

# Key Characteristics of VALUE-ADDING Safety Professionals

By Russell M. Clayton

**THE SIX SIGMA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM** is widely known across many different industries and businesses. The methodology originated in the early 1980s under the efforts of several engineers working at Motorola Inc. Together, they sought ways to improve quality, streamline manufacturing processes and reduce product defects. Eventually, “Motorola made six sigma its flagship approach to quality, and Xerox, GE and Kodak followed suit” (Bhargav, 2017). The effort evolved rapidly and eventually incorporated a now well-known concept called lean manufacturing. Together, these systems worked to decrease waste and eliminate all activities that were deemed non-value adding. Why did such quality management systems become so popular? What was the reason for their widespread acceptance?

Consider also the growing popularity of the value-add concept. “Value-added is the extra value [or enhanced value] created over and above the original value of something. It can apply to products, services, companies, management and other areas of business” (CFI, 2019). Endless opportunities exist for businesses and employees to add value in their respective spheres of influence.

Bennis (1990) describes how effective leadership requires the capacity to set clear expectations and define an overall vision. Bennis further suggests that great leaders strive to eliminate wasted time, coining the phrase “leadership is the management of attention.”

Building on these principles, consider the leadership qualities of OSH professional colleagues. What do they do to add value to the organization? Do they streamline processes and eliminate wasted time? If leadership truly is the management of attention, what should OSH professionals be paying attention to? Following are 10 key characteristics that differentiate value-adding safety professionals from those who do not add value. They represent the opinions of the author and are supported by industry best practices.

## KEY

### TAKEAWAYS

- OSH professionals add value to the businesses they serve when they implement the 10 key characteristics described in this article.
- Business leaders will recognize and benefit from the added value.
- Value-adding safety professionals will improve employee engagement, retention and protection.

### 1) Constantly Learn & Study

In the OSH field, there is much to learn. Beyond the moving targets of regulatory compliance and industry best practices, there is a need to constantly study the workforce that we serve. An invaluable part of this learning comes from frontline workers. Employees who are performing the work have unique perspectives that qualify them as excellent teachers. Value-adding OSH profession-

als understand the need to constantly learn and grow in their understanding of workplace hazards. They understand that this learning comes from all levels of the workforce.

Another important resource for continued learning is through organizations such as ASSP. Each year, the Society provides a multitude of educational opportunities throughout the U.S. The value of these courses comes not only in the content of the classes, but also in the collaboration that occurs with fellow safety professionals.

### 2) Skilled at Developing Others

If the strength of a safety culture depends entirely on the safety department, prepare to be disappointed. Workplace safety is the responsibility of every employee. Value-adding OSH professionals have the capacity to develop a safety mind-set in every employee. This is especially true with frontline supervisors. OSH professionals should partner with management to help supervisors lead safety on their respective jobs and projects. In doing so, OSH professionals greatly extend their sphere of influence.

In 1987, as the new president and CEO of Alcoa Inc., Paul O’Neill gave a powerful speech to a large group of shareholders. Instead of speaking about finances or business prospects, he focused on workplace safety. In that historic speech, he highlighted the importance of developing the workforce and engaging people in the work. He said:

If you want to understand how Alcoa is doing, you need to look at our workplace safety figures. If we bring our injury rates down, it won’t be because of cheerleading or the nonsense you sometimes hear from other CEOs. It will be because the individuals at this company have agreed to become part of something important: They’ve devoted themselves to creating a habit of excellence. Safety will be an indicator that we’re making progress in changing our habits across the entire institution. That’s how we should be judged. (Ross, 2012)

### 3) Ask Good Questions

Asking good questions is essential to the work of OSH professionals. Not only is it a great way to identify hazards, it also establishes greater trust and respect between the worker and the safety professional.

In business environments, there is often a resistance to asking questions of any kind. Brooks and John (2018) describe this resistance:

Why do so many of us hold back? There are many reasons. People may be egocentric—eager to impress others with their own thoughts, stories and ideas

(and not even think to ask questions). Perhaps they are apathetic—they don't care enough to ask, or they anticipate being bored by the answers they'd hear. They may be overconfident in their own knowledge and think they already know the answers (which sometimes they do, but usually not). Or perhaps they worry that they'll ask the wrong question and be viewed as rude or incompetent. But the biggest inhibitor, in our opinion, is that most people just don't understand how beneficial good questioning can be. If they did, they would end far fewer sentences with a period—and more with a question mark.

When employees sense that OSH professionals are genuinely interested in hearing their thoughts and opinions, they are more likely to engage in the process of elevating workplace safety. Brooks and John (2018) further describe the strength of open-ended questions:

No one likes to feel interrogated—and some types of questions can force answerers into a yes-or-no corner. Open-ended questions can counteract that effect and thus can be particularly useful in uncovering information or learning something new. Indeed, they are wellsprings of innovation—which is often the result of finding the hidden, unexpected answer that no one has thought of before.

When an OSH professional begins inspecting a site, s/he should always spend time talking to workers and learning about the work being performed. Following are examples of effective lines of inquiry:

- Tell me about the work you are doing. How long have you been doing this?
- Tell me about the training you received before you began working here.
- How often does your supervisor talk to you about safety?
- What is the greatest hazard with the task you are performing?
- How could someone be injured while doing this?
- Do you feel safe working here? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that our company values workplace safety? Why or why not?

Value-adding OSH professionals trust the knowledge and experience of frontline employees. They ask good questions with the intent to learn and work as a team. No one wants to work with a safety professional who does not listen to others.

#### **4) Help Identify Solutions to Problems**

Most people can point out problems. Conversely, leaders help identify solutions. Value-adding OSH professionals understand that solutions are often discovered as groups of people meet together and share their best ideas. Effective safety leadership is about bringing people together and facilitating important discussions. This kind of approach engenders an environment of teamwork and collaboration. It also incites a feeling of ownership and buy-in on the part of frontline employees. When workers experience this level of partnership with the safety department, they are more likely to reach out when future needs arise. The opposite is unfortunately also true. If OSH professionals only focus on pointing out problems, then leave the site, they will likely find trust diminished and relationships damaged.

#### **5) Recognize One's Support Function & Act Accordingly**

OSH professionals are not (and should not be) the sole decision-makers when it comes to safety processes and policies. Safe-

ty leadership is best accomplished by those who manage business operations, and the safety department serves as a support function to that end. Elevating management in their responsibility to own and lead safety is more beneficial in the long term.

This important relationship was described by Jeremy Hafen, president of Sunroc Corp. in Orem, UT. He said, "Central to our work is the bedrock understanding that people and communities are more important than money. This core value guides our efforts and the way that we operate. Our committed safety and health professionals reinforce this principle in the important work that they do. Together with operations management, they ensure that no process or procedure will ever permit shortcuts or unsafe behaviors."

It really is a partnership. The combined efforts from safety and operations create a powerful combination that produces lasting change.

#### **6) Take Time to Get to Know Workers**

Most organizations and companies profess safety to be a number-one priority. While this may be true, many workers do not feel this is the case. The difference is often made in how workers are treated by upper-level management. Maxwell (1998) says, "Inexperienced leaders are quick to lead before knowing anything about the people they intend to lead. But mature leaders listen, learn and then lead." Value-adding OSH professionals understand this leadership principle. They make a concerted effort to get to know frontline employees and take a genuine interest in their thoughts and ideas. This key element of effective leadership is described by Arnold (2019):

One of the most important aspects of being a leader is knowing your employees or team members. In order to be a leader, you need people to follow you. Knowing your team members and showing a real appreciation for them and their personalities, wants, needs and work styles will build a sense of trust and community within your organization.

#### **7) Celebrate Successes**

Regardless of how they may be labeled, the intent of "atta-boys," "swag" and "kudos" is universally applicable. Recognizing safe work behaviors is an industry best practice and is extremely important. Of course, concerns and issues must be addressed. However, value-adding OSH professionals understand that by first acknowledging good things, they are in a better position to then address items that are out of compliance. OSH professionals should seek creative ways to reward good behaviors as they are observed. This can be accomplished in many different ways and does not have to be financial in nature. Even a simple comment can have a significant impact on reinforcing safe work behaviors.

#### **8) Seek to Elevate the Quality of Safety Training**

Effective leaders have the capacity to provide training that is engaging and thought provoking. They regularly implement new ways to present content and improve the learning process. Occasionally the best approach is to step aside and arrange for guest instructors or subject-matter experts to educate the workforce. Efforts to improve safety training add significant value and have real returns on investment.

Additionally, there is real value when peer-to-peer learning is part of an organization's training plan.

[Peer learning is] a two-way, reciprocal learning activity. [It is] mutually beneficial and involve[s] the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants. It

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can be described as a way of moving beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning (Boud, 1988).

Students learn a great deal by explaining their ideas to others and by participating in activities from which they can learn from their peers. They develop skills in organizing and planning learning activities, working collaboratively with others, giving and receiving feedback and evaluating their own learning. Peer learning is becoming an increasingly important part of many courses, and it is being used in a variety of contexts and disciplines in many countries. (Boud, 2001)

### 9) Be More Proactive Than Reactive

Value-adding OSH professionals are always trying to find ways to get ahead of incidents in the workplace. They analyze trends and evaluate patterns. They work with others to look ahead and challenge the status quo.

In 1895, poet Joseph Malins penned the powerful analogy of “the ambulance down in the valley.” Of those who are wisely focused on prevention, he wrote:

But the sensible few, who are practical too,  
Will not bear with such nonsense much longer;  
They believe that prevention is better than cure,  
And their party will soon be the stronger.  
Encourage them then, with your purse, voice, and pen,  
And while other philanthropists dally,  
They will scorn all pretense, and put up a stout fence  
On the cliff that hangs over the valley. . . .

To prevent other people from falling. . . .  
Better put a strong fence 'round the top of the cliff  
Than an ambulance down in the valley. (Malins, 1895)

### 10) Effectively Communicate With Others & Welcome Transparency in One's Efforts

At a moment's notice, OSH professionals must be able to demonstrate their value. This ability has great importance and reassures executive managers that their investment into the safety department is worthwhile and meaningful. Many OSH professionals fail to do this well. As a result, management loses confidence in the team and questions their worth.

Part of proving value is being able to speak the language of business. OSH professionals must be able to not only broadcast the things that are going well, but also honestly present the things that are not going well. This should always be coupled with what the safety team is proactively doing to address the concerns.

Safety metrics are meaningful and should always be presented in their proper context. Comparing metrics to industry averages is instructive. It is also helpful to compare current trends to your own performance history. These approaches paint an overall picture of general progress or digression.

### Conclusion

Maxwell (1998) teaches that “the bottom line in leadership isn't how far we advance ourselves but how far we advance others.” The 10 characteristics reviewed in this article support that premise. The ability to add value transcends personal gain and allows OSH professionals to become valuable resources for any business. Wharton business professor Adam Grant says, “In the long run, the people who rise the highest are those who add the most value to others. The people who get promoted are those who establish a track record for advancing the interests of the group” (Schawbel, 2013). Without question, OSH professionals

advance the interest of employees and companies on an international scale. They truly become givers and not just takers.

Grant further explains:

People tend to approach professional interactions with one of three different mind-sets: taker, matcher and giver. When we're in taker mode, we focus on getting as much as possible from other people. When we're in matcher mode, we look to trade evenly with other people, seeking reciprocity in equal exchanges.

When we're in giver mode, we look for ways that we can be helpful to others.

To assume the role of a giver, the first step is to gain a deeper understanding of what other people need. From there, the key is to figure out how our expertise, resources and connections might best fulfill their needs. (Schawbel, 2013)

Being a value-adding OSH professional does not occur in a single moment during one's career. Rather, it is accomplished through a commitment to the regular and consistent pursuit of the characteristics that have been outlined in this article. These important efforts will elevate the safety role into a core leadership function that no business could survive without. Investing in a group that is solely focused on protecting and developing workers is not only good for business, it is the right thing to do. Value-adding OSH professionals promote the truth that we will always put workplace safety ahead of any other objective. When employees return home safely at the end of every day, business leaders have confidence that they are getting a return on their investment. These same leaders become additional beneficiaries of value-adding OSH professionals. **PSJ**

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