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Survival Skills for the Safety Professional

To be successful in the new millennium, says this leading loss prevention expert, safety professionals will need to focus on business value, not compliance fears.

by Larry L. Hansen, CSP

Recently, I was asked by the Minnesota Safety & Health Conference to address the question "The Safety Profession in the New Millennium - Will it Survive or Thrive?" At first, I was hesitant to accept that invitation as I wasn't really sure I had the answer to such a profound question. Moreover, if the answer wasn't a very popular one, I wasn't sure I wanted to be the "grim reaper" who had to deliver it. But I had just received an unsolicited call from Bob, a long-time safety manager who had left a voice mail congratulating me on an article I had recently authored. His call came on a Friday while I was out of town. I went in the office the following day to check out my mail and returned his call. He too was at work on a Saturday - cleaning out his desk. He had been canned! His story made short and not so sweet: When OSHA went to a "kinder, gentler form," his employer figured it didn't need safety anymore. Adios, Bob. I didn't need any further incentive to realize that survival was a critical issue for our profession and its timing was "exactly right."

In researching my presentation, I came to recognize some very important developments:

The world has changed. The business world is now truly a "global" community. New technologies, international trade agreements and the economic unions emerging in the Far East, Europe and Latin America truly pit U.S. business against global competitors. The truth is, we no longer drive either domestic or foreign cars...we drive "global" cars. We need to overcome the limiting paradox: "Large world, small minds."

The business we do has changed. In the last 15 years, we have undergone a dramatic transformation of our U.S. business base. We are no longer a heavy industry, manufacturing economy. We have transitioned to a service and knowledge work economy where as much as 20 percent of our work force may be telecommuting by the year 2000, according to Training magazine. Today, most employees work "in their minds." The results of these trends are smaller workplaces, different physical demands and exposure to injury, and fewer traumatic

accidents. Safety in the "workplace" must be redefined.

The way we do business has changed. Through the leadership of "B-school" academics, a select group of corporate executives and enlightened business sages including W. Edwards Deming and other leaders in the quality movement, American management has dramatically changed its philosophies, principles and operating practices. We have literally turned our pyramidal organizations "upside down." Yet....

The way we do "safety" hasn't changed! Safety in most U.S. workplaces continues to employ traditional, compliance-based programs separated from the business process and, in many cases, pursuing issues in direct conflict with the corporate mission. This I see as the critical challenge to the survival of the safety profession in the coming millennium.

Shakeout

As safety professionals, we are no longer "salaried" employees. We're "contingent" employees! Our jobs, our careers and our futures are contingent upon our organization's ability to achieve operating goals and produce adequate financial results. Our employment is only as stable as the success of our corporate endeavors.

With this as a reality, I believe there will be a "shakeout" in the safety profession. Some will face survival; others who embrace greater management skills and mindsets will thrive. Many in the safety profession (perhaps out of frustration) have relied heavily on the "compliance sword" of OSHA to move management on safety and health issues. If the threat of OSHA is the primary rationale for safety decisions, the safety professional's existence becomes highly vulnerable when the regulatory "pressure" is turned off. What will drive the "culling" of the profession will be the practitioner's ability to respond to but one critical question: "What measurable value (net worth) do you contribute to the long-term financial health of your organization?"

Safety, with its traditional focus, has had difficulty producing satisfactory answers to this question. For one thing, our national results in terms of incident

rates and workers' compensation costs send a clear message that the safety profession has been but marginally effective. Executives overseeing our results happen to be the same folks who pay the bills for workers' compensation, health benefits and the damage and rework created by accidents in the work environment. They are finding it more difficult to justify the profession, and maintain staff, in view of these results. Furthermore, the quality profession has been highly successful in demonstrating its financial worth to senior executives. We can't blame them for "stealing the limelight" in the corporate board rooms, but we should be aware that every victory they achieve reflects poorly on us, a profession with similar challenges yet far lesser results.

Seven Necessary Skills

The future of safety requires new approaches and different thinking. Survival of the profession, I believe, hinges upon its ability to redefine its role, embrace the business process, and become a servant of it.

Here, then, are seven necessary survival skills for the safety professional in the new millennium:

1. Understand Financial Strategies: Any function which expects to succeed in the future must be able to demonstrate its financial contribution to the "bottom line." Most safety programs don't attach there very well. Safety professionals must develop innovative ways to equate the worth of their effort (accident/loss cost/savings) to the financial goals and "margin measures" of the business. Covey's Law: "If there is no margin, there is no mission."

2. Support the Business Process: To "earn our keep," the safety function must either contribute to greater revenues or reduce the operating expense of the business. To achieve either, the professional must understand the company's strategic plans; market share strategies; competitors; and the tactical plans to achieve key objectives. The safety professional must become a servant to these objectives and the business functions tasked to deliver them. The safety professional must become a true partner to all other business center managers in the shared task of turning top dollars (revenue) into bottom dollars...margin! If we do this, we all win!

3. Exhibit Personal Leadership: The safety professional must be "technically competent" but more importantly, must function effectively as an organizational "leader." The safety professional must have the ability to impact both people and processes through leadership and persuasion skills. Typically, corporate safety managers are not blessed with large staffs (power of position), hence they must develop

the commitment of the people (power of influence)...the true leadership quality! The only true measure of a leader is the number and commitment of his/her followers.

4. Be Valued as a Resource: If the safety professional's message, programs and products are not perceived by stakeholders as adding value, they will not be used and their worth will be diminished. Organizations are like human systems - when damaged, they find ways to restore themselves. If the organization does not succeed following the methodologies of the safety office, they'll find better, more efficient ways and, ultimately, do without it.

5. Employ Entrepreneurial Tactics: What the safety profession currently has to offer, most managers, quite frankly, don't want to buy (in some cases, we can't even give it away!). It's critical that this be changed. A big part of such change requires redesigning our product, providing better packaging and delivering more effective point-of-sale presentations. The professional must act as an entrepreneur to better define customer wants and deliver innovative solutions to them. The professional must attend to the "business" of safety, i.e.:

a. Marketing - Determining customers' "wants" (a.k.a. what they're willing to pay for);

b. R&D - Developing products that continuously redefine and exceed these "wants"!

c. Sales - Presenting the "product" in enticing ways that respond to these "wants" ...and ultimately to the needs;

d. Finance - Pricing services to create perceived value; and

e. Customer Service - Delivering all of the above when wanted, where wanted, to assure user satisfaction.

6. Collaborative Skills: The safety professional needs to build "strategic alliances" within the organization as true success lies in organizational synergy, not empires. The professional must create a "virtual safety organization" where safety becomes integrated with other key functions, particularly operations, human resources and finance. Safety must value those functions and in turn, must receive value from them. Once common goals, missions and rewards are created, the synergy needed for ultimate success will become self-generating and self-directing. Hold on!...This ride moves fast!

7. Initiative: Success in any endeavor is ultimately an outcome of "personal energy." The safety professional must expand his or her role beyond its technical limitations. Every position has a title, but a title should never confine one's function. Just because

we have a job, doesn't mean we should stop looking for work. To maximize personal success, the professional must continually seek ways of growing skills and contributing value to meet the needs of the corporation. That's called initiative and that is something which is always rewarded in a career! See 'ya in the year 2000!

Twenty threats (opportunities?) to the safety and health profession

1. The changing business environment
Business has changed - safety philosophies have not.
2. The era of OSHA – phase II
Less regulatory clout ... a kinder, gentler OSHA.
3. Our results – (lack of)
The numbers (trends) aren't pretty.
4. Image – the invisible profession
The safety profession is organizationally "isolated."
5. Success of the quality movement
If "they" can do it - why can't we?
6. Misdiagnosing success factors
Safety programs are necessary - but not sufficient.
7. Corporate C.O.M.A. (Cost-Only Mental Atrophy)
Managing cost doesn't create value.
8. Outsourcing/Insourcing
Someone else can do it better, faster, cheaper.
9. Disorganized labor
Organized labor's ranks and impact continue to shrink.
10. Compliance strategy
Doing the minimum is never enough.
11. Safety as a political pawn
It is a victim of functional battles - HR vs. Finance, etc.
12. The risk management function
By definition, prevention is part of the RM process.
13. International standards initiatives
We're not aggressively "leading" this initiative.
14. "Earned" disrespect
Past practices have "labeled" (rightfully so) the profession.
15. The industrial hygiene profession
A better "credentialed" discipline.
16. Changing management science
Management theory has changed, placing new demands on the profession.
17. Career torquing/compression

The safety professional needs to expand his/her capabilities.

18. Nontraditional exposures

Violence, stress, vehicle operations - new exposures.

19. The "delusion" of managed care

Managing health costs masks continuance of the problem..."Accident Rates."

20. Self-directed teams

Safety is very transferable to those who would value it the most - employees.

"The future belongs to those who create it!"

-John Graham, President, Graham Communications

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