

# The Emerging Management School of Safety

*SH&E professionals must develop business skills to succeed*

**By Shawn J. Adams**

OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, research of safety curricula has revealed much about the roles of SH&E professionals. In 1985, Dillon surveyed SH&E practitioners and found that their most important role was to seek “active support for safety function affairs from higher level management” (62). In 1992, Soule surveyed faculty, employers and graduates of Indiana University of Pennsylvania’s (IUP) safety degree program and found that safety people needed “effective management skills” in order to do more than just “apply technical skills” (86) and needed the ability to “recognize the company’s superstructure and infrastructure and be able to work effectively within it” (87-88).

In 1994, Ferguson surveyed CSPs and found that baccalaureate coursework in risk management was needed, as was coursework in areas associated with business, such as total quality management and the financial aspects of safety (79-81). Research at the associate degree level produced similar results [Adams(c) 549+]. Blair surveyed other CSPs and found that “the greatest problem the safety profession faces is the lack of upper management commitment and support” (127). Blair’s recommendations included expanding safety programs to include

“knowledge of business, accounting and marketing” (131). Similarly, Stempniak’s survey of faculty and practitioners resulted in a recommendation that risk management be included as part of the curriculum (67).

While none of the cited research suggests that technical skills should be abandoned, it indicates that degreed SH&E professionals often lack business skills, which hampers the effectiveness of these professionals. SH&E professionals must be able to communicate with business managers in a language to which those managers can relate. Like any form of communication, when SH&E professionals communicate with business managers, “information management must always be viewed from the unique perspective of the individual person or department” (Clampitt 82).

In “Safety Management: A Call for (R)evolution,” Hansen observed that many SH&E professionals suffer from a “Rodney Dangerfield” complex. They obtain professional certification, then wonder when the respect of top management will follow. Quoting Burk, Hansen writes:

Participation among top management ranks should not be viewed as a right. It must be earned through responsible performance. When the safety and health professional becomes concerned with promoting the cost-effective use of organizational resources, it will be further empowered through membership among top management ranks (21).

To promote the cost-effective use of organizational resources, SH&E professionals must understand the basics of business management and related disciplines such as accounting and finance. They must be able to communicate from the unique perspective of top management. Unfortunately, even from an

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ABET-accredited safety degree program, the education safety students receive is lacking with regard to understanding top management's perspective and its language, which is often grounded in managers' training as MBAs or CPAs. As Thomas and Lack point out:

The management school model for education of safety and health professionals has not yet been attempted, yet it is one whose time has arrived. After all, it is other managers who the safety and health practitioner must work with, gain respect from, and convince in order to be effective. This process is best begun while everyone is in school (646).

For the SH&E profession to be viewed as a top discipline and equal partner in the business world—as opposed to a technical field—SH&E professionals must expand into the fourth paradigm of occupational safety: the management school of safety. As opposed to a degree in “safety management” that focuses on technical skills while featuring courses with the word “management” or “administration” in their title, this new school would be a hybrid of disciplines. Graduates would be well-grounded in safety principles, but would also be familiar with risk management and traditional business subjects such as human resources management, finance and accounting—much in the way many business schools now offer MBAs for practitioners who lack an undergraduate degree in business. Such an approach would help the SH&E professional to better integrate into the modern business organization. It would also attract students who are interested in safety, yet lean toward business disciplines because they are not comfortable with the engineering disciplines that currently dominate the safety field.

### **The Three Current Schools of Safety**

Safety is a relatively new academic discipline. One could say that it was born with the passage of the OSH Act of 1970. A 1997 study showed that most states did not have a baccalaureate degree program in safety (Adams 43-45). Over the past 30 years, three main schools of thought have emerged within the SH&E profession—one deals with unsafe conditions, one with unsafe acts and one with the chronic aspects of worker safety.

#### **Engineering School of Safety**

The first school of thought could be referred to as the engineering school of safety. It focuses on having trained engineers who are cross-trained in safety techniques perform the safety function. This school is well represented by the American Society of Safety *Engineers* (emphasis added); through academic safety programs accredited by the Accreditation Board for *Engineering and Technology* (emphasis added); and by the CSP exam, which waives the ASP testing requirements if the candidate holds a professional engineer (P.E.) or CIH designation (BCSP 7).

Members of this school are invaluable for their technical expertise. Effective safety starts with a

properly designed workplace. Asking someone to work safely in an ill-designed workplace is akin to swimming upstream. Still, with the nation's industrial base shrinking and more of the economy represented by the service sector and small business, one cannot help but be concerned that the SH&E profession must adjust with the market.

#### **Behavioral School of Safety**

A second school of thought could be referred to as the behavioral school of safety. This school is grounded in psychology (often referred to as behavior-based safety). At times, a conflict exists between the engineering school and the behavioral school [Adams(b) 29]. However, both approaches

have value. If unsafe acts continue to be a leading cause of on-the-job losses, and as the economy moves from a manufacturing base to a service and information base, the behavioral school has much to offer the SH&E profession. While safety might start with engineering, human behavior cannot be engineered out.

#### **Health School of Safety**

The SH&E profession also has many members with health backgrounds. The third school of safety, which includes CIHs and certified occupational health nurses (COHNs), is the health school of safety. Like engineers and psychologists, these practitioners bring value to the profession because their efforts to deal with chronic conditions (rather than acute causes) ultimately add to the bottom line.

#### **The Problem**

Historically, SH&E professionals have ably brought the disciplines of engineering, psychology and health to corporate America. But the profession's weakness rests in its inability to affect the system as insiders. This system is the business (or, in the case of not-for-profits, the organization) in which SH&E professionals operate. A 1998 survey of ASSE members indicated that 82 percent worked in a for-profit business or a not-for-profit organization. The engineering school of safety focuses on things, the behavioral school focuses on people and the health school on chronic effects. None of them has the system as its primary focus.

In *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge discusses systems, claiming that all business and human endeavors are part of an overall system. “You can only understand the system . . . by contemplating the whole not any individual part of the pattern” (Senge 7). Since most SH&E professionals work in the private sector, not only must they affect things and people, they must also understand the business system in which they



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operate. This leads to a key question: How many SH&E professionals have a basic understanding of the general principles of accounting or finance? Roger Milliken, president of Baldrige award winner Milliken & Co., said that the biggest barriers to change in business are “upper management, middle management and front-line management” (George 59).

To overcome these barriers, SH&E professionals must be able to communicate from the “unique perspective” of these individuals—in their MBA/CPA language. Soule’s research indicated that the employers of graduates from IUP’s safety program are critical of the communication and management skills of junior

safety professionals, demanding that they be more than just technicians. It appears that the SH&E profession has an opportunity to improve.

Assume that the “Rodney Dangerfield” complex exists and that the research which indicates that SH&E graduates lack the management skills to succeed is correct. Assume also that an SH&E professional’s top responsibility is to seek “active support for safety function affairs from higher level management” (Dillon). Given these factors, the profession cannot logically ignore the system in which it operates, nor can its practitioners ignore the unique perspective of the system’s leaders.

To illustrate the problematic relationship that exists between safety and general management, consider the typical relationship between an attorney or an accountant and business management. Access to lawyers and accountants is considered a necessity in today’s business climate. As a result, these disciplines do not have to “sell” their recommendations to management.

Like these professions, the SH&E profession is made up of many experienced, talented people with advanced degrees and professional certifications. Why, then, after 30 years, do SH&E practitioners have to discuss a “no respect” complex and how to sell their recommendations? As Maxwell points out, “The true measure of leadership is influence. Nothing more, nothing less” (11).

Based on this measurement, if SH&E is not accepted by top management, a large part of the fault lies with the profession itself. At times, SH&E professionals have focused almost solely on being technicians, having little concern for being part of the management solution. This could explain why the business community often thinks of SH&E in terms of regulatory compliance rather than for what the discipline offers the bottom line (Nighswonger).

## **The Solution**

What can be done to address this problem? The answer is the emergence of a fourth school of thought, the management school of safety. This can be achieved in several ways.

First, employer feedback indicates a demand for both technical and management skills (Soule). Soule concludes that colleges and universities might have to take an “either/or” approach to safety (91-94). Given that the number of hours in a degree program is limited, some departments might need to develop a safety degree that emphasizes the technical skills, while others could design degrees that have more of a management flavor. Perhaps academic safety departments could develop a joint degree program with business schools. For example, Eastern Kentucky University offers an option entitled, “Safety and Industrial Relations.” Department chair Dr. Larry Collins explains, “Since most of our grads are offered their first promotion in HR or similar areas, this curriculum better prepares them for advancement and for admission into an MBA if they are interested in pursuing that route” (Collins).

Second, academic safety programs could develop safety management degree programs that require courses in basic business principles. As noted, research has shown that the stalwarts of many safety programs—such as systems safety, calculus and physics—are ranked low by CSPs (Ferguson). Certainly CSPs, as certified practitioners in the field, should know what is needed to succeed. Research at the associate degree level reported similar findings [Adams(c) 549+]. Such content areas could be replaced with topics that rank highly—such as risk management, safety and human resources management, and basic classes in business finance and accounting—that present an overview of the disciplines in the same manner that “practitioner” MBAs are being offered today to individuals without a business background.

Third, faculty should be diversified. Recruitment advertisements for faculty members often include requirements for the CSP designation, with the CIH and P.E. closely behind (Behm 38-39). These designations are important and should be encouraged, and faculty who hold them should be recognized as valued members of the teaching community. However, colleges and universities should actively seek qualified SH&E professionals with related business experience, and certifications that relate to both safety and business disciplines; these include the associate in risk management (ARM); professional in human resources (PHR)/senior professional in human resources (SPHR) and chartered property casualty underwriter (CPCU).

Fourth, the CSP examination process should be revisited. Two tracks could be developed, one with the current focus on engineering, the other focusing on business. This could be achieved in the same manner that the American Society for Industrial Security International has recognized different areas in security; that group now offers the physical

security professional (PSP) and professional certified investigator (PCI) designations in addition to its long-standing certified protection professional (CPP) designation.

One can only wonder how many excellent SH&E professionals with business degrees and backgrounds never pursue the CSP simply because they lack the preparatory education in engineering and the sciences. One could also wonder what many engineers would do if the CSP exam asked the examinee to select the most effective method of tax depreciation to use in presenting a cost-benefit analysis of a safety project to top management.

Finally, ASSE currently sponsors seminars regarding the business aspects of safety; these include seminars and certificate programs for both junior-level professionals and executives. In 2002, the group sponsored a Business of Safety symposium that included a keynote session, "Are You Relevant?" Sadly, too many SH&E professionals would have to answer no.

Seminars of this type should be continued so that experienced professionals can obtain training in business disciplines. Like those with safety management backgrounds must learn about safety engineering principles, those with safety engineering backgrounds need a good understanding of safety management principles in order to affect the system in which they operate. While the first three recommendations focus on future SH&E professionals, the fourth and fifth recommendations will help bring the management school of safety immediately into the profession.

## Conclusion

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey's fourth habit is "think win-win" (204). When an organization is safe, all stakeholders—from workers, management and SH&E professionals to stockholders—win. The SH&E profession provides a good product—occupational safety. If that's the case, why does management continue to undervalue safety? In *What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School*, McCormack states that if you do not listen to your consultant, even if s/he is the best in the world, you should fire the consultant. Some SH&E professionals report being concerned about job security (Gaspers and Naso 30)? Could this be because management does not listen to them?

Perhaps the answer to this quandary is embodied in Covey's fifth habit: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (235). Working from general management's unique perspective, SH&E professionals can get managers to listen—to understand that SH&E professionals are not technicians, regulatory compliance specialists, or "necessary evils," but well-educated professionals who are concerned with promoting the cost-effective use of organizational resources to immediately affect the bottom line.

Each school of safety—engineering, psychology and health—is valuable and each augments the others. Members of each group complete rigorous training in their disciplines and, while one discipline can

learn about the other disciplines on the job, the process of formal education is indispensable. Certainly, SH&E professionals can learn about business principles on the job; however, they cannot fully understand the breadth or depth in the same manner as someone with a formal business education. Thus, the need for the management school of safety. When this school of thought is incorporated into the SH&E profession, it will help address the communication quandary. Practitioners will be better equipped to understand and communicate in management's language, which will help overcome the great barriers to change—"upper management, middle management and front-line management" (George). ■

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