

Increasing Your Organizational Value

By Peter T. Susca

This article series chronicles the principles and techniques that readers can apply to transition safety and the safety profession closer to the core of what organizational leaders value. The foundational philosophy is that safety challenges stem from larger organizational issues. By understanding the core business values, OSH professionals can begin to work from the inside out to engage business leaders, rather than the typical outside-in approach to integrating safety with business. If leaders can tap into this information, they can use it to improve the organization as a whole, and move safety from a purely moral imperative to an indicator and facilitator of organizational health.

These principles and techniques have the potential to move you off “safety island” and further integrate you into the organizational society.

Considering the information that is forthcoming in this series, it is important to establish a strategy for OSH professionals at all levels to enhance their organizational influence beyond the realm of safety. Even if you possess a great deal of business acumen, the organization’s perception of you and the safety function will significantly impact your ability to influence others. Affecting organizational change outside the realm of safety is challenging. This article expands on the following seven initiatives to elevate the perception of the OSH professional and the safety function.

- 1) Calibrate yourself to the organization.
- 2) Build your business knowledge.
- 3) Assess their perception.
- 4) Share your value.
- 5) Create strategic allies.
- 6) Be your own advocate.
- 7) Develop a strategy and plan.

Increasing your organizational value beyond that of a technically competent OSH professional requires making an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses, as well as creating a personal development strategy and plan. The purpose of this value-building initiative is to provide the OSH professional with the relationships and skills to create a more effective and sustainable business approach and career.

1) Calibrate Yourself to the Organization

Safety professionals invest their heart and soul into the protection of others, and they need to feel supported. There is nothing more frustrating for an OSH professional than having high safety expectations in an organization that does not feel or act the same way.

“How good do you want to be at safety?” is the question that I ask senior organizational leaders at

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the start of every new job or assignment. As an OSH professional or consultant, it is important to understand the level of care or performance that management expects. To be clear, you have been hired to serve their standard of care, which may be different from yours. If you have yet to ask this question, or if you are unclear of the answer, it may be time to reevaluate management’s perspective. Asking this question in a provocative manner begs an explanation, not a short answer. As you listen to the answer, be alert to and follow up on these points:

- Why are they interested in safety? Is there a history, a personal value or a corporate edict?
- Did they use the word *safe* in the description? If so, can you have a sense of what it truly means to them?
- Are they using outcomes (e.g., injuries, regulatory nonconformities, citations or fines) as a measure of safety? Clarify the current and expected threshold for each.
- Do they speak from a risk perspective? Are they expressing concerns that have yet to manifest as outcomes?
- What level of safety ownership, responsibility and accountability are they assuming/deferring?
- Do you have a sense that leaders understand the reasons for the company’s injuries and safety risk? If so, do their reasons sound more like processes or people?

These are just a few indicators that you will need to fully understand to calibrate to senior management’s expectations and perceptions. With this in mind, go out and experience the organization’s operational reality. Walk the operation. Speak with those at risk and observe their practices, conditions and mode of operation. Comparing the two sets of information, senior management’s expectations/perceptions and the reality of the operation, will provide a good sense of the challenges ahead.

2) Build Your Business Knowledge

To evolve into a strategic business partner, OSH professionals need to understand the core workings (see sidebar) of the organization and how to represent their value to the business. The OSH profession needs to evolve from focusing primarily on safety-specific solutions to organizational and operational solutions that make good safety sense. In other words, turn safety issues into business improvement opportunities.

When working as an OSH professional in a business, it is imperative to understand how businesses and businesspeople operate. Taking classes and educating yourself on the workings of the business should be part of the standard of care for the OSH profession. Those who complete this fundamental requirement are better prepared to hit the ground running and are more likely to be welcomed by other business leaders.

Core Workings of an Organization

Business Structure & Process

- organizational structure;
- business value proposition;
- standards of care and values;
- products and services;
- roles of business support functions.

Sustainable Business Development

- design to delivery process;
- sales strategy;
- customer growth and fulfillment;
- stakeholder impact and value;
- supply chain.

Financial Management

- key performance indicators;
- turning revenue into profit;
- cost structure/investments;
- cash flow/WIP/inventory.

Process Improvement

- understanding and mapping processes;
- measuring process health;
- identifying and reducing waste;
- creating efficiency and mistake-proofing.

Operational Management

- operational performance measures;
- job planning and labor management;
- processes, equipment, materials and tools;
- first-line supervisor responsibilities;
- work environment.

Executive Decorum

- information format/style/focus;
- time/value expectations;
- presentations;
- backup information.

At the root of most fatalities and serious injuries that I have investigated during my career were unhealthy business or operational processes. In one fatal incident, an employee was run over by a flatbed truck when a driver was backing out of a loading area. While it would have been easy to identify the driver, the employee, the signage or controls in the area or on the truck, or weak risk assessment, as the reason, the pivotal question in this investigation was, "How often do drivers back up?" Knowing that owner-operator flatbed drivers should not be backing up in an area designed for pull-through loading, the answer was, "All the time." The real reason for this fatality was related to the poor design and operation of the shipping/loading area. The poor design and management of this area had been affecting shipping flow, scheduling, cost, and morale of workers and drivers for a while, as well as being a ticking fatality time bomb.

From a safety perspective, a good risk assessment would have identified the safety issue, but would the safety solution have changed the real reason for the incident? Or, would we have applied more safety controls to a flawed process? With a good understanding of process flow, waste, efficiency and their effect on key performance indicators, a business-savvy safety professional should be able to make a business (not only a safety) case to change the process long before the tragic outcome. When you can improve a process by showing cost reduction, schedule improvement or a significant change in customer, supplier and employee satisfaction, and eliminate hazards or exposure (rather than add cost, time and frustration with additional safety controls), your value as a strategic business partner will rise.

3) Assess Their Perception

While you likely look in the mirror every day before going to work, you may not see what others in the organization see. Your organizational value directly correlates to the organization's perception of you and the OSH profession. Accordingly, it is critical to assess your strengths and weaknesses as they apply to your role as a strategic business partner, as well as the perception of the OSH department as a whole.

Sadly, if the organization's senior leadership does not respect you as a peer, it may be because they do not perceive safety as a core business element or they do not see you as having the requisite comportment. If the latter is the case, the best way to change the value of safety may be to change senior leaders' perception of you. You should already have some sense of their perception based on their responses, body language and the way you are treated.

The best way to learn what they see and perceive is to ask for an honest assessment of yourself

and the OSH department. You do not need names and titles, or who said what when; just look for barriers to inclusion that are within your control. Start with your supervisor, especially if s/he is part of the senior leadership team. In addition, identify at least one other respected senior leader who regularly witnesses your participation in meetings, presentations, activities or deliberations with the management team. This should be someone who you share common ground with, either by shared projects or challenges, active support in meetings or possibly through other associations (e.g., common friends, activities).

If no one fits this category at present, it is time to start developing some senior management team relationships. Start by learning what their challenges are and determine how you may be able to help.

4) Share Your Value

Based on the nature of the profession, OSH practitioners have a lot to offer the senior management team that is outside the realm of technical safety solutions. Effective safety practitioners see the organization's operational and cultural reality manifest itself in the conditions, operational results, decision making and perceptions in the workplace. If you have been successful in making sustained safety improvements in the organiza-

tion, you probably have succeeded at some or all of the following:

- building trust and engagement with those at risk;
- finding common ground between employees, management and trade unions;
- creating effective processes, programs and management systems;
- seeing and hearing the operational reality, including the level of waste, risk and engagement;
- assessing the perceptions and capacity of the operational staff;
- understanding what operational initiatives will succeed or fail in the culture;
- creating solutions that are operationally practical and sustainable.

All of these skills and pieces of information are valuable to a leadership team that may spend little time in the field or the plant. The foundation of sustainable operational success is closely linked to the essence of sustainable safety success. In short, the leadership team must appreciate and engage you in the business application of your safety successes.

5) Create Strategic Allies

Aligning with leaders who represent the core elements of the business is extremely beneficial to your safety and organizational influence. In the business world, those who create value and manage the money are usually the most influential. In addition, be cognizant of individuals who are well respected by the management team and their direct reports.

Financial leaders track the money. The values of the organization are closely tied to where the money goes. Just as an individual spends money on what s/he values, so does an organization. While taking finance courses is a good idea, creating a trusted relationship with a financial leader is a great one.

Successful senior operations leaders must be organizationally savvy in that they must understand how to make the organization work for them. They must deliver a product or service in a sea of financial, engineering, sales, quality, safety, human resources, employee/union, customer and supply-chain needs and constraints. Those who can navigate through these challenges in a well-balanced fashion will go far in business. And, if these senior leaders perceive you



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as someone with like values and skills, they may take you with them.

The quality function in an organization applies a similar set of processes and system elements in their world. With similar processes (e.g., causal analysis), there may be a great opportunity to combine resources/expertise, learn from their experiences and grow your quality and data analysis skills.

6) Be Your Own Advocate

Early in my safety career, I worked as a safety manager at the headquarters of a large corporation. Although I sat only three offices away from the global leader of safety, I knew by his body language that he had little understanding of what I did or had the capacity to do. When I approached my direct supervisor with this concern, he, having faith in my abilities, said, "I attend a senior staff meeting with the global leader every week. Next week, you will go in my place." Although the offer seemed intimidating at the time, my supervisor made sure that I was prepared with the right approach and supplemental information if questions arose. That one meeting significantly enhanced my relationship with the global safety leader, as well as my career vector at that organization.

If similar development opportunities do not present themselves, ask for them. Clearly, my supervisor was not only supportive of me, he was confident and open enough to risk his own reputation to further mine. There are good leaders in your organization who, like my supervisor, may be willing to support your development and enhanced perception in the organization; seek them out.

7) Develop a Strategy & Plan

To grow in an organization, you must be willing to stretch outside your comfort zone a little at a time. Independent of tenure or rank in the organization, the elements outlined in this article can be used as part of your personal development and organizational influence strategy. Start by requesting a perception reality check directly from or secondhand through leaders who are willing to speak honestly. You may not like what you hear, so take a deep breath, then move on with a plan to change your influence and perception one small step at a time. Check back with allies and ask them to reassess your progress at reasonable intervals. Be sure to celebrate incremental successes. You deserve it.

Conclusion

These principles and techniques have the potential to move you off "safety island" and further integrate you into the organizational society. Perhaps it is time to test the water.

Calibrate yourself to the organization; compare their expectations/reality to yours. Build your business knowledge; understand and operate within the business world. Assess their perception; you must gauge how others perceive you and the OSH function. Share your value; the essence of good safety is the essence of good business, so share it. Create strategic allies; build a support system for yourself and OSH. Be your own advocate; seek out support, assistance and opportunities to grow. Develop a strategy and plan; create an improvement plan and celebrate incremental success.