

Planting the Garden – Impact Networking Strategies

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In our society today, issues of sustainability and going green are all around us. In fact so prevalent are these issues that one can scarcely pick up any printed material or read any electronic media without references to their impact on our daily lives. I contend, that as individuals involved in the safety profession, it is imperative that we understand these issues from a professional basis, but I also believe that we can apply them personally and professionally, such that we can positively impact our ability to “go green” and sustain our careers by utilizing strategies that assist us in being able to successfully plant the garden to address impact networking strategies. One thing that I believe we can agree upon is the fact that the safety profession has historically been and is currently misunderstood with regard to how we go about our duties and the impact that we can have on our operating environments.

In “Planting the Garden,” we must be mindful that our ability to transcend our roles as safety professionals and undergo a needed metamorphosis that will allow us to interact seamlessly with others with whom we want and need to influence is crucial to our future success. To this end our ability to step out of our comfort zone and engage in networking that is significantly different from the familial associations that we have with our colleagues is essential.

The ability to effect this change in presentation is substantially different than what we have become accustomed to in the past and, as with any change, it will not be easy. However to the extent that we are diligent in our efforts we can make the change and do so in such a way as to make the need for our heightened interaction with others compelling and convincing. Further, this change will pave the way for future generations of safety professionals to enjoy a higher level of inclusion in the broad milieu of organizational life. For far too long we have allowed things to happen to us instead of making things happen for us, and the process I am about to elaborate upon will allow us to move from a reactive to a proactive means of setting ourselves up for a brighter future.

Given the above mentioned state of affairs, I suggest that we vigorously pursue the following course of action that will make our roles as leaders within our respective entities less ambiguous and more impactful to others.

Networking Sustainability

As I have mentioned, discussions about sustainability are everywhere, and where others talk about the sustainability of your business operations, I want to discuss something much more fundamental, which is I believe the sustainability of your professional connections through

networking. Networking is a crucial activity; it is particularly so in the safety profession because even though we contribute mightily to virtually every area of existence, many people do not know or know very little about what we do, with the exception of the enforcement side of safety through OSHA. As it relates to that area, they know all too well what we do, and as a result they are not very happy when they interact with us on this front. Therefore it becomes imperative that if we are to engage in “Planting the Garden,” we must do some things that will allow us to network effectively with others and to never forget that we are a part of a profession that does add value to every sector that I can think of and for which it can truly be said that, “Safety Professionals Save Lives”.

As it relates to networking and planting the garden the first thing we need to understand and that we need to be aware of is what are our strengths and our limitations, and the second area we need to be concerned with is how readily we are able to adapt to new situations.

This first area that I have identified can rightfully be called self-awareness, and regarding self-awareness we are all probably cognizant of our strengths and that is a good thing. But a truly self-aware person knows both their strengths and their developmental needs. So let’s take a look at this issue of awareness. Self-awareness includes the recognition of our personality characteristics, meaning both how we present ourselves to others and how they interpret that presentation. Further it is an understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. Developing self-awareness can help us to recognize when we are stressed or under pressure and how those matters can impact our ability to behave consistently. Self-awareness also is often a prerequisite leading to our ability to effectively develop our communication skills and interpersonal relations, as well as other traits such showing empathy for others.

Some people have a difficult time facing the truth about themselves and as a result they engage in a highly destructive process of self-deception. Engaging in self-deception is easy because it allows us to exist in a world that takes on the hue of “rose-colored glasses.” However, such a distorted view does not allow either ourselves or more importantly the profession to benefit from the talents that each of us possesses. The following areas are 2 key benefits to be derived from being self-aware:

- The more self aware you are, the better you are able to accept or change who you are either in response to situations or as a precursor to stay ahead of change.
- As our roles within our organizations evolve, it will be imperative that we continue to increase our skill set to aid in our ability to be impactful, and being self-aware allows for this possibility.

Addressing Change

Very often people have a perception of safety that is skewed towards their personal biases, misguided or just plain wrong. Those observations do not stop them from casting their beliefs upon us and asking for any number of things that do not “fit” our beliefs of what role we should play. The reality is that just because someone asks for something that cannot be done in the manner one person might describe, that should not stop us from pursuing our goal or things that we believe will make our profession and us better. When approached with this type of scenario, we have to be able to discern what a person truly needs from what they say they want, and the same applies to each of us as members of the safety profession.

Think about this question, what is your job? The primary job that each of us has on a local level is to engage in the activities that will allow you to be perceived favorably given your responsibilities. However, on a global level we need to understand that the profession and the way we represent that profession will allow us to achieve much greater things than if we pursue advancement as an individual contributor alone. This will require a change in mindset so that we become the change we wish to see in the world. Therefore it will require each of us to pursue our dreams, hopes and passions in a little different manner. While change is not easy, it is a constant. We must be able to address change effectively particularly as it relates to the “Planting the Garden and Impact Networking Strategies”.

As it relates to change, it is or should be clear to us that our profession and by extension each of us suffers from a lack of knowledge about our profession and the opportunities available. While we know what we have to offer and it satisfies our needs, we cannot lose sight of the needs of others and how to endeavor to meet them. There is only one way to truly understand the needs of others and that is to communicate with them. We can communicate in a variety of ways but here are the 4 key areas that I think we need to utilize to begin our work in the garden:

- Observe – this is done with your eyes and ears
- Ask questions – it shows that you value the relationship
- Share – it opens the door to further dialogue and understanding
- Care – no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care

Up to this point I have mentioned several times the theme of planting the garden. However, in order to do so there are several distinct processes or steps one must undertake. First you have to take stock of the environment you are working with and that entails understanding if the ground is potentially receptive to what it is that you want to plant. Most of you who have a regular garden or who have ever worked in one, know that even if you had a garden the year before, you need to aerate the soil and remove any weeds or other impediments that will prevent your plants from rooting properly.

The second thing is you have to identify what type of plants will do best in the area you have prepared. Is it an area that receives a lot of sunlight, do the plants need little or no watering or do they need plenty of water? After you have done all of this and you have placed the plants in the ground you need to keep an eye on them to make sure things are going the way you planned. Finally, as the opportunity presents itself, you want to improve the chances of your plant reaching its full potential by being flexible enough to know what is working and then making the necessary changes to ensure future success.

Three Essential Elements

As it relates to networking and planting the garden, there are 3 things we must keep in mind, which are:

- An awareness of our strengths and weaknesses
- The reality that we need to be flexible and adapt to changing situations

- We need to understand the needs of others

Furthering our initial discussion regarding awareness, we need to understand what each of us presents as our brand image. This occurs by developing your brand, which is as a member of the safety profession. Second, you need to market and sell your brand by always having an eye on the bigger picture. This is akin to raising money. The first time you encounter someone who might be a potential donor for a cause you are supporting you never want to ask them for money the first time you engage them. Rather, you first want to ask them for their time. Third you have to manage the relationship, which entails a lot more than just giving them your business card, receiving theirs and telling them what you do. Think of your plants in the garden; they require attention on a regular basis if you hope to get out of the connection what you thought it might yield. Finally, you have to understand that things change and as a result we have to change to improve the way we interact with others based upon the way they respond to our presentation.

To the extent that you are able to expand your brand through relationships, people will become your advocate and that means good things for the profession, your organization and you. And here is a point that people often overlook. **YOU DON'T KNOW, WHO KNOWS WHO.** Therefore, the way you treat people, not withstanding their titles, is vital to your success.

Titles separate people, and when it comes to establishing and building relationships there is one thing that all people want to know, which is people want to be treated by people. Once they know that you respect yourself, respect them and value the relationship they will assist you in your mission.

Just like there are phases in planting a garden, there are phases in networking, which are:
Planting the seed or establishing the connection and
Tending the garden or nurturing the relationship.

Good networkers, like good gardeners, have a complete tool kit to help them achieve their objectives. As I close I want to talk further about our profession, which I see as the most important of all professions, and talk just a little bit more about what the primary job is or should be for all of us.

First, we need to continue to grow demand for the opportunities that we have in our profession through networking, mentoring and identifying the talent we have and managing it successfully so that our operations continue to prosper. **Second**, we should all strive to promote the professional development of ourselves and others who operate in this profession. **Third**, we must continue to exercise the leadership that is needed by taking advantage of professional opportunities through the ASSE, its boards and our local chapters, as well as, other entities that we can or should partner with. **Finally** and most importantly, we must continue to believe in ourselves and the knowledge that what we do matters and is of value.

If we do these things there is no doubt in my mind that we will continue to progress along the upward path that we are now on. The future is now and we have the opportunity and the responsibility to make of it, what we want it to be.