

‘Evolve To Succeed’: Communicating the Safety and Health Message in a Changing Work Environment, Part 2

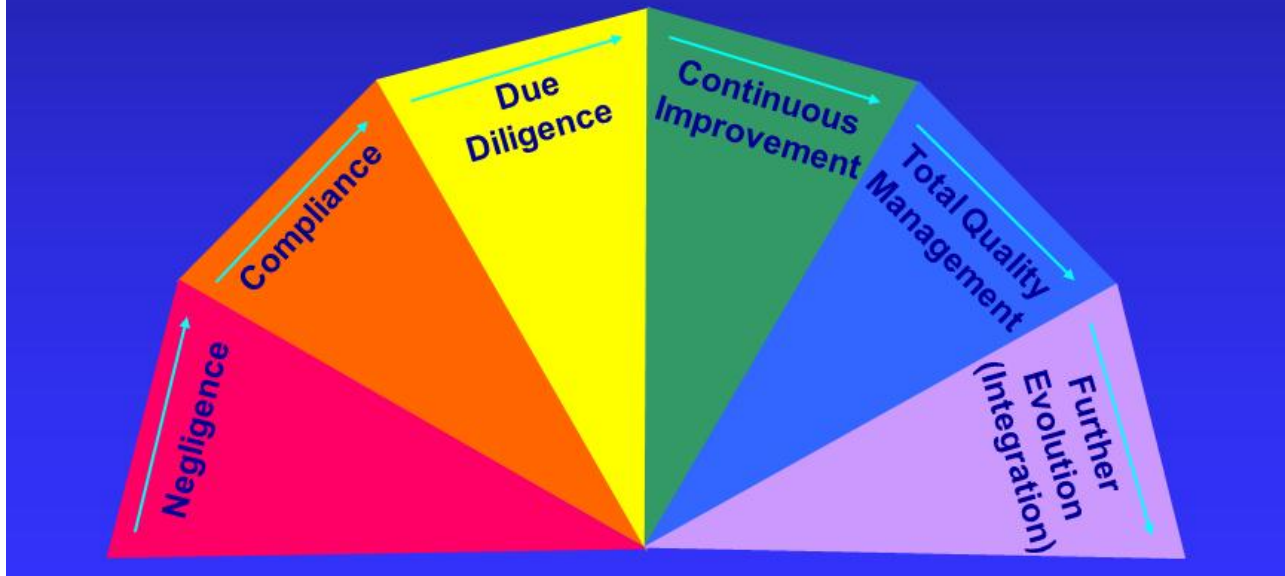


By Fred Leafloor, *CRSP, CHSC, CRM*

This article is the second in a series providing the author's insight into the changing communications role of the safety professional. As introduced in the first article, much of a safety professional's effectiveness is characterized by an ability to clearly articulate important safety and health issues in a manner that a management group can easily place within a business context, facilitating the adoption of solutions. As the organization's OHS program or safety culture matures, safety professionals must change their approaches and communications styles to maintain the effectiveness of their messaging.

Having previously introduced the OHS Maturity Phases dashboard and discussed the shift in communication styles when working within a negligence culture, we now turn our attention to the safety professional's more challenging communications adjustment when leading the organization's transition from a compliance culture to a organizational mindset of due diligence.

OHS Maturity Phases



Communicating in the Compliance Phase

In the compliance phase, the generally ineffective—but frequently used—fear-mongering approach from the negligence phase is no longer available. The safety professional can't call upon potential regulatory punishments for violating OHS laws as motivation if the organization is at least compliant with these requirements. A large number of safety professionals don't have this realization and so continue to use the "same old" approaches to communicate to management and the workforce in the new operating environment. This lack of understanding marginalizes the safety professional and his or her communications quickly become irrelevant and ignored.

A More Effective Approach

Building upon the guidance provided in the previous article, effective health and safety communication must incorporate a recognition of basic business principles to get the message heard. Within the compliance phase, the communication focus must shift to active positive reinforcement of planning for opportunities to not only meet but also exceed the requirements in the OHS laws.

For many organizations, this step requires a change in thinking. Budgets, schedules, operational priorities and other commercial forces all occupy the forefront of a manager's mind. Each critical issue receives only as much attention as necessary to move it off of the top of the pile to make room for the next crisis. The safety professional must consider and present safety issues in terms of that pile and communicate decision options that can support self-sustaining solutions. That is, the focus should be keeping compliance issues off of the pile entirely when possible and avoiding have them percolate to the top on any sort of regular basis. Has anyone noticed the corollary that being able to do so in a practical manner also makes the safety professional's life a lot easier'

How Is Effective Communication Accomplished'

Communication within this stage of organizational OHS development/maturity relies primarily upon maximizing the good news stories that highlight the benefits of compliance with OHS program standards and regulatory requirements. The safety professional must move from "negative reinforcement" to a "positive reinforcement" approach.

For example, many successful safety professionals link the "saved" costs of incidents resulting from effective compliance behaviours to organizational leading and lagging (or trailing) indicators, particularly in terms of workers' comp costs. In fact, some jurisdictions have workers' comp rebate programs for improved injury performance. If your organization operates within that type of regime, speak to the appropriate department to quantify the organization's reductions in workers' comp costs and tie those reductions directly to improvements in compliance. For instance, show that the introduction of an ergonomics program reduced the incidence of musculoskeletal injuries in workers.

Scrutiny of OHS newsletters and safety professional publications reveals many stories of regulatory non-compliance and their outcomes. Compare the background of some of those incidents to tasks (or experiences) within your organization and develop safety emails, alerts, bulletins, posters or info-notes to show how your organization's current behaviours keep them out of the traps into which others have fallen.

Example: Say a company in your jurisdiction was recently hit with a hefty fine after a worker was injured because he failed to lock out equipment before repairing it. In fining the company, the court noted that it didn't have written lockout procedures. Your company has such procedures. So you can use this incident to illustrate how your company's procedures help protect workers from similar injuries and the company from similar fines.

In addition, show how compliance provides a business advantage over competitors. Include parts of the organization's internal compliance record as an additional section within bid documents, strengthening the typical trailing indicator statistics that are required in the majority of Request for Quote bid responses. The more you can demonstrate the comparative savings or other commercial advantages of compliance, the more likely management will be to take those extra steps in support of compliance activities and activities that go beyond compliance.

And don't waste opportunities to keep the benefits of compliance activities in front of management. Announce good inspection reports, meeting target goals for leading indicators, closing out of report follow-up action items, etc. as successes.

Bottom Line

Safety professionals frequently feel that "tooting your organizational horn" doesn't reflect the quiet professionalism that many believe is the watchword of our profession. But consider this: During the compliance phase, the organization's future development is balanced on the edge of a blade. It can lean forward to embrace greater opportunities to improve its OHS performance and commercial success. Or it can fall backwards into the quagmire of non-compliant

behaviours with program standards and regulatory requirements and face incident costs and potential fines or penalties. Your effective and ongoing communication activities can tip the balance in favour of future improvements. To paraphrase a famous 18th Century quote by Edmund Burke, "All that's necessary for the triumph of non-compliance is that safety professionals do nothing."

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