Lai Poon Piau

PS: How is safety a form of social responsibility and how can safety managers convince upper management that this is the case?

Lai: Public sentiment has increasingly been pinpointing the need for companies to conduct themselves in a socially responsible manner. The public expects a corporation to not only take care of employees, but to take care of the environment and the community where it operates. It is important for businesses to understand the requirements for a successful and sustainable company. An important business strategy is to place emphasis on workplace safety and health. This not only ensures the well-being of employees, but also allows them to contribute positively to productivity. When employees work in a safe environment, they are more committed to their jobs and less prone to making mistakes.

SH&E is an area where progressive leaders can set directions and influence behavior and outcomes. Senior management should strive for strong safety performance even in today’s increasingly challenging operational landscape. It is important for upper management to set clear directions and shape organizational behavior for SH&E, as they set the foundation for preventing incidents and occupational illnesses.

The commitment to SH&E should not end at the workplace. To nurture a deep-rooted safety culture, safety must be practiced in all aspects of workers’ lives.

PS: Current economic conditions present companies with a bevy of operational risks that lead some to cut SH&E programs. How can safety professionals gain management buy-in to keep SH&E at the forefront?

Lai: Convincing management and getting them to invest in SH&E programs is not an easy task because generally a company’s primary goal is to make profits. But the benefits of a concerted and focused SH&E strategy cannot be underestimated.

International Labor Organization estimates that approximately 4% of the world’s annual gross domestic product is lost as a consequence of occupational diseases and incidents. Presentation of such data and similar cost analyses of a company’s injury/illness costs and statistics can encourage management to buy-in to programs.

Also, safety professionals can develop programs that will support and enhance the company’s existing policies and practices to make the case for management support. Ensuring that senior management is aware of these figures and how these programs will improve productivity and processes helps safety professionals gain management buy-in and keep SH&E at the forefront in all critical decision-making.

SH&E professionals also can convince companies to use additional resources during tough times to build capabilities and improve processes and systems. Companies taking this long-term view will have a huge advantage when an upswing comes around.

PS: Why is safety also important for business sustainability?

Lai: At the most basic level, safety should be seen as a tool to protect the bottom line, since an incident could very easily wipe out any profits. However, many businesses today view safety as an investment in the success of their business.

In Singapore, more than 600,000 workhours were lost due to work incidents in 2011. Companies lose productive workhours due to work stoppage, property and equipment damage, and incident investigation.

In addition, many indirect costs exist, such as employee medical leave, absenteeism, loss of morale and loss of reputation, potentially resulting in loss of future business opportunities. Conversely, employers with healthy employees are more likely to have higher work motivation, greater job satisfaction, and will contribute better-quality products and services. A safe and healthy work environment can foster loyalty and reduce absenteeism, and companies are able to tap these experienced workers for their expertise, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life, corporate productivity and economic success.

PS: How can workers take personal responsibility for safety and health?

Professional Safety is a monthly journal published by American Society of Safety Engineers
www.asse.org/professionalsafety
Lai: The cooperation of workers is vital for maintaining a safe and healthy work environment. Organizations should encourage employees to play an essential role in this regard and ensure that they are given adequate information on the organization’s policies and processes. To ensure WSH measures, appropriate training and open conversations are imperative. In essence, workers should:

• take reasonable care for their own safety and that of others who may be affected by their actions or oversights;
• comply with WSH instructions and procedures;
• use safety devices and protective equipment correctly;
• report immediately on any situation that may be deemed as a hazard;
• report any incident or injury that arises in the course of work.

Access to better information is a primary condition for significant and positive contributions by employees that should be made readily available by employers.

PS: How can safety managers be sound leaders at the office?
Lai: There is no single answer to becoming an effective safety evangelist. Safety managers must understand the pain points for different management levels in order to show how SH&E can offer improvements to those pain points in both the short- and long-term. In addition to getting senior management support, identifying key influencers at the departmental and team levels and getting their buy-in can help get more employees to support good SH&E practices. It also pays to communicate the implementation plan clearly. A good plan will cover what actions are needed and why, who should play what role in enforcing these practices, how to measure improvement and how to fine-tune the process. Safety managers and management alike must be able to communicate safety at an emotional level. Each worker also must be willing to listen when the managers discuss the importance of safety.

PS: How can smaller enterprises implement and profit from workplace safety and health?
Lai: One method that smaller enterprises can adopt is to appoint safety managers or form safety committees. By involving staff in a company’s safety initiatives, it ensures that every worker is responsible for safety, which subsequently becomes a part of the company’s culture. Recognizing that these companies may lack adequate resources in implementing safety programs, the WSH Council has rolled out several initiatives in Singapore to help them. This includes the WSH Assist program, which helps smaller enterprises build WSH capabilities and improve standards. Consultants have been deployed to the workplace to educate and give customized advisory services and help these firms develop implementation action plans.

Improvements in safety management can be achieved by dedicating adequate resources, which can in turn have a positive impact on business performance. However, it is also imperative to expand safety efforts beyond infrastructure and capabilities to include cultivating the right mind-set and attitude toward SH&E for sustainable outcomes. This responsibility lies not only with a company’s senior management, but also with line managers and employees.

Most importantly, small enterprises must be able to shift away from the mind-set that safety is a cost. In many cases, the solutions are related more to perception and practices than resources and investment.

PS: What advice can you offer to readers who are starting their safety careers?
Lai: Be aware that risks exist in any workplace and that employees may still be unaware of them, even if they have had many more years of work experience. Resistance to change is also natural. To achieve a win-win situation, a new safety manager has to stay up-to-date on the latest workplace regulations and risks, gain buy-in from senior management for SH&E practices and be sensitive when dealing with colleagues. More importantly, young professionals should recognize that they are entering a profession that is truly in the business of saving lives. To effectively do this, SH&E professionals need to be passionate about safety. It is this passion that will help them earn the respect and credibility from their colleagues and peers.

PS: What are some commitments that Singapore has made to improve safety and health?
Lai: To achieve sustained and continuous improvement in WSH standards, the WSH 2018 was codrafted by the WSH Council and the Singapore Ministry of Manpower to lower the national fatality rate to less than 1.8 per 100,000 workers by 2018. One of the strategic outcomes to achieve the desired target is to make safety and health
an integral part of business. The WSH Council’s bizSAFE program is one initiative to help companies strengthen their risk management capabilities and implement a comprehensive WSH system. Companies are recognized for placing WSH as a priority and a core value in their operations and business. This, in turn, encourages others to get on board with the program. When it launched in 2006, the number of bizSAFE-certified companies was only 550. Certified companies now number more than 10,000.

In addition, Singapore recently ratified the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, C187. The ratification of C187 will align Singapore’s efforts more closely with international labor standards and ensure that the safety and health of workers is always top priority on the national agenda. This will position the country to play an even bigger role in both the region and world stage for WSH excellence.

Singapore has made significant progress on the WSH front as a result of regulatory reforms through the enactment of the WSH Act, as well as greater industry ownership of WSH outcomes in areas such as industry capability building and standards setting. This has effectively brought down the country’s workplace fatality rate from 4.9 fatalities per 100,000 workers in 2004 to 2.3 in 2011.

As part of the WSH 2018 strategy, Singapore also organizes the WSH Conference biennially to create a forum for the exchange of best practices, new solutions and approaches among renowned WSH practitioners around the world.

**PS:** How can safety professionals form a strong bond with government agencies, professional organizations, the industry and other related groups?

**Lai:** Safety professionals must contribute toward the development of the SH&E landscape and not flow along with the tide. Regulators can only set basic or minimum expectations since our rules apply to everyone. Whereas for WSH professionals, they can see the specific needs of individual companies or situations and help make informed decisions on the best standards to apply. Better yet, SH&E professionals should try to set new and higher levels of safety performance as efforts or investment in this area always yield high return on investment.

Appropriate legislation and regulations, together with adequate means of enforcement, are essential for the protection of worker safety and health. Internal WSH policies and regulations should be developed in consultation with government agencies, professional organizations, the industry and other related groups.

**PS:** In SH&E practice, what are the benefits of a holistic approach?

**Lai:** Our understanding of SH&E issues has shifted focus from purely high-risk environments, such as preventing falls and incidents on construction sites, to taking a more holistic approach. For example, if a worker has a medical condition or is fatigued due to poor sleeping habits, his/her mental state can influence how well s/he follows safety rules. Therefore, one needs to look at workers’ holistic care. The general approach must be to reduce exposure to risks and minimize possible harm, whether in physically unsafe conditions, poor ergonomic conditions or psychosocial issues in the workplace.

**Lai Poon Piau** is the executive director for Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council. He has 20 years’ experience in safety and environmental experience, and has worked in the oil and gas, and energy industries. He began his career in Singapore with Chevron Texaco. After that Lai moved to Edwards Technologies. He is an affiliated member of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health, a graduate member of the Institute of Engineers of Australia, and played a founding role in the Society of Loss Prevention of Singapore.