

## **The Emerging Role of the Safety Professional, Part 1**

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*By Donald R. Groover, CIH, CSP, Jim Spigener · April 2008*

**The landscape of your career has changed. Yours and other organizations must increasingly rely on effective leadership at all levels to motivate people in new ways.**

Safety professionals have long been the mainstay of EHS performance. Even as methodologies evolve, new tools emerge, and thinking changes, organizations have counted on these practitioners to guide the core of EHS functioning. Still, changes in the business landscape are beginning to change that role. Businesses have moved to flatter organizational models, leaders have less discretionary time, and competition is increasingly global. Whether you are working at a plant site or in a corporate office, the new reality is that what made you successful in the past may not be enough for success in the future. This article is the first in a series on the emerging role of the safety professional in today's business landscape. The series will outline how safety professionals can successfully navigate the issues and opportunities of new business realities for personal, professional, and organizational success. We begin with a look at the new landscape safety professionals must work within, the opportunity these circumstances present, and the major pitfalls that can derail a safety professional's credibility and value in this new environment.

### **The Safety Professional in Today's Organization**

Whether called an industrial hygienist, safety manager, loss prevention engineer, or any of a myriad of other titles, the safety professional's core duty is the prevention of events that cause harm to people, property, or the environment. Traditionally, the safety professional has been viewed as a technical expert who must be proficient in a wide range of methods, controls, and administrative tasks in order to drive safety functioning. There was a time when being a good technician and "safety cop" was sufficient for career success. That is no longer the case. Today, merely applying effective safety controls requires navigating an increasingly complex organizational landscape.

To start, safety professionals must contend with threats to people that exist in greater number and variety than ever before, among them pandemics, terrorism, and on-the-job violence. Within the organization, old, reliable landmarks have shifted—beyond recognition, in some cases. Fewer people must do more work faster and with fewer resources. Technology is moving at light speed. Employees work under less supervision, in flatter organizations, and with responsibility for increasingly complex decisions. The workforce is also aging, and years of downsizing have left a declining manufacturing base and an influx of newer, less-experienced employees at every level. The organizations that survive must not only deal successfully with these problems, but also must do so in an atmosphere of less tolerance for injuries and environmental mistakes and a higher penchant for litigation.

Perhaps the most significant casualty of these developments is the erosion of the traditional relationship between employee and organization. There are no more lifetime jobs. Upward opportunities are more scarce. Benefits have become sources of frustration as employees see pensions disappearing and health care costs either going the same way or becoming prohibitively

expensive. Organizations today must increasingly rely on effective leadership at all levels to motivate people in new ways.

### **Opportunities & Pitfalls**

Certainly, future success is going to demand increased proficiency and savvy. At the same time, this new environment presents safety professionals with a new opportunity: partnering with leadership in enhancing organizational culture and performance. Safety is one business function that allows an organization to demonstrate genuine concern for the well-being of the individual and give life to the ethics that are becoming more important to employee satisfaction. Safety professionals have the skills and ability to help implement processes and technology with reliability and sustainability. In this way, safety professionals position themselves as consultants to the organization and trusted advisors to the line organization and its leaders.

Realizing this level of personal and professional growth means moving beyond the role of the technician toward that of a change agent. While the change agent role involves different skills and knowledge, the process begins with recognizing how the safety professional is currently adding—or undermining—his or her core value to the organization and personal credibility.

There are several traps we have seen safety professionals fall into that are illustrative of the safety professional's role and value and what happens when people fail to realize their influence. The vast majority of people caught in these traps are not doing these things because they lack concern for employees. Instead, they get caught up in the organizational situation and in many cases make decisions under pressure to appear as a “team player.”

- ***Independently deciding resources are unavailable:*** One of the tough questions that needs to be considered by safety professionals and line leadership is to what extent safety professionals should be concerned about, and influenced by, production and profitability targets. For example, not recommending a new initiative to encourage workers to submit safety suggestions because people are “too busy already” compromises the safety professional's personal value and worth to the organization. Effective safety professionals must make risk evaluations and safety strategy recommendations independently of business considerations. It is the professional's job to be proactive in anticipating safety needs and to prepare solutions that fit those needs as they arise.

Clearly, safety professionals need to have a strong case for change, give consideration and thought to the process or system they are recommending, plus have an accurate assessment of the resource requirements. But that is where the obligation needs to end. It is then up to line management to determine whether the organization has the capacity to absorb the change.

- ***Adding layers of complexity:*** *The second issue is almost an antithesis of the first.* This is the situation where the safety professional gives little or no consideration to the organizational structure or its capacity for change. The mindset is that every situation needs to be handled by a new and complex program. The effect becomes more severe in organizations with an increasing employee-to-leader ratio or where employee engagement in safety prevention activities is not possible or is ineffective. A good example of this mindset is treating every exposure type with a similar level of programmatic development, complexity, and detail. The reality is that not all exposures deserve the same level of intervention; while all are important, their potential outcomes differ. An organization that spends as

much time and effort dealing with a situation where the most likely result is a minor injury as it does with exposures that can lead to life altering injuries or fatalities has the beginnings of a problem. Left unchecked, complicated procedures and systems force line leaders to pick and choose what to focus on, compromising the effectiveness and consistency of safety activities.

- ***Insertion into the disciplinary process:*** Another easy trap for safety professionals to fall into is seeing themselves as the people who should decide whether discipline should be administered to a person who violates the rules or procedures. While everyone at the site has an obligation to ensure rules and policies are followed, this doesn't mean it is appropriate for safety professionals to be in the middle of a discipline process. When a safety professional becomes the person in the organization who administers discipline, two things can and often do happen: First, it gives management permission to abdicate its responsibility to enforce the safety policies and rules. Second, this situation strongly positions the safety professional as an advocate for management, versus an advocate and resource for safety.

- ***Failure to investigate and analyze new initiatives and approaches:*** The final trap has to do with how safety professionals think about change. The worst thing that can happen to a safety professional is to become known as the person who thinks only tactically or presents solutions he has not fully investigated. Just because something worked in one location or in one particular situation does not mean that approach is valid or appropriate given your organization's situation, configuration, or desired direction. Leaders serious about improvement will want long-term, proven solutions and will look to your safety expertise for answers. Thinking strategically about how to improve results helps you get a seat at the leadership table.

Effective and credible safety professionals must think beyond problems and issues and learn to recognize problems in the interactions among systems and programs, both within the safety domain and across other business domains. For example, the solution to an ineffective program may not be finding a new one; it may be reconfiguring its interface with the nonsafety business systems that influence it.

### **What's Next?**

Safety professionals have a great deal to offer their organizations. They stand to gain in standing and influence as they assert their expertise in safety and organizational change. The first step is ensuring you are fulfilling your safety role effectively. In the next article in this series, we will discuss the role of safety professional as change agent.

## The Emerging Role of the Safety Professional: Part 2

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By Don Groover, CIH, CSP, Jim Spigener · May 2008

**Become a change agent for your own good and that of your organization.**



As the business landscape continues to change, safety professionals are faced with rethinking their traditional role. Staying relevant as the organization changes means learning how to leverage your knowledge, skills, and experience in new ways. This article, the second in a series on the changing role of the safety professional, presents the case for transitioning from technical expert to change agent and outlines the core competencies of this new role.

### **The Technical Expert Trap**

Safety today is increasingly treated as a business function with tangible business impacts, rather than as a discrete function managed by a handful of people. More organizations are expecting safety thinking and engagement from employees across levels and functions, including senior leaders. Alongside broader engagement, organizations also are identifying a wider scope of systems outside traditional safety silos that influence safety functioning.

These developments, while undoubtedly positive, pose a challenge to safety professionals. Simply put, a wider role for safety in the organization will mean an increased need for strategy and change management expertise and an increased demand for complex information about hazards and the factors that create them. For even the best safety professionals, being pegged as a “technical expert” without strategic capabilities can increasingly limit options and opportunities. Ultimately, it affects the ability to shape EHS functioning within the business.

If you are a technical expert in EHS, the good news is that you already have the skills and knowledge to contribute to safety strategy. The hard part will be gaining fluency in organizational change management and recasting yourself as an agent of change.

### **Core Competencies of a Change Agent**

A change agent is in the business of advancing performance by identifying how to get there and enlisting others in that endeavor. Change agents in safety do not leave their technical expertise behind; they simply leverage it to develop strategies for sustainable, high-level performance. The difference between technical expert and change agent here is akin to the difference between a manager and a leader. One is concerned with the “what” of the safety objective and in executing the particulars, the other with the “how” of the objective and with guiding the strategy.

There are a number of elements that create effective change agents: remaining ever curious, continuous learning, and building fluency in the behavioral sciences, consequence management, exposure recognition and reduction, and other tools for safety improvement. At its core, the

competencies of an effective change agent come down to three things: knowing and maintaining focus on the safety objective, understanding behavior, and understanding culture and safety climate.

#### *Knowing the focus*

As a technical expert, you have a focus on safety that probably has been on the particulars: what hazards exist where and what systems are needed to mitigate them. As a change agent, you need to develop a view of the performance target that is high and broad. The ultimate goal of any safety effort is to reduce exposures. Rather than concentrate only on finding and removing exposures, a high and broad focus looks for how exposures are created by organizational systems and the interactions of people with technology and processes.

Organizations striving to create a zero-injury culture need this view in order to identify previously unknown or underappreciated exposures and to ensure the mechanisms they install are effective at controlling them. By providing this view, you allow your organization to move away from “chasing injuries” to managing risk within the fabric of the business itself.

#### *Understanding behavior*

Safety professionals are often drawn into discussions about behavior: namely, how do we get people to do the right things in the right way? From an on-the-ground perspective, the solution to a safety-related behavior—for example, employees not intervening when they see a peer working at risk—might seem simple. Develop a checklist, put people in a training session, and tell them we expect them to do it. This might work if the only barrier to the behavior was a lack of awareness or feedback skills. As a change agent, however, you need to know exactly what factors are driving this behavior in order to forward the right solution.

A very helpful tool for safety professionals is ABC Analysis, a method that helps decipher what influences organizational behavior. We analyze the behavior by defining an example of it. (For example: “An employee does not stop a co-worker who is about to start grinding without a face shield.”) Talking to employees, we might find that the antecedents (triggers) of this negative behavior are:

- I am afraid it will start a conflict.
- I am too busy.
- The person has more seniority than me.
- They should know better.
- No one else intervenes.
- It is the supervisor’s job.
- The person wouldn’t listen to me anyway.
- I didn’t think they would get hurt.
- I do it the same way.
- I am not really sure how to do this.

These particular antecedents tell us that the triggers are primarily culture and climate. We only find one system issue (lack of skill) and no conditional issues that are triggering the behavior.

The next step is to identify the consequences— defined here as what the person actually receives as consequences, not what we think they are going to get or consequences to the organization. For this

part of the analysis, you can ask, “What’s in it for the person to do this behavior?” The answers could be:

- I avoid conflict.
- I get my work done.
- I don’t look like I am “sucking up” to the boss.
- I stay friends with the person.
- I don’t embarrass myself.
- I could get in trouble.
- I feel guilty if they get hurt.

Consequences vary in power based on timing, consistency, and significance. Consequences that happen quickly after the behavior are more powerful than those that have a delay (sooner versus later). Consequences that are more likely to happen “this time” are more powerful than those that are unlikely (certain versus uncertain). Finally, consequences I view as positive are much more desirable to me than a negative consequence. So consequences that are soon/certain and positive (S/C/+) are more powerful. Here, the analysis might look like:

I avoid conflict S/C/+

I get my work done S/C/+

I don’t look like I am sucking up to the boss S/C/+

I stay friends with the person S/C/+

I don’t embarrass myself S/C/+

Not intervening becomes OK S/C/+

I feel guilty if the person gets hurt L/U/-

I could get into trouble L/U/-

In this instance, there are six very powerful consequences reinforcing the undesired behavior. The “train and tell” approach we might have attempted before the analysis would clearly not produce sustainable improvement. In fact, this analysis suggests that an intervention higher up in the organization, where culture is created, might be more productive. The particulars of your analysis, the nature of antecedents and consequences— and, therefore, the remedy—will change depending on your organization and the behavior you investigate. The point is that when you are able to dig into what shapes a behavior, you gain a better understanding of how to change it.

#### *Understanding culture and safety climate*

Finally, change agents are versed in the organizational factors that shape outcomes. In the ABC analysis above, we gained an insight into how attitudinal, climatic, and cultural factors can have a strong influence on individual behavior. Culture here refers to the shared values and beliefs of an organization. Climate is the prevailing influences on a particular area of functioning (such as safety) at a particular time. One can think of culture as background influence on the organization, while climate is foreground. Climate changes faster than culture, often very quickly after a significant incident. Without significant and conscious effort, however, the underlying culture is likely not to change

sufficiently to prevent further incidents. As the saying goes, “When strategy meets culture, culture eats strategy for breakfast.”

Culture is a creation of leadership. To become an effective change agent, the safety professional must understand the ways in which leaders are shaping culture (through their behaviors, decisions, and influence styles) and what effect that is creating on safety functioning. As a change agent, you must alert leaders when they are taking the short view, challenge a strategy that is not going to deliver sustainable improvement, and provide sound recommendations for how to proceed.

### **Putting the Pieces Together**

Transitioning from technical expert to change agent does not happen overnight; the competencies outlined here take study, practice, and persistence. While there will always be a need for technical expertise, assuming a strategic capability positions you to become an invaluable asset to your organization, enhance your professional satisfaction, and ultimately advance your mission as a safety professional: protecting lives and livelihoods.

## The Emerging Role of the Safety Professional: Part 3

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By Don Groover, CIH, CSP, Jim Spigener · June 2008

### How well do we develop our own and our team's skills, and what can we do better?



The safety professional's primary role is to help the organization move toward an injury-free environment. Transitioning from "technical expert only" to versatile change agent gets us part of the way by helping us reorient ourselves around a bigger-picture view of the causes and influences of safety. This article takes the next step with a look at the heart of the safety professional's activity in the organization: setting—and keeping—improvement mechanisms in motion.

Evolving business realities affect the safety professional's job in very important ways, not least of which is heightening the polarities among resources, profit, and risk management. How we approach new systems and resources will have a direct impact on how well change efforts perform and whether or not we advance the safety profession in a way that makes it not only relevant, but essential, to the organization.

#### Why Method Matters

Becoming a change agent means that we develop a broader view of safety and its causes. We step above a narrow, technical focus in a way that helps us contribute to strategy and make a case for safety's role in the organization beyond mere compliance. So how does this role manifest itself in the actual practice of managing change systems? While our thinking as a change agent becomes more broad, our practice of safety at the implementation level must become more precise. Increasing organizational complexity means change efforts face increased risk for error and, should they fail, heightened potential for damage to the culture and the safety objective. It is critical that we understand and avoid those pitfalls that pertain directly to change systems, chiefly:

#### **Getting intimately involved in the discipline or punishment process for rule or procedure infraction.**

We cannot afford to remain the safety cop or to enable the line to abdicate accountability.

**Advocating or implementing a program because "everyone else is doing it."** We cannot afford to attach our reputation, or the safety of employees, to programs we have not fully vetted for effectiveness or for its alignment with our organization's needs, values, and objectives.

**Being so technically focused that we give the line organization neatly wrapped solutions without regard to culture and behavioral reliability.** We cannot afford to expend resources on solutions that do not match organizational realities and limitations.

To be effective, and remain relevant, the safety professional must look at his or her role from a leadership, rather than managerial, perspective. In addition to identifying effective tools and systems, we must consider how successful those solutions will be given the configuration of our organization's culture, vision, and resources. In other words, we must not only consider the "what" (e.g., this system



for this objective), we must also consider the “how” (e.g., how this system supports our goals and who we are as a company). This mindset informs how we identify, implement, and manage safety systems.

### **Effective Change Management: Five Essential Elements**

As a change agent, the new safety professional must know the focus (exposure reduction), understand behavior, and understand culture and climate. These competencies are the starting point for creating change. The actual work of implementing and managing change efforts requires additional tactical considerations. In our experience, the safety professional who wishes to lead performance must pay attention to five key areas:

1. the organization’s present state,
2. the vision for the change effort,
3. the implementation strategy,
4. organizational resources, and
5. maintaining the organization’s focus on the safety objective.

### **Assessing the Present State**

For a new safety system to be successful, there not only needs to be acceptance of the new way of doing things, but also there must be alignment among behaviors, programs, and systems throughout the organization. Creating this alignment requires that the safety professional develop a clear picture of the landscape he or she is stepping into. The safety professional needs to develop a clear understanding of several key things, including:

**The present state of the culture, namely, what beliefs and values determine how things are done right now in the organization?** How will those beliefs and values help or hinder a new initiative?

**The aspired values of the organization in behavioral terms.** For example, an aspired value of “being a workplace that does not accept injuries” might be stated in behavioral terms as, “ We rigorously look for and address exposures and their causes ahead of injuries.”

## The Emerging Role of the Safety Professional: Part 4

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*By Don Groover, CIH, CSP, Jim Spigener*

### Staying Relevant: Leverage Your Knowledge

In this series we have laid out the emerging challenges that safety professionals are experiencing, the new skills we must possess to operate in this new era, and the challenges we will face if we decide to remain stagnant. Safety is taking a much more central role in the emerging world, but safety professionals who remain rooted in their past successes and approaches may find themselves become less and less relevant. So what is the pathway to success? How do we increase our relevancy? In addition to new skills and knowledge, safety professionals must also become change leaders. To complete this series, we look at how leadership style can help safety professionals become more effective influencers of safety - and organizational - performance.

#### Transformational Leadership Style

Fundamentally a safety professional must have sound management skills. He or she must be able to outline staffing requirements, select the right people into the department or organization, know where to get answers to technical and regulatory questions and be able to lay out a project plan for a new initiative. Yet, in a business landscape of increasing complexity and diversity of demands, safety professionals must also become change leaders.

A change leader generates great enthusiasm and energy within his or her direct reports and those around them, and acts in a way that makes others want to listen and take heed. This is not to say that the safety professional must become a self-centered egomaniac; in fact, he must become just the opposite. Leadership is about a person's ability to give people a sense of purpose and understanding regarding the work they do and moving people to action.

James Macgregor Burns coined the phrase "transformational leadership" in 1978 to describe just these qualities. Burns defined this leadership style as "inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations, the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations - of both leaders and followers." Since then transformational leadership has become a well studied and documented leadership style. Transformational leaders have been shown to:

- Lead work groups that are consistently rated as more productive and flexible.
- Contribute more leaders into the pipeline.
- Attract and retain desirable people to the organization.
- Score higher in safety leadership best practice scores.

Transformational leadership can be understood as having four defining characteristics or dimensions. They include:

- **Challenging:** The leader provides subordinates with a flow of challenging new ideas aimed at stimulating them to rethink old ways of doing things. He or she challenges dysfunctional paradigms and promotes rationality and careful problem solving. Behavioral examples of intellectual stimulation include: Encouraging followers not to think like him, creating a

"readiness" for changes in thinking, encouraging a broad range of interests, and putting forth or entertaining seemingly foolish ideas.

- **Engaging:** The leader helps others commit to the desired direction. She coaches, mentors, provides feedback and personal attention as needed, and links the individual's needs to the organization's mission. Behavioral examples include: creating strategies for continuous improvement, promoting self-development, encouraging others to take initiative, and coaching and counseling.
- **Inspiring:** The leader sets high standards and communicates about objectives enthusiastically. He articulates a compelling vision and communicates confidence about achieving the vision. Behavioral examples include: helping followers achieve levels of performance beyond what they felt possible, demonstrating self-determination and commitment to reaching goals, expressing optimism about goal attainment, and arousing in followers emotional acceptance of challenges.
- **Influencing:** The leader builds a sense of "mission-beyond-self-interest" and a commitment to the vision. She gains the confidence, respect, and trust of others, considers the ethical consequences of her decisions, appeals to others' most important values and beliefs, and instills pride. Behavioral examples of influence include: engendering trust in the leader's ability to overcome a crisis, acting as a role model, sacrificing self-gain for the gain of others, and creating a sense of joint mission and ownership.

Transformational leadership is not mysterious. It is comprised of observable behaviors and its effect can be measured through discussions with people who are in contact with the leader.

### **Becoming a Transformational Leader**

Transformational leadership creates a will to go above and beyond self interest within the organization. The challenge for safety professionals is learning how to direct that will toward an investment in safety, in other words, learning how to tie a transformational style to safety practices. To illustrate how leadership style can influence best practices, let's use examples of two well known leadership best practices: credibility and collaboration.

**Transformational Credibility** - Credibility as a safety leadership practice describes a person's willingness to admit mistakes to self and others, give honest information about safety performance even if it is not well received, and follow through on safety-related commitments, among other elements. To illustrate how to leverage credibility behaviors using a transformational style, we will look at the credibility behavior of giving honest safety performance information.

Many organizations suffer from spending too much time on low energy/low potential events. Leaders will discuss every OSHA recordable equally, an incident with high potential for severe injury (such as a near miss associated with a failure in the lock out, tag out system,) will get the same level of attention as an incident with low potential for serious injury (such as dust in the eye.) While someone getting dust in the eye is important, its potential for life-altering injury is extremely low. A safety professional who points out this apparent inconsistency, and advocates for a change in how events are prioritized, adds to her credibility.

One could approach this task in a number of different ways, but the most powerful and influential way would be to use the challenge dimension of transformational style. For example, you could set up a

group discussion with the people you want to influence and ask them to consider why events are handled the way they are. Instead of telling people how they need to think about the issue, a transformational safety professional would engage others in a conversation, posing questions such as: what message are we sending when senior leaders spend as much of their time on low energy and low potential events as high potential events?

**Transformational Collaboration** - Collaboration as a safety leadership practice is about promoting cooperation and teamwork, asking for and encouraging input from people on safety issues that will affect them, and seeking out and listening to diverse points of view regarding safety. Collaboration behaviors are often most called for in changing direction. Change is difficult and people are generally comfortable with the status quo, unless there is an extremely compelling reason for change. New directions are made easier if people are engaged in the process and contributing to decisions along the way. The safety professional who gets into the field and seeks input and feedback from the people he depends on to implement the change is more successful and sets the stage for success.

Collaboration in decision making should not be confused with consensus, which is a process by which a group comes to a joint decision. With collaboration, the leader still owns the responsibility for making the decision, but seeks others' input before deciding. Practicing collaboration behaviors using a transformational style might take the form of using the engaging dimension mentioned earlier. When a decision or initiative allows time for input, the safety professional can approach the decision by soliciting input in a way that encourages others to take initiative in identifying solutions, rather than providing a set of options for them to choose from.

The safety professional might also coach others to take on new roles within the new initiative, thereby giving people a more personal way to buy in to and support the change.

### **Exciting Times**

An increasingly large body of research shows that excellence in safety performance correlates with excellence in other performance metrics such as productivity, profitability, quality and customer service. Work place demographics are changing, with employee populations growing more diverse in background, belief, and geography. So too are business practices and norms. A focus on culture and safety climate, and on developing safety leadership skills at all levels, can provide a surer path to success and sustainability than any single new program.

These truly are exciting and changing times. For safety professionals who grab the reins and develop transformational leadership skills and continue to personally challenge their level of understanding and beliefs, there will be greater opportunities and with it a much more rewarding job. Finally, by working on these attributes and skills the safety professional will remain a relevant and welcome member at the table with other senior executives.

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