



A Web Exclusive from *Professional Safety*

Executive Safety Leadership

By Dan Petersen and Kyle Dotson

On Nov. 8, 2006, over a lunch of burgers and fries, Dan Petersen and I talked about the good old days and where the safety of business—and the business of safety—might be headed. While we both enjoyed talking about the history of safety and health management, Dan in particular was never one to stop looking toward the future.

On that day, I was more interested in gaining his assistance in tapping a famous friend of his for a donation to the American Industrial Hygiene Foundation. At age 72 and after having suffered a mild stroke, he was more interested in discussing the book that I had been writing on my own for too long and that we were to finish together.

*As most of you know, Dan passed away a short time later, and I feel the need to share with other SH&E professionals a few of his thoughts on safety leadership as best practiced by executives. These thoughts reflect some of our dialogue over the years on my longstanding fondness for management systems and his well-experienced view of the wide range of reasons for failed industrial safety programs. But by and large, these thoughts share what Dan felt was right—and wrong—about one of my previous articles, *How to Coach Senior Managers: Ten Roles Executives Should Assume for Safety*.*

When (if?) I finish our book, it will be dedicated to Dan, my teacher, mentor and friend, as he was known to so many of us in the occupational safety and health management professions.

Safety & Health Management Systems

Management systems will be critical to achieving long-term safety and health excellence in the large organizations of the future. The publishing of the ANSI/AIHA Z10 standard that accepts variance in individual company approaches is a significant step forward for everyone. The resulting systems may vary from simple to complex, but will only work if implemented well. Like many safety programs sitting on the shelf collecting dust at organizations of decades past, it often matters more how they are executed than how comprehensive they may be in design. However, poor design of safety systems such as a foundation in common practices based on incorrect theories is a recipe for failure. Preventing some of these frequently designed-in failures may be where a consensus standard such as ANSI/AIHA Z10 will contribute the most.

How Systems Can Help Get Everyone Involved, Including Senior Managers

Only senior managers can ensure safety as an organizational value and part of the company culture. Therefore, senior management engagement is crucial for long-term safety success. One way that standardized safety and health management systems help safety staff is to provide a template for getting people at all levels of the organization involved in the safety management process, including senior management. Safety and health professionals are perhaps wisely shy about telling chief executives what they should be doing to lead safety in the organization. Yet that is exactly what a safety and health management system does—it defines and maps the role and safety participation of senior management along with those at all other levels in the company.

On the Safety Commitment of Executives

Most senior managers value and want to actively support safety and health, but are pulled in so many directions that they feel they simply must focus only on what strategically is in the way of

the company's success. Frankly, occupational safety and health is and historically has been something that unless obviously out of control has been easy to assume to be under control. This is not only logical, but as a pure intent represents good corporate governance.

I have been known to say that I have never met a manager who wanted anyone to get hurt. Dan believed he had met a few. Since we always agreed that it was more realistic for SH&E professionals to influence the activities rather than the core values of individual managers, we agreed that rather than asking a manager to commit to a role that s/he is unlikely to routinely fulfill in the long term, it is better for today's professional staff to help the executive in three leadership activities: 1) saying the right things about safety and health; 2) measuring the right things; and 3) holding his/her lieutenants accountable.

On the Safety Commitment of Employees

Despite the fact that safety is among the most fundamental of human needs, safety and health risks in the workplace and elsewhere in life are adapted to and quickly become familiar and accepted. Various practices have encouraged risk-taking. One example is hazard pay, a concept still well accepted by many industries, governments, labor unions and workers around the world. Perhaps the safest worker is one educated in the hazards and risks, is adequately motivated by personal factors, and is continually coached by superiors and peers in the workplace so as to be rewarded for safe behaviors and held accountable for unsafe behaviors in a wide variety of financial and emotional ways.

On the Measurement of Safety in Large Organizations

There is likely no single best measure of safety performance, but the standardization of some measures is critical to ensure benchmarking of performance. Part of measuring the right things means understanding that different measures are appropriate at different levels of large organizations. The "behavior-based processes" that define critical behaviors, measure the percent behavior achieved and provide feedback for corrective action are tools for the measurement of one leading indicator of safety at the employee level.

Other measures, such as the percent implementation of all appropriate elements of a corporatewide safety management system, may be appropriate at a business-unit level. At the top of an organization, the results of leading indicators such as a high-quality safety perception survey that includes worker satisfaction together with long-term health indicator results and short-term lagging indicators of bottom-line injury results may be a perfectly appropriate combination of measures.

Eight Executive Habits for Safety Leadership

1) Executives must lead by example in the area of safety as well as every other aspect of ethical business. This includes, for example, the correct wearing of appropriate PPE in the workplace. One minor lapse observed by persons two levels down in the organization will undo untold other positive efforts to achieve excellence in workplace safety.

2) Executives must verbally communicate about safety in meetings with other managers. While what people do is sometimes more telling than what they say, it is the rare executive who can effectively lead without verbal articulation of his position on the matter. What executives say to each other one-on-one about safety while safety staff or other support staff is not present speaks volumes and has the greatest effect on crucial aspects of company culture.

3) Executives must put their money where their mouths are and fund safety adequately. This does not mean employing arbitrarily large staffs of SH&E professionals. Instead, it means in all business decisions that executives seek to treat the safety of all employees as the ethical right

thing to do, a prudent act use of corporate funds and of corporate governance, and an intangible factor of business relationships that is almost always also a good investment.

4) Executives must hold their subordinates accountable for managing safety and must require that subordinates report on safety matters. Make sure that the roles and responsibilities for safety and health are defined (in writing and in practice). Doing so is part of treating safety just like any other important part of the business. Safety should be simply part of an overall performance measurement process.

5) Executives must provide appropriate feedback regarding safety performance. Monitor the results of management system audits and provide feedback. Personally praise exceptional performance, ignore average performance and confront substandard performance on the part of subordinate operations managers/supervisors. Realize that human exposure to injury risk has an element of randomness and may not be well described by current statistical analysis methods such as the frequency rate of recordable, reportable or lost-time injuries. Therefore, acknowledge and appropriately reward efforts in risk-reduction even if short-term injury results are poor.

6) Executives must make sure that the risk profile of the organization is continuously improved. New hazards and potential risks to the business (not just safety or health) are introduced continuously, and large corporations that are good managers of risk will be successful in the long term. When something bad happens—and it will—get to the root cause and try to systemically build in whatever must be feasibly done to ensure that it won't happen again.

7) Executives of organizations that use potentially toxic materials must ensure that there is long-term support for the anticipation, recognition, evaluation and control of industrial hygiene in the organization. The past actions or inactions of corporations in the developed world are judged today by a society with extremely high expectations as compared to even the recent past. One can safely assume that societal norms for a safe and healthy work environment will continue to increase in the future in all countries of the world.

8) Executives must ensure that safety and health processes are being fully integrated into the primary management system processes of the business. Safety and health cannot be effectively managed long-term separate from the management of the routine affairs of the business. In today's companies, this includes the deep integration of safety and health matters into systems such as the enterprisewide management software and process control systems.

About Dan Petersen

From the 1950s into the 21st century, Dan Petersen richly interpreted the rapidly developing management and social science of the time and applied this body of knowledge to the field of safety management. Through his prolific writings that span 30 years, he created a body of safety management literature unmatched by any other single contributor.

His teachings of the need to focus on the actions of people as the ultimate avoiders of industrial accidents, as well as to guard the machines, is a concept that is likely to be even more true in the future. The increasing complexity in future workplaces ranging from biotech to nanotech will require the anticipation of risk and the building of safety into the physical, chemical and biological “machines” in ways that cannot yet be imagined. The recognition of the human factor in perhaps the overriding of what is intended by designers to be fail-safe machine processes will ensure that Petersen's work remains a critical factor of safety management for decades to come.

SH&E professionals can learn more about Dan's philosophies and vision for the profession in his many books and videos.

- *Measurement of Safety Performance* (2005, ASSE).
- *Authentic Involvement* (2001, National Safety Council).
- *Safety Accountability* (1999, CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Analyzing Safety System Effectiveness* (1996, Van Nostrand Reinhold).
- *Human Error Reduction and Safety Management* (1996, Van Nostrand Reinhold).
- *Safety by Objectives: What Gets Measured and Rewarded Gets Done* (1995, Van Nostrand Reinhold).
- *Dan Petersen's The Challenge of Change* (1993, CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Dan Petersen's The Challenge of Change: Creating a New Safety Culture Resource Manual* (1993, CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *The Criteria for Safety Excellence*. Dan Petersen's Safety Management Series, Part 1 (1990, distributed by CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Evaluating Your Safety System*. Dan Petersen's Safety Management Series, Part 2 (1990, distributed by CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Measurement and Reward*. Dan Petersen's Safety Management Series, Part 3 (1990, distributed by CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Safe Behavior Reinforcement*. Dan Petersen's Safety Management Series, Part 4 (1990, distributed by CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *High Participation Safety—A Case Study*. Dan Petersen's Safety Management Series, Part 5 (1990, distributed by CoreMedia Training Solutions).
- *Safe Behavior Reinforcement* (1989, Aloray).
- *Readings in Industrial Accident Prevention* (coauthored with J. Goodale; 1980, McGraw-Hill).
- *Human Error Reduction and Safety Management (thesis)* (1980, University of Northern Colorado).
- *Industrial Accident Prevention : A Safety Management Approach* (coauthored with H.W. Heinrich, N.R. Roos, J. Brown & S. Hazlett; 1980, McGraw-Hill).
- *Analyzing Safety Performance* (1979, Garland STPM Press).
- *Safety by Objectives, SBO* (1978, Aloray).
- *Safety Supervision* (1976, AMACOM).
- *The OSHA Compilance* (1975, McGraw-Hill).
- *Safety Management:A Human Approach* (1975, Aloray).
- *Techniques of Safety Management* (1971, McGraw-Hill).