PS Asks
John V. Grimaldi

John V. Grimaldi, Ph.D., was 1961-62 ASSE President. He was considered a true visionary in the safety profession. This interview was conducted in 2006, but he asked ASSE not to publish it at that time. Following his passing in 2011, his wife granted ASSE permission to publish the interview.

PS: You have written several books on safety management. How has safety management changed since the 1960s?
John: In my view, the practices and philosophies addressing management techniques have changed. We really do not know all that much about safety management. The work of managing is persuading someone else to work.

What does that really mean in terms of safety? Does that mean we can be devious sometimes—can a safety manager bribe a worker, take a worker out to dinner or a show for doing a good job? It is a tough balancing act. Then there is the camp that calls for tough management styles. Managers who snap the whip all the time may get more output than others but only for a short period. My point is that we are not sure where safety management is going. We need to do more.

I am very encouraged to see that the art and science of safety management continue to move forward. For decades, one thing I have said is that we need to show the positive return for safety. ASSE has been doing quite a bit on this, and I am happy to see articles on topics such as enterprise risk management. We need to move the safety debate forward.

The concept of dynamics in safety is hard to quantify or evaluate. If we go with my belief that safety has no dynamics to it, it is hard to relate safety to upper management. We had good results up to a point, but we are still far from what we want to achieve.

An example for me is Hurricane Katrina. I personally surveyed the levees in New Orleans, LA, almost 12 years ago, and from what I saw, not enough was done [to ensure their integrity]. It seems that the problem with the levees was known long before the disaster, but without the immediate impact of a hurricane, it was difficult to generate interest in dedicating resources to fix the levees. The result was seen after the hurricane occurred.

I feel that those who ran things in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina could have been much more efficient and effective. Unfortunately, things went terribly for both the on-site management and the impacted citizenry. Safety management in that case was not dynamic—it was relaxed. The problem was not fully understood or appreciated until after the catastrophic event took place.

I coined the term safety management when I worked for GE. However, we really do not have any right to speak of safety management. In the past, safety people were not given the chance to manage, but if they did, they had to become effective persuaders more than anything else. The term management implies the ability to run things and to have the ability to make decisions that impact the operation, but the safety manager and the practice of safety management do not really run things.

Safety advanced one giant step with the introduction of the term safety management. It created job titles and positions that never existed before, but it has not yet realized its full potential. Today, we are still constantly fighting with people to make them see the value of safety. I had the privilege of being on the committee that wrote the OSHA bill. One of the questions I asked was, “What will you do with those people who violate the rules?” Many companies still have yet to answer that question. Do we fire them, fine them or reassign them?

I have been outspoken on the need for safety professionals to become champions for safety management. On many occasions, we have relegated ourselves to being the sideline advisor. We identify a problem, then walk away. That was a problem before, and in my opinion, it still is. We need to be more outspoken and carry the banner.

Safety management gave safety specialists a title of importance, a feeling of responsibility and professional acceptance measured strongly by those executives who learned the value of an effective safety program.

PS: Do you believe that the role of SH&E professionals has changed as well?
John: I took over the Center of Safety at New York University (NYU) in the 1970s, and I was the director of the Institute of Safety and Systems Management at the University of Southern California. I talked to people in safety, and they knew the terms and could quote from textbooks, but we never discussed safety philosophically early in my career. We talked about hazards and exposures and how to control them or to engineer them out of the working area.

I think that is clearly changing. One only needs to open Professional Safety journal to read all of the articles about safety as a profession and the need to grow. I hope that I contributed positively to this debate and initiative during my career.

PS: What current occupational safety and health developments do you believe warrant further research?
John: I would like to see more research on management systems and on ways to move past programs that are based only on compliance with regulations. If we study effective programs that focus on factors other than incident rates, we can identify what enables safety management to progress.

PS: What advice do you have for managers who wish to improve their SH&E programs?
John: They should look more at environmental aspects. The growth in environmental is enormous, and it will not change. It also is important to know the art of safety management. Learn to be a persuader, but speak like a champion.

PS: How can colleges and universities better prepare students who plan to pursue a career in occupational safety and health?
John: There should be more advanced degree programs. At NYU, one could earn a master’s degree in safety management, and for a doctorate, you could build your own program. I have seen many smaller schools that now offer degrees. I think this is good, but I am concerned that high-profile schools are not increasing their programs or are choosing to eliminate them. Smaller schools should not offer safety degrees if they do not have the staffing or proper resources on the subject. But we need the high-profile schools to offer programs to keep a focus on safety management.

PS: Based on your experience, what do you consider to be the greatest occupational safety and health achievement of the past 30 years?
John: I think the movement of corporations to implement solid safety programs needs to be recognized. For example, DuPont’s safety record is marvelous, and GE has always had a good record. One way of advancing performance is to improve the conditions that cause bad things to happen. In looking for improvements, one must identify the conditions that cause problems as well as the person(s) who caused the negative result. Redesign and correction of the exposure should always be considered first to ensure that controlling mechanisms are in top order. These types of companies are actively looking for hazards and exposures, then implementing new systems to correct them. They balance regulatory compliance with the need to move ahead.

PS: What are the most significant changes to have taken place within ASSE since you served as president?
John: I am impressed by all of the activities, such as the conferences and other learning events. I also am impressed by the publications and services offered to members.

PS: Many view you as a major leader in promoting the use of technical concepts, such as system/Boolean algebra, among safety engineers. What other technical concepts can safety engineers benefit from today?
John: We should use the ones we have as best as we can. Safety experience used to be based on the injury/severity rate or how many injuries occurred and the gravity of these injuries. That turned into an expression that insurance companies and employers have settled for as an indicator of how severe an exposure is. By keeping track of the frequency of injuries, they dropped the severity rate and focused on all cases that occurred. Severity rate is the rate that governs the executive office. Expense control frequency rates are often little numbers, and larger numbers are more.

I am proud of the work I have done with system safety and Boolean algebra, but I really think we need to do more with management systems. At the same time, it is important that safety professionals continue to have solid technical skills. System safety is critical because it looks at safety from an engineering perspective and uses solid engineering principles to identify hazards and exposures. Once we can find and evaluate them through a risk assessment, we are in a much better position to implement the management systems.

PS: What do you consider as your most noteworthy accomplishments within the safety engineering field?
John: I met many nice people, and I continue to be proud of my work in systems safety and management systems.

PS: You are recognized as a leader of the safety profession, and you have held key positions before and after the creation of OSHA. How has the creation of OSHA affected ASSE and the SH&E profession?
John: Initially, it was positive, but I have not been active with OSHA-related issues for the past 10 years or so. Unfortunately, the passing of time has considerably diminished OSHA’s requirements and its applicability to new working areas. To me, it appears that there is little follow-up to ensure that people are doing their jobs and meeting their requirements after an inspection or complaint. I have always taken the position that laws themselves do not necessarily provide the results you want unless you are a conscientious manager who gives time to all things management has to consider. OSHA’s nonexistent presence for almost all employers in the U.S. has become so familiar that its impact is not felt as seriously as it was in the beginning.
That said, I have always supported agencies such as OSHA and NIOSH. I believe that solid programs are based on much more than compliance with regulations. Much of the regulation is somewhat dated. Many progressive companies continue to advance and to look at things such as advanced management programs, quality involvement of impacted parties and employees, and creative approaches. I think we need to pay attention to regulations, but we also can advance. I mentioned several companies that I believe have outstanding programs and are helping set the stage for the future.

John V. Grimaldi, Ph.D. (Sept. 6, 1916 to Oct. 8, 2011), received a Ph.D. from New York University (NYU) in 1955, an M.A. from NYU in 1941, a bachelor’s degree in Chemical Engineering from the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1951 and a B.S. from New York University in 1939. Grimaldi was a practicing engineer and consultant in the specialty he initiated in 1956, safety management. From 1977 to 1986, he was executive director and professor of safety science and systems management at the Institute of Safety and Systems Management at the University of Southern California. From 1979 to 1986, he was clinical professor of community and environmental medicine at the University of California-Irvine College of Medicine. He was director of the Center for Safety and chair of the Department of Safety Sciences and Education at New York University from 1967 to 1977.

He served as consultant for safety, health and plant protection with General Electric Co. at its New York corporate headquarters from 1956 to 1967. Prior to that, he was director of the Engineering and Research Division and as assistant manager of the Accident Prevention Department of the Association of Casualty and Surety Cos. in New York from 1945 to 1956. From 1944 to 1945, he was research associate at NYU’s Center for Safety. From 1942 to 1944, he was director of safety for Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corp. in Bethpage, NY.

He led the development of the first graduate-level academic training program in occupational safety and health and occupational biomechanics at NYU. Grimaldi was a pioneer in early efforts to combine emerging management techniques with occupational safety and health programs. He and Rollin Simonds coauthored Safety Management: Accident Cost and Control, a leading college text for 3 decades.