some skills to offer will start to build relationship and trust. For you to gain that trust, they will need to understand your motives and why you are reaching out. It must be remembered that they will be potentially exposing some vulnerabilities to you if you work together and they have to have a sense of you and your motivations. Make sure that you go in armed with a resume and some references as well. In addition to letting them know what you have to offer from a skills, knowledge and abilities standpoint, they will need to have information to look into your character. Don’t be surprised if the organization needs to perform a background check on you prior to your being able to work on-site with them. This is standard procedure for organizations and agencies that service people, but particularly children.

At the conclusion of the project or activity, you may want to document what you accomplished depending on the type of intervention you had. It can be very valuable for the leadership and/or board to understand what has been undertaken on their behalf and use it for documentation. You should also use the activities and results on your own resume, so documentation is helpful.

## **Conclusion**

There is no shortage of opportunities for a safety professional to volunteer their time and talents. The challenge is in understanding what opportunities can be met and how to partner with various organizations. We can all give back.