

SURVIVAL SKILLS FOR THE SAFETY PROFESSIONAL

By:

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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.

Recently, I was asked to address a Safety and Health Conference on 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. And secondly, 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! However, as I thought further on that subject, it became clear to me that it was in fact a critical question for our profession and its timing was "exactly right." . . . I accepted.

My research for that presentation caused me to realize some very important things. I came to recognize that:

The World Has Changed - The business world is now truly a "global" community. New technologies, international trade agreements, and the economic unions forged and emerging in the Far East, Europe and Latin America truly pit businesses 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 business base. Some countries are no longer invested in a heavy industry, and a manufacturing economy. Many have transitioned to service industries and a knowledge work economy. Today, many employees work "in their minds." 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 progressive corporate executives, and enlightened business sages including W. Edwards Deming, and others of the quality movement, business management has dramatically changed its philosophies, principles, and operating practices. We have literally turned our pyramidal organizations "upside down" . . . yet, in many respects,

The Way We Do "Safety" Hasn't Changed! Safety in many workplaces continues to employ traditional, 'employee attitude and compliance-based' programs separated from the business process, and, in many cases, pursuing issues directly in conflict with the corporate mission and objectives. This I see as the critical challenge to the survival of the safety profession in the 'now' millennium.

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 leading to sustainability. Our employment is only as stable as the success of our corporate endeavors.

With this as a reality, I believe there will be further "shakeouts" in the safety profession; some will face survival, while others who evolve greater management skills and operational mindsets will achieve . . . thrival! What will drive the "culling" of the profession, will be the practitioner's ability to respond to one critical question: "What measurable value (real worth) do you contribute to the long-term financial health of your organization?". . . And can you convincingly prove it!

Safety, with its traditional focus, has had difficulty producing satisfactory answers to this question. 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, and contributor to it.

Here, then, are seven requisite survival skills for the safety professional in the 'now millennium':

1. **Understand Financial Strategies:** Any function that expects to succeed in the future must be able to demonstrate its financial contribution to the "bottom line" today. Most safety programs don't attach there very well. The safety professional 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 the attainment of greater revenues, or reduce the operating expense of the business greater than their cost. To achieve either, the safety professional must understand the company's strategic plans; market share strategies; competitors; and the tactical plans in place to achieve key objectives. The safety professional must become a supporter of and 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! We do this by effectively managing the 'middle lines' (loss and expense). We have great opportunity here, and if we're successful, 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 (power of influence) 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 commitment of his/her followers.
4. **Become a Valued Resource:** If the safety professional's message, programs, and products are not perceived by his or her stakeholders as adding value, they will not be used, and their worth will be diminished and ultimately eliminated. Bottom line -- if we're not "lined up" with the corporate mission and able to provide support services perceived valuable to it by those calling the plays, we'll be sidelined!

5. **Employ Entrepreneurial Tactics:** What the safety profession currently has to offer, most managers, quite frankly, aren't interested in buying (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, re-defining our target customer, 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 safety professional must focus on:
 - a. Marketing - determining customers' "wants and needs" (a.k.a. what they're willing to pay for);
 - b. R&D - developing products and approaches that continuously redefine and exceed wants!
 - c. Sales - presenting the "product" in enticing ways that respond to needs;
 - d. Finance - pricing services to create both real and perceived value; and
 - e. Customer Service - delivering all the above when wanted, where wanted, and how wanted to assure customer satisfaction.

6. **Develop Collaborative Skills:** The safety professional needs to build "strategic alliances" within, and beyond their organization, as true success lies in collaboration and organizational synergy, not control and turfs. 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 it in turn, must value from them. Once common goals, missions, measures, and rewards are created, the synergy needed for ultimate success will become self-generating and self-directing -- Hold on! . . . This ride moves fast!

7. **Take the 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 define one's role or confine one's function. Just because we have a job, doesn't mean we should stop looking for work. To maximize personal success, the safety professional must continually seek ways of growing skills and contributing value to meet the needs of the corporation. That's called initiative, and that's something that is always rewarded in a career! Welcome to Safety in the 'NOW' millennium!

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"SAFETY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM, WILL IT SURVIVE . . . OR THRIVE?"

Twenty (20) threats (opportunities?) to the Safety profession:

- . **A Focus on Symptoms**
 - *You can't manage (change) outcomes...you must deal with causes.*
- . **The Era of OSHA - Phase II**
 - *Less regulatory clout . . . a kinder, gentler OSHA.*
- . **Goaled Mediocrity**
 - *A Tolerance for 'Average' Doesn't Drive Good Results.*
- . **Ignorance -- The 'Segregated Profession'**
 - *The safety function is organizationally "exiled".*
- . **Success of the Quality Movement**
 - *If "they" can do it . . . why can't we?*
- . **Misdirected Energy and Effort**
 - *Safety programs are necessary . . . but not sufficient.*
- . **Corporate C.O.M.A. (Cost Only Mental Atrophy)**
 - *Failure to Recognize the Difference Between 'Cost and Expense'.*
- . **Outsourcing**
 - *Someone else can always do it easier, faster, cheaper...but generally not better.*
- . **Disorganized labor**
 - *Organized labor's ranks and impact continue to shrink.*
- . **Compliance strategy**
 - *Setting a 'Low Bar' doesn't lift one to excellence.*
- . **Safety as a political pawn**
 - *Safety as victim of 'Turf Battles -- HR vs. Finance, etc.*
- . **Lack of Leadership**
 - *American Business is over managed and under led.*
- . **Preference for the 'Quick Fix'**
 - *Trying to solve a complex problem with the wrong formula.*
- . **Reputation---Past, Present...Future?**
 - *Past practices have "labeled" the profession.*
- . **Better Credentialed Peers**
 - *All other things being equal—Credentials Count.*
- . **'Bass-ackward' Performance Models**
 - *For over fifty years, the obvious answer eludes us.*
- . **Career Compression**
 - *The safety professional needs to expand their capabilities.*
- . **Nontraditional exposures**
 - *Violence, stress, vehicle operations -- new exposures.*
- . **The "Delusion" of Success**
 - *Managing incident rates, masks continuance of the problem . . . "COSTS!"*
- . **Empowerment**
 - *Safety is most transferable to those who would value most -- EMPLOYEES.*

"The future belongs to those that create it!"

- John Graham, President
Graham Communications