The Safety Network

Strategies for building an effective company resource

By Jeffery E. LaBelle

IF A CORPORATION WANTS TO ENSURE that each of its 10 facilities has a complete safety program for fall prevention, should each facility safety manager be asked to create an individual document for his/her site? Should the corporation create a standard program, then require that each site implement it? What other options are available (Ouchi)?

In the movement to do more with less, companies are seeking methods and practices that allow them to achieve safety process success in the most effective and efficient manner (Hintch 36). This article examines one effective approach—the safety network.

What Is a Safety Network?

In this context, a safety network is an organizational team of functional (i.e., SH&E) representatives that creates synergies, sets strategies, establishes benchmarks and solves problems. The basic concept is that different people perform similar functions within a given organization; a network of these peeople can improve collaboration, reduce work redundancies and accelerate outputs as a team more efficiently than the individuals ever could working independently.

Why Develop a Safety Network?

Consider the example posed at the beginning of this article. An organization has 10 separate facilities, each of which employs an SH&E manager. Each manager is tasked with developing and continuously improving his/her site's SH&E process. If each of these 10 managers takes five days to develop an individual fall protection program, the total person-hours needed to complete the task would be 400 (10 x 5 x 8 = 400). Now suppose that in the team setting, one manager volunteers to develop the program, which will subsequently be reviewed by the other nine managers. Assuming one hour each to review, the total person-hours is now 49 [(1 x 5 x 8) + 9]—a reduction of more than 87 percent [((400-49)/400) x 100]. As this simple example illustrates, the network process not only can reduce the amount of time

required to ensure that each site has a consistent program, it can also produce a final program that has been peer-reviewed.

Based on this, one can surmise that if the individual yet often-redundant knowledge and capabilities of the group's members could be harnessed, the collective efforts required to achieve this task could be reduced by more than 90 percent. Multiply this savings by the number of SH&E programs required and necessary for safe operation, and it is easy to see the tremendous potential of this approach. And, this example does not even consider the benefits of having a consistent yet locally customizable SH&E process throughout the organization.

What does this savings achieve? Reducing the amount of work required to maintain or even accelerate the safety process allows SH&E managers to refocus their efforts on areas that truly need attention, such as improving incident investigation, ergonomics or behavioral/cultural issues.

Buy One, Get Nine Free

Let's consider the combined-effort benefits of a safety network in more detail. When an SH&E manager develops one safety program, then receives nine different ones in return from his/her teammates, the potential for workload reduction is clear. However, such a process raises concerns with respect to program applicability and comprehensiveness. Will the nine programs received in return be OSHA-compliant? Will all required sections be appropriate for this site? What if someone writes in volumes and another writes in bullets? These are excellent examples of the thought process that occurs when SH&E managers begin to see themselves as part of a team.

By creating a program development strategy and

Jeffery E. LaBelle, CSP, CIH, *is environmental health and safety manager for CC Industries in Chicago. He holds a B.S. in Physiology with an emphasis in chemistry from Michigan State University, an M.S. in Industrial Health and Hygiene from the University of Michigan and an M.S. with an emphasis in management from the University of Toledo. He is a professional member of ASSE's Greater Chicago Chapter.*

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peer-review process, each SH&E manager will end up with programs that are better than any one manager could create. In essence, these are "best of the best" documents, not "the best I can do given the time I have" documents.

Safety Program Development
Strategy & Peer Review

To create consistent programs, those involved must develop a strategy that will allow all team members to understand the group's direction as well as what is expected of them individually. Then, through a peer-review process, not only do members actively participate in how each final document will look and function, they also help to ensure a consistent process that operates using a system of checks and balances. The strategy and review process should include the following steps:

1) Determine and rank which programs to develop first (e.g., high risk vs. high use).

2) Develop, peer review and agree on a program template.

3) Assign responsibility to each safety manager to develop a draft program.

   a) Each team member should submit to the applicable author any similar program that s/he may already have.

   b) Each team member should submit any needs or suggestions to the author.

4) Assign deadlines for draft program completion, peer review and final distribution.

5) Authors disseminate first draft to team.

6) Team members review draft program individually and with their facility management, and provide constructive feedback on the various elements to the author by the deadline.

7) Author reviews feedback and distributes final draft program by deadline.

8) Team reviews final draft program at network meeting.

9) If the team agrees on the final draft, it then becomes the final program (following management review and approval).

10) Site safety managers may be allowed to incor-

porate addendums that customize it specifically for their site. An optional exemption would include customizations based on corporate approval, adopting modifications that are "greater than or equal to" current program requirements or are deemed necessary by local management.

As noted, such a process reduces program development time and helps to ensure program consistency. Using the same program eliminates lengthy debate on the subtle differences among site programs (e.g., grammar, semantics) and focuses attention on continuously improving the primary, team-created programs; it also frees time to address critical issues (such as training). Additionally, involving each facility's SH&E manager in the development of consistent company programs fosters a sense of inclusion and accountability. This process also offers the network a firmly rooted, easy to envision set of achievable goals; this breeds a sense of accomplishment that can facilitate future projects (Montana).

What Else Can a Safety Network Achieve?

SH&E program development is only one project in which a safety network can be involved. Anytime SH&E managers need to complete a project or implement a process, a high-performing safety network can speed the task. The group can:
• Participate in company safety goals and strategy setting.
• Produce more-complete and concise, and better-supported SH&E programs and processes.
• Create improved assurance of federal and state regulatory compliance.
• Develop and implement important SH&E programs that are not compliance-based or are based on industry best practices.
• Improve peer-to-peer communications and discussions regarding problem-solving strategies and troubleshooting approaches.
• Ensure uniformity in training development and implementation.
• Conduct benchmarking (within and among companies).
• Ensure that all facilities have the opportunity to achieve the same high level of SH&E process success.

Once organizational SH&E processes reach consistent levels, the network can begin to pursue more-challenging goals that will surpass what any one facility could achieve alone. In most situations, developing a collaborative environment can save resources that would be better spent advancing the organization's overall goals and objectives. As the saying goes, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Assessing the Need

Before considering a safety network, a needs assessment should be conducted. Cote's needs assessment model consists of these main activities:
• Determine purpose.
• Develop a plan.
• Plan data collection.
• Collect and analyze data.
• Identify required levels of current and future performance.
• Identify current level of performance.
• Identify problem areas.
• Identify cause(s) of problems.
• Identify solutions.
• Communicate results and recommendations (Cote).

The assessment should analyze the current state of each site's SH&E functions. Do safety managers currently use any methods to reduce redundant work efforts (both within and between locations)? Are resources being used effectively? Are time and effort being expended on projects that would be better managed with team unity? Are differing priorities an obstacle? If so, a safety network may well be an effective way to accelerate a new safety process or invigorate a stagnating one.

To conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, the resources necessary to support a safety network must be calculated and its overall fit with the organization's objectives considered. The completed assessment can then provide a valuable tool to help sell the concept to management.

Getting Buy In: Three Approaches

The network organizer must seek convice critical people that the safety network is a viable solution. This can be achieved in three ways: 1) grassroots; 2) direct approach; and 3) "talk it into reality."

Grassroots support entails presenting the concept to would-be participants, outlining the benefits and potential challenges, and determining their interest and willingness to commit the time necessary. Since the safety network should meet physically several times a year, potential members should assess whether they will receive the necessary support from their managers to attend these face-to-face meetings—that is, will the time and expense be approved? Grassroots support initiatives should also anticipate and address team member concerns before formally seeking senior management approval.

Another way to gain support for a safety network is the direct approach: Present the concept to senior management before discussing it with potential

team members. This requires a formal proposal that should define the network and its benefits, identify leaders and participants, and explain logistics, financing and costs. A cost-benefit analysis that supports the benefits of developing a safety network may help sell this concept to management. If senior management approves, the concept is then presented to potential members with the assurance that it has management support.

The third option—"talk it into reality"—involves the network organizer "talking up" the concept to critical people (potential team members and senior management.) S/he might discuss how getting SH&E managers together regularly to develop consistent processes, brainstorm and troubleshoot would improve their effectiveness and efficiency. This approach seeks informal approval first. In all cases, both potential participants and senior management must be committed to the initiative.

Logistics & Resources

In terms of overall network funding, typical costs will include travel expenses, meeting room fees, food and office supplies. Additional funding may be required for special projects or to implement recommendations made by the network—especially those with company-wide implications.

As noted, the safety network should meet face-to-face several times a year, perhaps at a major city location or in a city with a company operation. The latter option can facilitate a site tour and give team members the opportunity to rotate hosting the meeting. It also produces minor cost savings since the host member need not travel. Alternatively, meetings can be held in conjunction with a local safety conference to allow members to combine professional development with company business.

If travel-related resources are limited or nonexistent, the team can meet and interact virtually. This can be accomplished through regular conference calls; via e-mail discussions through which members add their comments to the message thread; or via online electronic meetings using conferencing software. While these approaches may limit in-depth debate or make it more difficult to truly get to know other team members, they still allow for continued progress toward team goals. To maintain momentum on agreed-upon projects, the network facilitator should schedule a one-hour conference call between meetings to discuss interim project results and to remind participants of deadlines (LaBelle 18).

Team Development

One great characteristic about a safety network is that it evolves. If fostered, this evolution can transform the group into a high-performing unit. According to the "Tuckman Model," teams go through common developmental stages: forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman 384; Tuckman and Jensen 419). Wheelan further defines these stages:

The first phase is a period of dependency and inclusion. In this phase, group members are

concerned with personal safety and need dependable and directive leadership. In the second phase—counterdependency and fight—members of the group begin to challenge the leader's authority and openly disagree with one another. If these disagreements are successfully resolved, the group enters the trust and structure (third) phase, which is characterized by increased group cohesion and cooperation. During this phase, members begin to organize and plan ways to achieve their goals and objectives in earnest. A work (fourth) phase—a period of intense focus on goal achievement—follows. Finally, in groups that are not ongoing, a termination phase occurs (Wheelan).

Thus, as a safety network evolves over time, its ability to perform and contribute typically accelerates (Chang). Therefore, management should be informed to expect that after the initial "low-hanging fruit" issues are addressed and as the team becomes more established, its output will likely amplify.

Establishing Roles & Responsibilities

Once the network has been approved, the network organizer must determine who is in charge. Should the organizer be the leader, the facilitator or simply a peer member? Should someone outside the group with no stake in its outcomes facilitate the team? This is a key first step in deciding how to best run the meetings.

If possible, working with a professional team facilitator for the first few meetings will help participants gain a better feel for how the network will function and what is expected of it. A facilitator helps to set the stage for successive meetings as well. In any case, whether an expert or a company SH&E manager serves as the facilitator, this role must be performed with great care and in a manner that fosters peer debate. A functional leader who states his/her own opinion too early can silence subordinates quickly. The facilitator must guide the team to resolutions that *it* seeks, not those on the facilitator's personal agenda. A skilled facilitator fosters an open, honest atmosphere and is constantly aware of not placing his/her thoughts ahead of critical team debate (Ulmer). In all cases, the facilitator must understand team dynamics and possess leadership skills. Even those with some experience in this area would likely be served by additional formal instruction in team facilitating.

Ground rules for meetings and group member roles should be established early in the team development process. All members must understand their roles and expectations (on both the individual and team level). In addition, they will want to know how much influence the facilitator has and whether s/he will be able to garner outside support for team decisions. An early meeting to brainstorm about these rules and roles will help all participants better understand the process.

In many employment settings, the word "fun" is avoided. In a team setting, however, having fun and

lightening the mood promotes a comfortable, easy camaraderie, which encourages open discussion and supports an atmosphere of friendly support (DeKoven). Thus, the facilitator should strive to schedule fun into the meetings. For example, s/he could start each meeting with an icebreaker or team-building activity.

Team Building

Team-building exercises may occur before, during or after the actual meeting time. The philosophy and practice behind consistently including these on the agenda is that these exercises bring people together to solve a fun problem together. The exercise should require some problem-solving efforts, allow members to share something about themselves or otherwise allow members to better understand fellow members. This will help the group as a whole to better understand their peers and how best to utilize each member's particular talents. It also helps to increase trust among members and promotes open communication.

The First Meeting
The Agenda

The first team meeting is critical. It establishes the foundation on which team members will work together. An agenda is paramount to success. Consider this exchange from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*?

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat (Carroll).

The agenda should be distributed well in advance, along with a request that participants bring attachments or ideas for discussion.

Minutes & Timekeeper

Before the meeting, the facilitator should develop a schedule of who will take the meeting minutes. Taking turns alphabetically (or in reverse) is one way to share this task. Someone (perhaps the minutes-taker) should also monitor the time allotted to each topic. Meetings can fast become frustrating to all involved if the agenda is not followed.

Room Setup

The team should meet in a comfortable room that is conducive to its work. A U-shaped setup is ideal since it allows each member to see the front of the room and encourages open discussion because all participants are facing each other. The room should be well lit and appropriate audio/visual equipment should be readily available, as should items such as flip charts, masking tape and writing utensils. Breaks should be scheduled into the agenda as well.

Setting the Atmosphere & Tone

Before the meeting, the facilitator should give serious thought to the atmosphere in which team members will work. The atmosphere created for this first meeting will create an impression on all team members that will set the stage for future meetings. The agenda represents the matter of the discussions while the atmosphere is the context in which it will occur; it is as important to success as the agenda. To foster a positive atmosphere, the facilitator should consider setting aside time early in each meeting for individual "celebrations." This is where each member shares positive news that has occurred either at his/her facility or personally. This sharing gets people to talk early on. In the author's experience, when people are required to speak early on, they are more likely to speak throughout the meeting.

Future Meetings

To ensure superior meetings, the facilitator must consistently provide superior facilitation efforts. There are few shortcuts to effective facilitation. A tremendous amount of behind-the-scenes work is involved in preparing network meetings. The facilitator should anticipate spending three to four days of planning for each day of meeting. S/he must also continue to coordinate meeting location and logistics, outside speakers and related details. It is also important to ensure that safety network goals, objectives and achievements are clearly and regularly communicated to all involved. This is in addition to the facilitator's primary role as cheerleader, coach and taskmaster.

Conclusion

For all the effort required to establish and maintain a safety network, the rewards are almost immediate and genuinely heartfelt. Significant benefits can be achieved by shepherding the distributed talents that exist within an organization into something that is greater than the sum of its parts. When successful, it is truly an achievement of which to be proud. ■

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