

## **Advancing Your Career: What Companies are Demanding of Their EH&S Professionals**

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### **Introduction**

As our economy becomes more global and the world seemingly smaller, what must an EH&S Professional do today to prepare to be/remain a leader tomorrow?

This paper will provide information and feedback derived from hiring managers, current safety leaders, job postings and other sources to try to establish a path to leadership. It will cover why it is important to have a plan, help you determine where your starting point is, give direction to resources available to expand your knowledge and skill sets, and provide insight into how to position yourself for success.

### **Do You Have A Plan?**

I have had many professionals ask me, “Why should I develop a plan to advance my career?” They will go on to ask, “Won’t that just happen by proving my value to my organization through performance and gaining experience?”

In short, NO! Jumping in your car and driving as far or as fast as you can until you run out of gas, or money to buy gas, is not the way you would plan a trip with a specific destination in mind.

Think of your career as a long journey. When we plan a trip, we know our starting point and we know our destination. What are the chances of success of reaching our destination, in the time we want to reach it, if we do not look at a map and plan the route? Slim to none. What we do is plan out the trip, what highways we will take, where we stop for the night, and what we might want to stop and see along the way.

Why would your career be any different? I like to say there are three types of people: Those who lead and make things happen; those who follow and have things happen to them; and those who just wonder what the heck happened.

Most people will fall into the middle group. People in the last group would not be attending a conference such as this. If you want to be in the first group, you need to prepare. You need to know what will be required of you. You need to know your role on the team. You need to have a clear and honest understanding of what your skills are today and what you need to do to put yourself in a position to take advantage of opportunities when they are presented to you. I will tell you this, in the real world, opportunity does not come knocking. It very often is just sitting in front of us and we either do not see it, or are unprepared to grab it.

By laying out your career map you will always be in a position to **Expand Your Knowledge, Experience and Value.**

When your organization sees you as a value to the company, defining value as ROI exceeding expectations, you will have created the highest possible level of job security. It will also position you to take advantage of **Advancement Opportunities** with your current employer, sometimes even prior to your knowing those opportunities exist.

If you have become a high-value employee, word will also get out to other organizations who are seeking the best of the best, which can result in opportunities coming directly to you. You can view these as new routes being opened to reach your destination. Do not be shy about taking a look. You may have found a new superhighway to your destination. You may also have found the proverbial “short-cut” that will result in a much longer trip. But if you refuse to look, you will never know which one it is.

Your route should also include plans to handle detours and other unexpected changes along the way. In career planning terms, we are referring to performing an Active Job Search. Chances are, this will happen to us at least once during our careers, whether the circumstances are voluntary or involuntary.

## **Are You Prepared?**

Of course, the starting point of any journey is to first determine what you already have to start your trip and what you will need to get either before you start, or pick up along the way. This requires being absolutely honest with yourself to determine what your knowledge and skill level is today. Suffice it to say that advancement is dependent upon two factors simultaneously arriving. One, the opportunity presenting itself meets two, your ability to fulfill the needs of that opportunity. You do not have control over when the opportunity will present itself, therefore, you must be ready to fulfill its requirements when it does.

Because the group here today has a wide diversity of starting points, I am going to use a broad brush to paint what is needed from the start of a career to the leadership roles of tomorrow. You need to assess for yourself where your current starting point is.

The first question to ask is, “Do I have the education requirements to get to the next level?” While many of today’s safety professionals chose this focus while in college and have their bachelor’s in one of the EH&S disciplines offered, many other safety professionals first arrived in a safety function without having gone through a formal education process. They were picked and promoted from the rank and file demonstrating a certain aptitude for EH&S in their former

positions. Even with 20 years experience, however, this is not going to be good enough to advance to leadership roles. Virtually every leadership role today requires either a 4-year degree or at a minimum a 2-year degree supported by a professional certification. If you do not have a degree, get it. There are no excuses. With the availability today of on-line courses, you can study at your speed, on your time.

Once you have your basic degree, you should then be concentrating on separating yourself further from the masses. Get yourself certified. There are, of course, several valuable certifications to choose from, CSP, CIH, CHMM just to mention a few. More and more companies are moving the certifications from the “Preferred” section of their job descriptions to the “Required” section. One reason for this is the number of people who have been certified and companies who are seeking the best are saying “Okay, you may have studied the body of knowledge but show me you know it.” Certifications demonstrate you know it.

Once again, to step even further out to the front of the profession, get your Master’s in safety or other more general business discipline.

The next question to ask is “Do I have the experience necessary to get to the next level?” Again, you need to be honest with yourself. Experience matters. For senior management to consider you for advancement, they need to be comfortable with the track record you have accomplished. You need to master the duties of your current role to be in a position to advance to the next level

Have you been the force behind the success, or have you been the beneficiary of an overall good environment?

Of course, education and experience in EH&S is not the end all. How many EH&S professionals see their role as to provide the safest environment possible for their area of responsibility? How many see their role as to find a way for their area of responsibility to be as profitable as possible? The correct answer is the latter because without profits, there will be no employees to keep safe.

To advance to leadership roles, you will need to be perceived as a business partner, not just the Safety Cop. What does that mean? Beyond the obvious of developing the technical expertise of your function, you will need to broaden your knowledge beyond safety to other areas of business. Your experience cannot be limited to minimizing hazardous exposures and reducing your incidence rates; after all, that is what is expected of you. You must learn as much as possible about:

- Your company. What is its business? How does it make a profit? Who are its competitors? Who are its customers? What is the current financial situation and forecast of the company and/or industry?
- Your facility or business unit. What are its production goals? What are the pressure points for senior management? What is the facility/unit’s current financial position?
- Your individual customers. What is the current culture? What is the perception of you or your function among them?

You should develop a basic understanding of financial statements, especially if you work for a publicly traded corporation. If you can equip yourself with at least a basic understanding of the budgetary constraints facing your customers, you will be in a better position to provide solutions that not only can advance your agenda, but theirs as well.

While it would seem that the normal arguments of hazard avoidance, such as “no one wants to see an employee injured”; “everyone should go home in the condition they arrived to work in”; or, “it’s just the right thing to do”; “this will reduce our IR” etc. are honorable and true, what gets business leader attention is the money. You need to know how, in financial terms, adopting your proposals will either help them make money, or at least save them money.

You need to understand the cost to the business of the injured worker. Some costs are obvious, i.e. medical treatment, paid leave, etc. Some are less obvious, i.e. effect on experience ratings, TPA administration costs, productivity/replacement loss. While others are practically hidden altogether, i.e. the effect on basic health plans, other sick time.

The skill sets needed for success tomorrow incorporate both safety and non-safety knowledge and expertise. These skills include, but certainly are not limited to:

- Education
- Certifications (CSP, CIH, OHST, CHST, CPE, ARM, PHR etc)
- Behavior Based Safety
- Value Added Safety
- Lean Manufacturing
- Six Sigma
- Financial Management
- Personal Leadership
- OSHA standards
- Ergonomics
- Risk Management
- MERSA
- Worker’s Compensation
- Return to Work/Light Duty
- Ability to make safety easy to understand
- Demonstrate safety is not a cost but an investment with a tangible ROI

## **Advancing Your Agenda**

Now that you have everything you need to advance your career, the question becomes can you get senior management to see it?

As Safety Professionals, the reasons for adopting programs we are putting forward are clear, crystal clear. We did the analysis. We ran the numbers. All we need to do is present the facts, and let the facts speak for themselves. Anyone with a drop of common sense should see the logic behind our suggestions. Correct?

Wrong!

I will bet that most of you did not expect to need sales skills when you entered this profession. Those of you who have already advanced to and achieved leadership roles have developed these skills and understand how important they are. You need to SELL your programs to management, peers, rank and file, unions, etc.

One of the biggest mistakes any professional makes is assuming people have common sense. This is not a commentary on the general intelligence of our non-safety colleagues; it is a statement on the fact that common sense is based on common knowledge. Without common knowledge, there can be no common sense. Therefore, when you are speaking with a non-safety professional who does at least share a portion of your knowledge and experience, what appears to be common sense to you is absolutely foreign to them.

If you are going to travel to Germany to sell something, would you expect your customer to have an excellent command of the English language or would it be better if you learned to speak German? Likewise, you cannot expect to speak to non-safety colleagues using safety jargon.

You need to become multi-lingual. You need to speak the languages of your senior management, non-safety peers and the rank and file. You need to express to them, in terminology that will ring in their ears, the value your programs represent to them.

If you are going to sell programs to senior management, you need to speak in terms of money. How will doing this, or not doing this, affect the bottom line? The money can be in terms of fines and penalties, lost time, health care, productivity gains or losses, but it must be in financial terms. You also need to build in the best case scenario and worst case scenario because reality will fall somewhere in-between.

In speaking with your non-safety peers, you need to know what their trigger points are and what will get their attention. This will vary from function to function and business unit to business unit.

In speaking with rank and file, their concerns are generally getting out of work as soon as possible, with the least amount of effort. Is it not true that many, if not most, injuries are caused by someone trying to circumvent procedure in order to “get it done easier or faster, etc.”?

Do you possess credibility when you speak? Are you called upon by others to help them build safety into a process, or are you called upon only when tragedy strikes and then expected to fix it? Are you seen as someone who walks the walk? Are you ALWAYS using your PPE? Do you deliver on the expectations set for you? If not, selling your programs will be near impossible, no matter what language you speak.

Remember when Ronald Reagan asked a simple question, “Are you better of know than you were four years ago?” You need to ask yourself the same question regarding your employer, “In regards to my performance, is my company better off now than they were before I was in this role?” If the answer is yes, you may need to site specific accomplishments to advance your agenda. If the answer is no, you will lack credibility and not be in a position to advance anything. As a matter of fact, that may be an indication that you should start looking for a more suitable environment to join.

## Moving On

There comes a point in time when ALL things come to an end, not just the good things. In today's economy, one must always be prepared. Change can be voluntary or forced upon you, but change will happen.

The good news is this is always an opportunity. You always have options and you need to explore all of them. I am certain; many Safety professionals became entrepreneurs and established their own businesses following the loss of their traditional employment. Others have found their way to bigger roles in new companies, sometimes in new locations. It is also true that others, unfortunately, never recover. However, leaders lead and make things happen.

Always keep your resume up to date. In addition to the traditional information regarding your duties and responsibilities, it must contain your accomplishments. Let's face it, if I was to compare resumes of ten Safety Managers from ten manufacturing plants, the responsibilities would all be roughly the same. What you were responsible for will never set you apart from the crowd.

Two things will set you apart. What you did with those responsibilities and how you present those accomplishments. It is not good enough to simply list an accomplishment as "IR dropped from 3.4 to 2.5" or "Worker's Comp costs reduced by 18%." You also need to provide some guidance as to how you did it.

I asked earlier, "Have you been the force behind the success, or have you been the beneficiary of an overall good environment?" A prospective employer wants to know that the accomplishments you list were achieved as a result of your leadership and not that you were in seat and benefitted from the work of your predecessor. To address this, you need to give them a flavor of the "how you did it."

You are not bragging when you do this. You also do not diminish the fact that the accomplishment was achieved through the performance of the team. The question is, would the team have achieved that goal whether you were there or not?

Other key points to be aware of:

- Never lie on your resume
- Have all significant employment gaps explained
- Be prepared to handle your shortfalls with confidence.