

'Evolve To Succeed': Communicating the Safety and Health Message in a Changing Work Environment



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This article is the first in a series providing the author's insight into the changing communications role of the safety professional. Much of a safety professional's effectiveness is determined by his or her ability to clearly articulate important ideas in a manner and in the business language that an operations-oriented management/supervision team can accept and adapt for use within their own roles. As an organization's health and safety performance matures, safety professionals must change their approaches and communications styles to maintain the effectiveness of their messaging.

This series of articles assumes that the safety professional already possesses the technical knowledge and skills to effectively apply the benefits of planning and technology to assist management in implementing and monitoring the company's tactical safety and health efforts. Many safety professionals possess those skills but are challenged when a broader, more strategic vision of the company's health and safety is needed.

OHS Performance Phases

First, we must develop our own understanding of organizational

maturity in terms of OHS performance phases. A common model in use today is the “dashboard” presentation. We’ll use this concept as the basis for the series.

Realistically, one can’t consider organizational safety and health maturity as a single point on a line—it’s more of a span or a phase of performance where some parts of the company will demonstrate a higher level of knowledge and implementation than other parts. Within this dashboard, there are six broad phases of a company’s health and safety maturity:



The bottom line performance criterion for workplace health and safety is compliance with the statutes and regulations of the authority having jurisdiction over the workplace. In simplistic terms, if you’re not in compliance with the law’s requirements, you’re negligent in the required duties stipulated by those laws and thus “below the line” of acceptable performance within this model. If you’re compliant with the regulatory requirements, then the company is performing within the compliance zone.

This analysis is somewhat of a broad simplification. There’s no simple categorization for regulatory compliance for a company that has multiple departments or workplaces. Within different parts of the company, compliance with the regulatory requirements may be more or less rigorously implemented and maintained. And at any single point in time, some activities or parts of the company may be fulfilling their regulatory requirements while other activities or parts are not.

Many companies don’t start developing their OHS program from a non-compliance position; however, there are enough companies

in the commercial/industrial world that don't start on a formal OHS journey until after they've encountered regulatory attention as a result of a random inspection or as follow up to an incident involving a serious injury or fatality.

Communicating in the Negligence Phase

How does the safety professional commonly communicate to management when the organization isn't maintaining regulatory compliance? From informal surveys of hundreds of OHS students seeking the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering's Certified Health and Safety Consultant (CHSC) professional designation and completing the Applied Risk Communications program, the responses have been overwhelmingly similar: When faced with an issue of regulatory non-compliance or the attitude that worker health and safety isn't an important business function, a large proportion of safety professionals take on a "soothsayer of doom" approach and attempt to focus on the negative consequences of non-compliance for the company or the individual involved.

Relatively simple online research can provide safety professionals with many examples of incident outcomes from similar events, orders or directives from other workplaces and prosecutions resulting in fines or other penalties. These examples are used as grist for the OHS mill and are presented with unfortunate monotony in an apparent attempt to scare management into compliance with the message, "Otherwise, this could happen to you, too!"

Unfortunately, with so much negative reinforcement messaging—and with so few actual harmful outcomes for the company—the impact of that messaging quickly loses its impact. Continued repetition of this type of messaging reinforces the impression that the safety professional is a doom-sayer, not a team player, and presents the safety professional or team as harbingers of bad news. With this approach, the only time a safety professional is heard from is when he or she threatens

unlikely consequences for non-compliant behaviours.

The brutal reality is that there are hundreds of thousands of individual workplaces and only hundreds of government inspectors to spread out through the community. When no significant incidents have arisen to attract regulatory attention, many companies float happily under the radar with no realistic concern that they'll ever be visited by an inspector.

If they *are* visited and if the inspector actually sees a safety violation being committed, he or she may issue an order or directive with an associated compliance period. If the non-compliance continues, the government could lay charges and prosecute the company for the offences. And if the company is actually found guilty, the court may impose a variety of punishments. But that's a lot of "ifs" and during that whole process, the safety professional is still prattling on about potential negative consequences for the company.

Bottom line: Negative reinforcement simply isn't a reliable tool to use to persuade management of the seriousness of workplace safety. It's based upon a belief that non-compliant behaviours will result in some form of negative impact for an organization—but on balance, incidents resulting from regulatory non-compliance issues don't always result in personal or organizational harm. The messages "You're going to get fined," "You're going to jail" and "We're going to kill someone if this isn't fixed" may be true in some very few and isolated cases, but in general don't provide a credible warning to management. Instead, they primarily undercut the safety professional's effectiveness.

A More Effective Approach

So if fear-mongering doesn't work, what other practical approaches are available to the safety professional when dealing with a "Negligence Phase" organization? One approach

is to speak the business language familiar to management.

According to a number of management models, the pillars of business include such principles as quality, cost, schedule and safety. The priority of those four pillars is always in flux. For example, sometimes cost is the priority. But if the low-cost widget can't reach the market with adequate quality and at the appropriate time, no one is going to buy it. Quality and schedule will then become the priorities. And if much of the bottom line is being eaten up by medical costs for injured workers and a lack of experienced replacement workers is impacting the delivery schedule, then the company's viability may be threatened and a close look at the health and safety issues is necessary.

An effective safety professional can relate the potential causes of incidents or safety violations to their impact on one of the other pillars (cost, quality and schedule). By speaking management's language, your messages are likely to receive a more focused hearing. Connect health and safety to the management of the business in terms of how the OHS program can help the company as a whole, the problems the OHS team and management can solve together, etc. without persistent negative reinforcement. You can't ignore the potential consequences of inspections and safety violations, but they shouldn't be your "default setting" when trying to change organizational behaviours and advance the company's health and safety maturity.

This approach can be challenging. The safety professional will need to spend some valuable time envisioning how safety hazards might reasonably cause harm to workers and the company. When there's no reasonable expectation of harm arising from a minor safety transgression, then move your attention to other issues that *do* present a chance of serious harm.

The next article in this series will focus on the safety

professional's communication style as the company transitions from the Negligence Phase to the Compliance Phase and how his or her messaging strategies must change to continue to support the positive development path of the company's health and safety maturity.

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