Starting a New

Tips for a successful integration

By Niranjan Dave

IT IS THE FIRST DAY at a new job. The human resources forms have been completed and an ID card has been issued. Time to report to your boss. S/he welcomes you, talks for a while, then introduces you to others in the department. S/he then leaves you in your office to settle in. The new job has begun.

Most people will be both excited and anxious, eager to get started and produce great results. However, this eagerness must be kept in check; otherwise, it may result in actions being taken too quickly. It is similar to starting medical treatment without proper diagnosis.

Outside of having to solve an emergency threatening the organization or threatening life and limb, it's really important to hold back for a few weeks until you're beginning to understand the organization and the culture. It's really okay to be clear that you're new and you want to fully understand the issues before you jump in with opinions and suggestions. Give yourself a chance to understand the situation. People will usually respect your efforts to get to know the organization first before you make judgments (Blitzer and Reynolds-Rush 24).

Whiting and Bennett agree, noting that "each company faces unique needs and opportunities inherent in the nature of its operations and workplaces, and from whatever company culture is brought to bear" (5). In *The First 90 Days,* Watkins lists common traps that afflict new leaders: Failing to focus; not taking the business situation into account; not adjusting for the culture; failing to get wins that matter; and letting the means undermine the ends (81-82). This article provides guidelines for avoiding those pitfalls.

Niranjan (Niru) Dave, CSP, ARM, *is director of safety and contingency planning at Depository Trust & Clearing Corp. in New York City. He has been in the safety and health field for more than 26 years and has worked in manufacturing, insurance and financial services industries. A professional member of ASSE's Metropolitan Chapter, he holds an M.S. in Occupational Safety and Health from New York University and an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering from M.S. University in India.*

Listen More, Talk Less

Three strategies can help anyone start a new job properly. While this is a good idea in many situations, it is particularly important when starting a new job. Listening more leads to better understanding of the situation and makes a good impression on others. In *Find the Bathrooms First,* Blizter and Reynolds-Rush share this advice from one of the subjects they interviewed: "I try to do a lot of listening initially; I'm a sponge. I listen to everything anyone wants to tell me. You are certainly never going to learn anything by being a talker" (27). It is also important to "establish yourself as a good listener. Let your coworkers do most of the talking" (Blitzer and Reynolds-Rush

Job in SH&E

Whether new to the profession or starting a new position, an SH&E practitioner must take time to understand the organization before actively trying to change anything. This article provides specific ideas and suggestions for how to effectively get started on a new job—in terms of how to understand the organization, what to do and what to avoid. By following this approach, an SH&E professional can build effective working relationships, credibility and respect from the start.

32). Watkins shares similar views when he says that "displaying a genuine ability to listen often translates into increased credibility and influence" (37).

A new employee should also avoid overt efforts to impress others. Instead, the focus should be on learning and understanding. This automatically and more effectively impresses others. It is also best to avoid referring to how things were done on a previous job. People rarely appreciate such comparisons.

Understand the Situation

It is easy to perceive that the boss and others expect immediate contributions. However, it is important to realize that many employers recognize that an SH&E professional must first understand the company, its people and processes before s/he can effectively contribute to improving safety performance and culture. Says Meg Whitman, CEO of eBay, "I [told] our head of strategy when he came to work for us: 'Don't do anything for three months. Just absorb, understand, get the counterintuitive nature of the business'" (Business 2.0 Staff 99).

Planning to learn means identifying—in advance—the key questions and how best to answer them. "Few new leaders take the time to think systematically about their learning priorities. Fewer still explicitly create a learning plan when entering a new role" (Watkins 35). Certainly, some concerns may require immediate attention, but it is important to remain focused on the need to take the time to understand the situation during the early days on the job.

Three critical areas of understanding in this regard are to: 1) learn the organization; 2) identify existing safety programs and activities; and 3) identify safety improvement needs. It may take four to six weeks to assess these areas—a necessary investment that will pay off by leading to more effective efforts.

Interviewing Tips

Preparing for Interviews

- Identify key individuals.
- Schedule 15 to 20 minutes with senior management and one hour with others.
- If you don't get a response to your request for a meeting, keep trying.

Conducting Interviews

- Be relaxed, confident and friendly.
- Introduce yourself and explain the scope of your responsibility. Do not go into great detail about your background. If asked, provide additional information but be careful to not try to impress. The guiding principle throughout is to listen more, talk less.
- Ask for their views on the safety effort and any improvements they might suggest. Take detailed notes. Ask for clarification or for more details as needed.
- Ask department heads whether you may attend a staff meeting to introduce yourself. If you will work with that department closely, also ask to sit in on their staff meetings.
- When talking with functional people, explore what they do and how.

Learn the Organization

The SH&E professional's overall function is to be a change agent—an "improvement agent," as Riley Bechtel, Chair and CEO of Bechtel Group, stated during the Executive Summit at Safety 2004. In the same session, John Murphey, Chair Emeritus of Bell Helicopter Textron, said it is an SH&E professional's obligation to be a change agent. As Maxwell stated, "The true measure of leadership is influence. Nothing more, nothing less" (Maxwell; Adams 20). Such influence results from learning Covey's fifth habit of highly effective people, "Seek first to understand" (235).

To learn about the organization, it is important to understand what it is that will be changed. Therefore, the first priority is to know the organization thoroughly. This requires patience, persistence, effort and time. It encompasses many factors, including knowing the company's organizational structure, products and services, people and communication channels. It also means attending several departmental staff meetings.

Organizational Structure

If possible, obtain a copy of the organizational chart. If one does not exist, is outdated or access is denied, talk with key personnel—starting with your boss—to create one. The goal is to understand the reporting structure—from the top down to the department-head level—and the organizational structure with respect to regions, divisions and departments. If possible, determine the number of employees in each group, and identify all physical facilities and their locations, the number of people employed at each and which departments or groups occupy them.

Products & Services

The next step is to become familiar with the company's business. Ask others, review marketing brochures and annual reports, and visit the company website. Learn what products the company manufactures, assembles or distributes, as well as the various services it provides and the customers it serves. In addition, learn about the company's profit margins and similar metrics.

Key People

The third component of learning the organization is to identify and interview key people. In the author's opinion, this is one of the most critical activities during the early days on a new job.

The first step is to identify key individuals in three categories: management, union leaders (where applicable) and those involved in specific functions. Identify senior manager and department heads of interest, targeting people at as highest level possible. For example, if you are head of the safety group for the organization, try to meet with the president, his/her direct reports and remaining department heads. If responsible for safety for a division within the company, try to meet with the executive responsible for that division, his/her direct reports and other key department heads. In an entry-level position, identify those groups with which you will be working, then identify the department heads, managers and supervisors for those groups. It is best to prepare these lists independently. While others may readily offer suggestions, they may provide information that is biased due to internal politics, turf issues, and personal likes and dislikes.

Once the lists are developed, share them with your boss, who may have additional suggestions. The third step is to meet with these people, starting with the highest-level person and working down the list. If some people do not immediately respond to messages or e-mails, be persistent. "If someone is not returning your call the first time, call again. Don't take no for an answer. . . . Pursue it beyond that" (Blitzer and Reynolds-Rush 57). In rare cases, it may be best to ask others to help schedule meetings.

During the meetings, ask interviewees to share how they view the existing safety effort and what they see as needs. To avoid being excessively influenced by what the first few people report, Watkins advises, "Keep to the same 'script' in all your meetings. Its format might consist of brief opening remarks about yourself . . . and then a standard set of questions" (45). Limit interviews with senior managers to 20 minutes.

The second target group includes union officers and safety representatives on various safety teams. The third group includes those with hands-on responsibilities for various functions that affect safety activities—such as security, medical, facilities, engineering, maintenance and human resources. Spend at least an hour with these individuals. Ask about their views of existing safety efforts, potential areas of improvement and details of their activities that may affect safety (directly or indirectly).

> A baseline question that every new leader should ask is, "How did we get to this point?'" Otherwise, you risk tearing down fences without knowing why they were put up. Armed

with insight into the history, you may indeed find the fence is not needed and must go. Or you may find there is a good reason to leave it where it is (Watkins 36).

During the individual meetings, provide a brief personal introduction but do not provide great detail unless specifically asked to do so. The goal is to listen more, talk less. If the interviewees sense sincerity and respect, they will develop a positive image of you. This is a great way to start new working relationships.

Departmental Staff Meetings

When meeting with various department heads, ask whether they hold staff meetings with their direct reports. If so, ask to attend so you can provide a brief overview of your background and invite them to share safety concerns or suggestions. Again, the objective is to inform, not impress.

Besides this initial appearance, ask the heads of departments with which you will be working closely whether you can attend their staff meetings regularly—and be sure to follow through and attend these meetings, particularly during the first few months. These meetings will reveal the department's typical concerns, pressures and decision-making process. The meetings are also an opportunity to gain visibility among key personnel—exposure that will make it much easier to work with them in the future.

Communication Channels

To truly know an organization, it is important to understand how employees receive their communications. Is it via the company's employee newsletter, broadcast e-mails, public address system announcements or all-staff meetings? These channels will be important for sharing safety messages in the future.

Learn about Existing Safety Efforts

To better understand the current situation, it helps to become familiar with existing safety programs and activities and their history. It is important to acknowledge that these programs and activities are the result of needs and the level of knowledge that existed at the time they were developed. In addition, remember that those involved likely did the best they could.

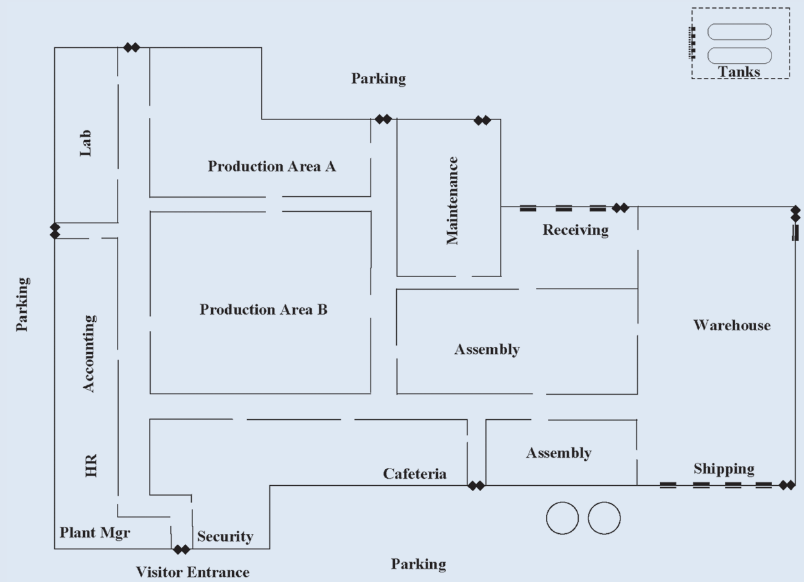
So, rather than criticize what is in place, show respect for what was done and move forward. Try to identify individuals involved in the development and implementation of various programs, talk to them and gather information about why certain things were done. This historical perspective can provide valuable insight into the organization. "There is nothing to be gained and much to be lost by criticizing the people who led the organization before you arrived" (Watkins 106).

DeRose provides two additional dimensions about the need to first understand the existing effort.

> 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 (42).

Figure 1

Sample Facility Diagram



To learn about past safety efforts, obtain copies of all written safety programs, procedures, forms, records and related documents. This may take time, so be persistent. Review of these materials should indicate what is supposed to happen—that is, what is outlined in safety plans and procedures. Then, as you interview people, you will develop an understanding of how things actually work.

While exploring safety activities and programs, develop information on the extent to which employees are involved. For example, are they members of various teams or committees, involved through safety meetings and safety suggestion program? In addition, determine the extent and nature of involvement by senior and mid-level management and union leaders. Try to estimate the extent to which involvement of these groups affects the safety effort. Review the history of the involvement of outside people such as inspectors, auditors, consultants and insurance company safety representatives. Identify their impact on the existing safety effort as well.

This structured learning process will provide details about how the organization is structured, how the culture and other factors affect safety performance, and what safety programs are already in place. At this point, one more step must be taken before a safety strategy or action plan can be developed.

Safety Needs Assessment

At this point, gaps and ineffective components of existing safety programs need to be identified. Two actions facilitate this process: A walkaround tour and an injury data analysis.

Walkaround Tour

Early on, it is best to make a thorough physical review of the entire premises, including areas that

New SH&E Job Checklist

- Listen more, talk less.
- Focus on understanding, not impressing.
- Do not refer to what you did on a previous job.
- Keep your word.
- Review the oganizational chart, reporting structure, divisions/departments, facilities/locations, number of employees at each, products and services, customers, profitability.
- Interview key people in three key categories: senior management, union officials, functional staff.
- Introduce yourself at various staff meetings and attend staff meetings for key groups.
- Identify communication channels.
- Review written programs/procedures/forms, and related documents and records.
- Identify the role of outside individuals such as inspectors, auditors and consultants.
- Compare what you hear from others to what is supposed to happen according to the plans.
- Estimate the extent of involvement by employees and senior management.
- Walk around the facility to make observations. Talk to supervisors and employees as much as possible.
- Review OSHA logs, workers' compensation claims and experience modifiers for the last three to five years. Also obtain other relevant data, such as details about HazMat incidents.
- Analyze the data to identify type-of-injury trends, calculate incidence rates, plot trends and compare incidence rates to industry averages.

remain hidden from most visitors. A good layout or a map of the premises will help (Figure 1). Be sure to carry any PPE that may be required in the areas to be visited and use them when needed. If possible, walk around independently. Introduce yourself to supervisors and ask whether they have time to provide a brief tour of their area and review their operations. This is a great way to get to know supervisors. Throughout the walkaround tour, make thorough observations and take notes. Introduce yourself to workers in the area as much as possible without interrupting their work.

Accident/Injury Data Review

Collect OSHA logs and annual workers' compensation claims data and experience modifiers for the past three to five years, as well as data such as the number of visits to the medical unit, fire incidents and HazMat incidents. Verify incidence rates for these years; if the rates are not available, calculate them, then plot them on a line chart to identify trends. Compare the rates to industry averages. If accident data are in electronic format, obtain a copy and verify accuracy and completeness. If data are not available—or are not reliable—use the raw data to create a spreadsheet or database, then categorize incidents and identify trends in terms of types of injuries, incidents by departments and related categories.

By this time, at least a month will have passed and a solid understanding of the organization should be emerging. It should now be possible to develop a plan or strategy for improving safety in the area of your responsibility. This strategy will likely encompass actions to fill gaps and those to strengthen inadequate program elements. In addition, this is the time to develop strategic ideas for moving overall safety performance to the next higher level.

Making It Work

While taking the approach outlined in this article, two things must be kept in mind to ensure a successful start on the new job: multitasking and keeping promises.

Multitasking

While the points are presented in a sequential order in this article, it may be necessary to apply more than one of them at the same time. One area need not be completed before starting another. For example, a typical day of a newly hired SH&E professional may mirror the following: Meet with and interview three people from the target lists; spend two hours touring a portion of the facility. Spend an hour or two reviewing written plans and records. Meet with the boss. Investigate a specific employee concern, such as a complaint of strong mold-like odor in the accounting department.

Keeping Promises

Carry a notebook at all times to document actions needed and promises made. Do not depend on memory because it is easy to forget things while digesting large volumes of new information. Once a promise is made, it is critical to deliver. Credibility and respect are earned one action at a time. If asked to do something that is not possible, be honest and explain the reason(s). Furthermore, if some action is overlooked, be honest and admit the mistake. Once credibility and respect are lost, they are extremely hard to regain.

Off & Running

After two months, the SH&E professional should have good understanding of the company and its mission; its organization and key personnel as well as their suggestions for improving safety; and details of the existing safety effort and its results. You will also have your own assessment of what areas require attention. By taking the time to understand the organization, you will have thoroughly diagnosed what works and what needs to be addressed—and can now begin to take effective action. ■

References

ASSE. "2004 Executive Summit." Presentation at Safety 2004, Las Vegas, NV. Des Plaines, IL: ASSE, 2004.

Adams, S.J. "The Emerging Management School of Safety: SH&E Professionals Must Develop Business Skills to Succeed." *Professional Safety.* Sept. 2003: 18-21.

Blitzer, R. and J. Reynolds-Rush. *Find the Bathrooms First!: Starting Your New Job on the Right Foot.* Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1999.

Business 2.0 Staff. "How to Succeed in 2005." *Business 2.0.* Dec. 2004: 97-118.

Covey, S.R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.* New York: A Fireside Book, 1989.

DeRose, A.J. "The SH&E Professional: Leader & Change Agent: Inspiring Organizational Transformation and Improvement." *Professional Safety.* March 2004: 40-43.

Maxwell, J.C. *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership.* Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998.

Petersen, D. "Human Error: A Closer Look at Safety's Next Frontier." *Professional Safety.* Dec. 2003: 25-32.

Watkins, M. *The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003.

Whiting, M.A. and C.J. Bennett. "Driving Toward '0': Best Practices in Corporate Safety and Health." Research Report R-1334-03-RR. New York: The Conference Board, 2003.