

Connecting the Dots

Demonstrating Safety's Business Value



Kathy A. Seabrook

Everything ASSE does, from programs, products and services to networking opportunities and member development, aligns with its vision to be a global advocate and premier leader for the SH&E professional and the profession. As SH&E professionals who actively demonstrate the business value of SH&E each day, each of us also plays a vital role in helping ASSE achieve this vision.

Demonstrating Our Value

Delivering value in business means protecting assets, mitigating risks and adding to the bottom line. Our employers expect to rest well each night knowing that business risks are mitigated and stakeholders are happy. SH&E risks are among those business risks, and it is our professional challenge to ensure that every meaningful engagement we have with employers demonstrates this connection.

Our role in business continues to transition from a focus on compliance to a focus on risk assessment and mitigation. SH&E professionals are adept at identifying risks, and we are learning to communicate about safety performance in terms of risk identification and mitigation. Risk is the language of business. CEOs, CFOs, directors, investors and operational leaders all understand this language, and such communication helps us demonstrate our value and brings us closer to our operational and leadership partners.

Our professional transformation has also seen us grow from safety enforcers to be avoided to in-demand collaborators who understand organizational challenges and needs. Operational leaders who own and are accountable for safety recognize that everyone is responsible for identifying and mitigating SH&E risk and making informed decisions. These leaders rely on us for subject-matter expertise and guidance that will help them make good decisions, mitigating risk and managing production expectations.

Meeting Customer Expectations

During the Kuwait Chapter's professional development conference, I participated on a panel with the leaders of two of Kuwait's largest companies: Mr. Ismail Abdulla Ali, deputy chief executive officer (Corporate Services Directorate) of Kuwait Oil Co., and Mr. Mohammed Hussain, CEO of Equate Petrochemical Co. These top executives discussed their commitment to worker and operational safety, and made clear their expectations that safety professionals must work with operational leaders across the organiza-

tion to identify and mitigate SH&E risks to their businesses.

This is where high-level executives see our greatest value, and their expectations should challenge each of us to answer several questions: What am I doing today to move the needle on SH&E risk mitigation? Do operational leaders view me as a valued collaborator with innovative problem-solving abilities and an understanding of internal and external business concerns? Am I a business enabler who can positively influence my organization's direction?

To best answer these questions, we must first understand the business environments in which we operate as well as the challenges our CEOs face. Then, we must work to align SH&E objectives with overall business objectives. This may be integration with FDA/quality issues in a pharmaceutical company, sustainability initiatives at a consumer-products manufacturing site or challenges related to domestic/international supply chains.

Connecting the Dots to Performance

Recall the story of Alcoa CEO Paul O'Neill. When O'Neill began his tenure, Alcoa's safety record was better than the average U.S. company. But he clearly understood the value of keeping workers safe:

If you want to understand how Alcoa is doing, you need to look at our workplace safety figures. If we bring our injury rates down . . . it will be because the individuals at this company have agreed to become part of something important. Safety will be the indicator that we're making progress in changing our habits across the entire institution.

O'Neill recognized that worker safety is an effective platform for changing organizational culture, and that an increased focus on worker safety leads to operational excellence, high productivity, top quality, lower costs and continuous improvement. In other words, he knew that safety is not only the right thing to do, it's also good for business.

Our role is to help our employers similarly connect the dots. Let's take up the challenge as SH&E professionals and ASSE members to help our employers recognize that an emphasis on worker safety creates highly sustainable and profitable organizations that have strong ethical values, high employee morale and solid reputations.

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"Excellence comes from human beings doing things of value that customers find memorable."

Tom Peters

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