The SH&E Professional: Leader & Change Agent

Inspiring organizational transformation and improvement

By A.J. DeRose

AN SH&E PROFESSIONAL'S MOST EFFECTIVE role in business is that of leader and change agent. Business must continually improve performance in all areas in order to survive. Much like productivity, quality and cost, safety is a functional area that can be measured, controlled and improved. Improving the safety management system entails changing equipment or processes in order to achieve breakthrough results. Such efforts may encounter resistance, however, so the SH&E professional must strive to minimize that resistance.

Safety's Key Role: Effecting Change

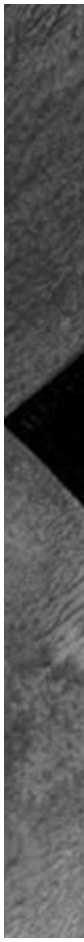
In business, titles say a lot about a person's purpose and function within a company. An auditor "audits," an accountant "counts," a supervisor "supervises," and an SH&E professional . . . ? An SH&E practitioner fulfills many roles, but as noted, the key role is that of leader and change agent. A change agent is someone who suggests performance improvements, then inspires the organization to become engaged and to transform (Nickols).

An SH&E professional's mission is to identify performance barriers in the business management system that inhibit safety performance, then to suggest changes that will enhance the system's performance (Petersen 8). To improve anything—be it a golf swing or a management system—targets must be set and actions initiated to attain them. This statement is as true for managing safety performance as it is for managing productivity, quality or cost. Safety performance can be managed—and it can be enhanced. Enhancing safety performance involves perfecting the safety system. It is in this arena that an SH&E professional can have the most valuable impact on the business.

To make a positive impact, an SH&E professional must be proficient in the technical requirements of safety. S/he must also know how to apply those requirements to the business in which s/he operates. In the author's opinion, an SH&E professional must also have integrity, passion and, most significantly, the ability to make change compelling. This quality is invaluable for an SH&E professional to succeed in the advisory role that s/he plays within an organization (Travelers 1992).

However, SH&E professionals do not hold the power of position to effect the leader-driven change that Axelrod describes in *Terms of Engagement*. Axelrod defines leader-driven change as the "hero or heroine who somehow convinces the reluctant multitudes that change is necessary" (11). Such change involves an autocratic style where the few make decisions for the many.

By contrast, today's SH&E professional must influence and effect change without having the power of position. His/her leadership role is to be a catalyst for change. Gandhi is a well-known example of this type of leader. Gandhi influenced an entire nation without having the power of position (Richards). He created the compelling need for change and his supporters made a conscious choice



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to follow him. SH&E professionals can have a similar impact on the transformation and continual improvement of organizations. This is best accomplished through engagement, which occurs when the entire organization becomes involved in decision making (Axelrod 33, 34). Engagement fosters closer personal connections between members of the organization and, as a result, the democratic process is embraced (Axelrod 33, 34).

The Challenge of Change

Achieving continuous improvement requires transformation. People find comfort in life's rhythms and patterns, so they naturally resist change. Profound change challenges deeply held beliefs that define who a person is and how s/he views the world. Resisting change is a natural reaction (Axelrod 53). It has even been suggested that people facing change undergo a denial similar to the grieving process (Scholtes 222). Certain responses given by a manager when confronted with a foreseeable change reflect this. "We don't have the time" or "That idea won't work" are both forms of such denial.

It takes fortitude to overcome the natural push back in response to change. For example, it is not always easy to suggest that a company does not have enough commitment to the safety effort. Every company has some degree of commitment to safety. No company really wants to have safety incidents and no leader wishes to see employees injured. Yet, accidents continue to occur. Often, organizations know that they want optimum safety performance. What they may not understand, however, is what must be done to achieve the desired results.

The SH&E professional's leadership role is to be a catalyst for change. S/he must strive to create and communicate a compelling need for change.

Safety improvement suggestions may be resisted because performance expectations for middle and front-line management are unclear. Accountability for safety performance does not always exist to drive appropriate action. This leads to poor safety performance because an organization is not measuring or rewarding (thereby encouraging) the right activities (Petersen 93). Therefore, to help a business improve, an SH&E professional must question system performance. The safety role of each manager must be examined, and a different way of managing the business must be explored. As a result of this process, business leadership may decide to change expected safety tasks and outputs of each manager. Resulting changes could include increased accountability for safety activities and a measurement system that links merit increases to task performance.

Resistance to change will likely be encountered at various levels of an organization—both when improvements are proposed and during their eventual implementation. For example, nearly every safety improvement requires an investment of time, money or additional manpower. Convincing an organization to make this investment can be difficult because management may believe that deploying resources for safety merely drains bottom-line profits. Thus, the SH&E professional must demonstrate that investment in safety is a value to the organization. In turn, this helps move the organization away from short-term thinking.

Line employees may also reject changes championed by the SH&E professional. For example, a worker asked to learn new methods or acquire new skills may view such changes as cumbersome or may see them as a threat to job security. Thus, the SH&E professional must help the organization show the value of the change to line workers as well.

Factors that Impact the Implementation of Change

Several dynamics ease efforts to change the management system. The most important is an organization's commitment to do what is nec-

essary to implement change. The extent to which leadership shows that it values a safety initiative is crucial (NIOSH 190). The message that safety is important must be clear. Often, there is a misperception at the operational level that safety issues compete with cost, quality and productivity. In an organization truly committed to operating safely, there is no zero-sum concept in which safety wins and something else loses. If safety is a core value, the company has clear expectations regarding performance. Leaders demonstrate commitment through unwavering support for safety in their decision making. The organization is active in the change-making process, performance is measured and everyone is held accountable for getting it done.

Perceptions regarding the need for change impact the ease of implementation. When people see no need for change, they typically ask, "Why do we need to do this?" With regard to safety, employees may not perceive that a problem exists. Even if a worker sees risks in specific work duties, s/he may have an "it won't happen to me" attitude and, thus, will see no need for change.

Within any organization, people may subscribe to the "what's in it for me" mentality. They wonder what the payoff will be for undertaking the change. In other words, change is more likely to be accepted if an individual sees personal benefit in it. In some cases, this benefit may need to be highlighted as it may not be immediately clear to workers. For example, an employee may think the change will make a task more time-consuming, or a supervisor may believe that s/he must learn new ways of managing. Therefore, part of safety's challenge is to help people understand why change is needed.

Improvements to the safety process are accomplished more easily if all tools needed to execute the required change are available. There are obvious reasons why SH&E initiatives are beneficial. However, no company has an unlimited supply of money, time or personnel. Therefore, it is important that resources spent to implement change be viewed as a business investment.

Implementing a major safety initiative independently of other ongoing projects within the organization can cause difficulties as well. Launching a safety-change initiative at the same time as another new initiative for productivity, quality or cost may cause it to be diluted and thus less effective. Furthermore, the number (and outcome) of past initiatives within an organization can influence how difficult change will be to implement. Some may dismiss this new effort as the next flavor of the month. Therefore, when implementing change, the SH&E professional should understand what has worked well in the past and why.

Overcoming Obstacles

The following tips can help ease the process of transforming and improving the safety system:

1) **Be prepared.** Giuliani refers to this as "preparing relentlessly" (52). Before announcing a project, anticipate questions that may arise and compile facts to answer them. Common questions include: Why are we doing this? What do we expect to accomplish? How is my job going to change? What additional work will I have to do? How will this change impact the safety of my job (Nickols)? These questions should be addressed during the early phases of the project through question-and-answer sessions with employees. A frequently asked questions factsheet is another useful tool. Succinct, honest answers will help alleviate employee concerns as the project is beginning.

2) **Understand the organization's business focus.** If possible, link the SH&E change effort with initiatives such as lean manufacturing or ISO 9000. Look for synergies between the safety initiative and other processes and capitalize on them. For example, lean manufacturing focuses on the efficiency of the production process and elimination of waste (Jones 12, 13). Many things qualify as waste, including scrap material, time spent moving or storing work in process, and wasted floor space, cycle time or worker motion (Jones 44, 45). Many lean manufacturing ideas dovetail with the concepts of waste elimination and efficiency improvements (Liebel). Often, this is a win-win scenario because improvements in safety can offer solutions to business needs.

3) **Justify the cost.** Before a project is launched, its return on investment should be determined and shared with business leaders. Such information will help to get necessary resources approved. In basic terms, the benefit realized as a result of an expenditure of company money, time and effort should be clearly demonstrated.

For example, suppose a company provides annual audiograms for its workers at a cost of $6,000 per year. It is proposed that the tests can be conducted internally by trained in-house personnel at a cost of $9,500. This initial cost includes equipment, training, data conversion and professional oversight, with minimal ongoing cost. The investment will have about a 1½-year payback, with little future cost. Methods of measuring and demonstrating cost savings of an initiative include dollars per unit, cycle time per unit and defects per unit. Other powerful ways of demonstrating cost savings include total annual workers' compensation costs and workers' compensation costs per unit.

4) **Have a plan.** Know where the organization stands relative to performance and identify the gaps. Define goals and educate managers so they understand exactly what they must do to succeed. Deming asserts, "It is not enough that top management commit themselves. . . . They must know what they are committed to—that is, what they must do. . . . Support is not enough: action is required" (21). It is also important to measure progress toward the goal. "What gets measured and rewarded gets done" (Petersen 93). Metrics that express progress in terms of reducing costs, cycle time and waste, or that show productivity gains will receive management's attention and support (Liebel).

5) **Find support for the plan.** The plan must be sold to key people. Spend the most time with those who

have moderate or high influence and are neutral about the proposed plan (Scholtes 227). Less time should be spent with those already in agreement. Furthermore, spending time on those who have low influence and who are highly resistant to change will not be productive. Throughout this process, it is important to listen to constituents and understand their concerns (Scholtes 225). A leader should examine opposing views, build on their strong points and be a good listener (Dupree xxi). A leader—one who serves—provides the best service to the business if s/he understands organizational needs (Greenleaf 27).

6) **Publicize the plan.** Before launching a change initiative, all involved should understand what issues the plan addresses and how. How will success be determined? How does each person impact the plan? Understanding these issues helps eliminate fear of the unknown. A clear, concise and logical plan is likely to be supported.

The plan can be communicated in many ways. The most effective approach is one that best suits the business. Focus on those mediums that attract people's attention. This may be the company newsletter, a series of e-mails or periodic communication meetings. Billboards, posters and signs may also be used. Large companies may employ closed circuit television or the company intranet or website. A combination of various mediums is another option. The key is to communicate the plan in a way that will be well-received by employees.

7) **Team up with others.** Whether called committees, focus groups or kaizen, teams can multiply creativity and leverage resources. Find people who are willing to get involved and make a difference. Provide them with basic training on group problem solving and other tools, help them define the problem, then fade back and advise only as necessary to keep them on track. Teams can develop the plan and implement the action items, and their involvement will help achieve sustainable results.

8) **Keep stakeholders informed.** Provide regular updates regarding the plan's progress. Include progress toward stated goals using the metrics developed in Step 4. Tailor updates to the targeted audience. For example, busy executives usually prefer a page of summary information that highlights all necessary data. Detailed information on the initiative should also be provided, such as monthly progress to goal, year-to-date performance and major obstacles encountered, with charts or graphs to illustrate each major point. Workers in a given department might receive a one-page summary covering their area, as well as information on the company as a whole.

9) **Understand subject material.** Covey calls this "sharpening the saw" (287). It is impossible to lead a change without an intimate understanding of what is being led.

10) **Network with other professionals, SH&E and otherwise.** Sharing new ideas and challenges helps to stimulate fresh perspectives.

11) **Celebrate success.** When the project is completed, take the time to recognize those who made it happen. Make sure that all involved know their efforts are appreciated. Celebrate a job well-done by distributing company logo shirts or watches to mark the occasion or by providing lunch for workers. Other recognition items might include gift certificates or an unanticipated bonus. However the achievement is celebrated, the needs of each employee, project size and difficulty of the task should be considered (Nelson xvi, 73-86).

Conclusion

Safety performance is a business function that can be controlled and improved. Continuous improvement of the business management system is needed to enhance performance. When an organization becomes engaged in continuous improvement, one thing is certain: change is inevitable. Change will be resisted, so its impacts must be minimized. An SH&E professional's role is to suggest improvements and lead change initiatives. Thus, the ability to lead and inspire an organization to change the way it conducts business is what defines a truly effective SH&E professional. ■

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