

Business Lessons for the SH&E Professional

**Mark D. Hansen, CSP, PE, CPEA, CPE
Vice President, Environmental & Safety
Range Resources Corporation
Ft. Worth, TX**

Introduction

Far too often I run into SH&E professionals who simply lack the big picture of how we fit into the business. I know our jobs are altruistic, but if management doesn't see us as business people, we will always be labeled as the SH&E "geek," and nothing more. That is why I suggest writing a mission and vision statement with support objective that link into the company's mission, vision and objectives. Further from that is being a business person who understands SH&E. If we can demonstrate how we bring the two together, we become an added value to the business team. So what you see that follows are ways to demonstrate your business value to the company and lessons I have learned over the years.

It's Not Personal ... It's Just Business

Seeing things not for what they are but for what they might be creates opportunities. It's easy to take a great performer and keep it performing, it is quite another to take a poor performer and turn it into a good or great performer. Taking a poor performer and turning it around can make a statement for your career. Get the reputation of a turnaround artist and you will never go begging during your career. Getting the reputation of making lemonade out of lemons and people will want to follow you your whole career.

Never be afraid to state your true worth. When someone asks what you are worth, be able to state with confidence, and based on performance, what your true worth really is. Many are shy in stating their worth and as a result they never really demonstrate their value to the organization. It may sound arrogant, but if you couch it in terms of value to the organization people will see what you bring to the bargaining table.

You're the one in charge of your learning curve. When you are given a new assignment or you take a new job, no one is going to learn the new system but you. If you dive in and learn all the issues in the new job or assignment you demonstrate the quick study you are and that you have become integrated into the team.

When it comes to assessing people, don't always believe what you hear; form your own opinion. When you hear what others have to say about the new addition to your team, your new boss or the new CFO, don't rely on what someone else says about them. Oftentimes, it is mere personality conflicts that some people don't get along. Since your personality is different, perhaps

you won't have the same problems as others. Give it a try, you may be surprised at how well you get along with the new person that you were told was one massacre short of Attila the Hun.

The key to mastering a new job is finding a mentor. Whether it is a professional mentor or a company mentor, a mentor can help you through learning the ropes of how things get done in the most efficient manner. A mentor can help you learn in the informal network of getting things done and help you avoid the land mines and pathways around the hurdles that people put in place.

Don't mistake asking questions for ignorance; asking questions often shows that you know what you're doing. Many take questions as a personal affront to their abilities, when in reality the questions are being asked to get an understanding of how business is being conducted. Don't take it personal, they are just trying to learn your method of conducting your job. They just may be able to help you do it better.

The key to a good presentation is to keep from getting caught up in the bells and whistles and cut to the chase. We, as SH&E professionals, tend to overload decision-makers with data because we don't know how to couch our arguments succinctly. Try to develop a memo on three-quarters of a page rather than five pages. Avoid the thirty-page document if possible. If you can't shorten the data, craft a one-page executive summary. When you can, develop a graph that is easy to understand that communicates thirty pages of data in a compelling form to clearly and succinctly explain your argument. Remember, details are for backup only.

You need a strong sense of self-image to manage a weak boss. A weak boss will manage you to failure and as a result you will take the heat for organizational weaknesses. A weak boss may also attack you for failures that he/she should have dealt with, but didn't because they don't have the business acumen to convince peer management. That is yet another reason to pick your bosses carefully.

Get an up-close and personal reading on your new boss. That means listening more than talking, asking other subordinates, asking people outside the company, but most importantly learning from your own interaction. Identify your boss's strengths and weaknesses, demeanor, when are the best time to bring good news and bad news to them. Watch, listen, take notes, and learn how to best interact with your boss. It could mean the difference between success and failure.

Have clear goals that your boss understands. We all need to have business goals, but when our goals are different from the one we have been given from our boss, trouble ensues. Make sure your goals are clear, that is, written down. That is a good reminder, everyday, when times are difficult, when we are conflicted between competing goals. Make sure you are on the same page as your boss.

Always anticipate your next move. Keep an eye on the organization and think about the possibilities if things go well and when they don't. Be prepared when opportunity prevails and standing in the wings when things fall apart. Keep a confidential plan and review it frequently and modify it when necessary.

Be prepared to defend your turf. When reorganizations occur, rightsizing, downsizing, whatever, when part of your turf gets allocated elsewhere, that's a bad sign. Defend all your disciplines. If you don't, your half-life as a manager just expired.

Have a base level of good performance to fall back on. We all have bad days, life happens. But when you do, it is less painful when you have performed to date, rather than snuck in just below the radar.

There is no room for emotion in business. There's no crying in baseball or business. No matter how emotional you get in meetings or confrontations, keep your emotions to yourself.

In the absence of trust, even the most generous act seems questionable. This is a two-way street. It can happen because of you or from the people you deal with. When people have been mean and difficult to deal with, then they are suddenly nice to you, suspicions begin to mount as to motive.

Never use your title as the sole answer to a question. I have seen all too often when asked a particularly probing question when the reply was, "I'm the SH&E Director!" My reply is, "So what!" Just answer the question. This is usually a defensive response to sidestep the question, hoping you will be intimidated and move on. Don't fall for it.

If your boss is a bully, you're probably stronger than he/she is. If your boss is mean and nasty and manages by volume, then just understand that this too shall pass and just try to minimize the damage to your career.

It is appropriate to go over your boss's head when he/she is managing to fail. However, you had better focus on the impact to the company and not make it personal or emotional. Get all the details down and present your case in a strong, succinct, clear, and unemotional way.

When someone hands you an opportunity, don't be afraid to take it. SH&E professionals often avoid risks in business because as professionals, our goal is to minimize the risk at work. It is often difficult to switch gears from not taking risks to taking risks. It is difficult to learn that taking a business risk to improve the workplace is a good thing. Don't be afraid to take an opportunity when it presents itself; it may just further your career.

Never forget that today's janitor could be tomorrow's manager. I have seen where companies require young professionals to rotate between business units so that one day they can manage the whole company. If you treat them poorly, trust me, they will remember it.

You might have the title, salary, car, perks, etc., but you don't have the job until you've proven yourself. Regardless of where you are in the organization, where you've been promoted to, you still have to prove yourself the old-fashioned way. You have to earn it. That means paying your dues at each level.

Take the time to get to know every one of your employees. Your employees will go to the ends of the earth for you if you get to know them as people first and employees second. When an employee goes into the hospital, do you make sure all the benefits are taken care of so the spouse isn't worrying about the paycheck issues, or are you worried about replacing the employee? Your organization knows where you fall on this issue, and it indicates the kind of organization you run.

Once you're the boss, you don't need to know all the answers, just where to find them. How often do people come into your office with problems expecting you to fix them? What do you do? How about turning the question around and asking, "What do you think you need to do?" Make them think it through. Make them come up with the answer. They don't need to check their brain at the door. Make them contribute to the solution.

Showing authority can be as simple as doing what needs to be done. When you have a bad employee that needs to be disciplined or fired, do it. That will build the morale of the organization. They will see that you want to protect them from bad apples. There's an old saying, when no one gets along with Bob, perhaps Bob is the problem. Deal with it in a timely manner or your organization will suffer, sometimes dramatically.

If you make a mistake, don't make excuses and don't be afraid to ask for help. We all make mistakes, but the ones that don't own up to it lose the luster to their reputation. Owning up to your mistakes is hard; blaming others is easy but is far more damaging in the long run.

A bad apple with a bad attitude can compromise the team. When you have a cancer in your organization, you must cut it out quickly, or it will infect the whole group and possibly destroy the cohesiveness of the group.

Winning isn't everything; *how* you win counts just as much. Winning and taking the high road is a great path, winning and taking the, "I told you so," low road can build more enemies than goodwill.

Good Employee Rules

If one wins, the whole team wins. When one person shines, the whole team shines. We are all in this together. Celebrate individual successes that build the team up.

Everyone has to appreciate everyone else's job. One person may be the Industrial Hygienist, another the Emergency Response Coordinator and another the SH&E Professional. All three have different roles, equally important to the organization and all must be equally appreciated. This builds camaraderie and esprit d' corps. This is what builds momentum. Keep it up and there is nothing you can't accomplish.

Be in the know. Know what's going on in the office, in the field office, in your discipline, including emerging technology and regulatory trends.

You've got to want to be there. This is the proverbial "fire in the belly" fashion. When you lose the passion, quit and find something you do enjoy or retire. Otherwise you will be a drag on your team.

Bring a solution, not a problem. All too often employees bring only problems to be solved by management. Make a habit of bringing a problem wrapped in at least one or two candidate solutions.

Make a decision, and stand by it. Some people would rather die than make a decision and when they do, they vacillate between to options, waiting for a majority vote. Make a decision and stick to it. If it needs to be modified down the road, make the adjustments and keep moving.

Become an expert in your field. Keep learning. I've heard people say, "I know everything about ...". Learn everything you possibly can about your field. Be the expert.

Your Commitment to Profits

As SH&E professionals we should be committed to making money for the company. For us this means minimizing losses as well as how we spend the money the company has allocated to us in our budgets. Every dollar counts. We can either use it wisely or spend it foolishly. The choice is ours. Our superiors will come to understand quickly just how we view the company's money. Do we treat it as if it is our own or spend it freely? Is it a valued resource or something we need to spend before we lose it?

What does, "the best," mean? Are we satisfied with the status quo or are we willing to be the best and make our company the best at what they do? Are we just putting in our time or are we relentlessly pursuing our vision? Answering these questions through our actions tells the whole story to our peers and superiors regarding the kind of businessperson we are.

Never apologize for focusing on profits. What? We are SH&E professionals, how can we focus on profits? Every dime we spend in our budget is a cost. Every dime that we give back to the company goes to company profits. For example, does everybody really need a top of the line color printer where the life cycle cartridge costs far exceed the printer costs? Why not have a network printer for every group of five to ten employees? After all, how many color copies do we really need on a daily basis? If you want to share with other departments, that is a possibility as well, as long as they pay as they go. When you negotiate items which are in your budget, work the vendors. If you are buying bunker gear, negotiate the best possible deal, getting vendors to compete. The rationale is simple; you want them to make a profit, you just don't want them retiring on your order.

Strategic versus non-strategic costs. Anything that contributes to the bottom line is strategic costs. Strategic costs are those that improve the bottom line, such as conducting internal Phase I Environmental Site Assessments before buying/selling properties, and implementing automated/semi-automated systems that improve safety and productivity. Any other costs are non-strategic costs. Our goal is to eliminate non-strategic costs such as, rent, consultants, computer-related equipment, office supplies, etc.

Don't over-quantify things. We as SH&E professionals tend to overquantify everything down to the gnat's eyelash when a more general quantification will do. Don't over-engineer your costs. In business we rarely know the exact cost, because sometimes it is a moving target. Be satisfied with understanding the costs that you can identify. It may take too much time to understand the exact cost in a business where minutes count. Further, don't quantify things you already know or that add no value.

Don't over- or under-delegate. This is a delicate balance. Good managers do 1% of the work but add 50% of the value to the organization. Weak managers study their business in detail

and manage their business in general. Good managers study their business and manage the important details.

Strategic vs. non-strategic time. Anything that contributes your goals and profits is strategic time. Non-strategic time is everything else. Our goal is to focus on the future.

Every cost is up for grabs. Every year that you use the same contractor or vendor without going to bid, you risk experiencing a phenomenon that can be called “corporate creep.” Every year a vendor increases rates and fees based on the cost of doing business and inflation. The result is that you pay more for the same product or service. Scrutinize those invoices and compare them to last year’s and make sure you aren’t getting caught in this negative effect. Better yet, go to bid frequently to prevent the “corporate creep” from occurring.

Cut costs first, ask questions later. When you think your budget is being eaten up by a black hole, cut things you don’t need and cut deeper than you think you need to cut. Many of the things you think they will gripe about missing won’t surface. On the things they really want, they will come to you and ask and justify the reasons they need it.

Dealing with Employees

If you never fire employees, you can’t have an excellent business. There are those who would prefer to coast until retirement, merely warming a seat and not pushing the envelope as a SH&E professional. Those that are marginal and poor performers need to be informed of the expectations of the job. Many believe employment itself is an entitlement. When you fire them for performance, it fires up the other performers on the team knowing that you expect and demand their best. For the non-performers, you either fire up them up or they update their resume waiting for the other shoe to drop or put their resume on the street. Either way you are pushing excellence.

Setting salaries. Pay should be connected to performance, not seniority. For employees with greater impact on the bottom line, their salaries reflect that value. If you see a superior value, recognize it and reward it. When hiring a SH&E professional, a particular applicant was working in a position that was less than his value. When making an offer, we based it on his worth, rather than his current salary. He interviewed with a competitor who make an offer based on his previous salary. Obviously, he accepted our offer. This was a great way to start off with implied respect and loyalty before the first day of work.

Never give regular bonuses. A second to retiring-in-place job salary entitlements is regular bonuses. Employees come to expect bonuses if you give them every year rather than based on performance. If they don’t get them every year, they know it is because of performance. Don’t get caught in the reap of regular bonuses. It is hard to wean employees off the entitlement expectation.

Motivating employees. In the end, you should provide a creative and forward-looking work environment. One of the best ways to ensure motivation is that employees can stick with you, work hard, learn a lot, have fun and be well paid.

Run lean and mean. When hiring employees, make sure you are at least six months behind the manpower curve. It takes a lot of time and effort to hire people. It is truly painful. However,

even more painful is laying off employees when the business wanes where there is no other choice. Make sure the demand is there before you man-up.

Close the outside contractor loop. Consider performing tasks in-house rather than contracting them out. One sure fire way to save on budget is to make your staff do the tasks they are competent at doing rather than paying millions of dollars for contractors to do it. It gets your employees closer to the day-to-day business and saves money at the same time.

Conclusion

Well, there you have it. I've included some methods to focus on the business and look for opportunities to leverage SH&E, and implement SH&E while being cost conscious from contractors to employees. Perhaps these principles have opened your eyes to learn more business principles. I suggest reading business books, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Investor's Business Daily*, the business section of your local newspaper, and books about financial statements. Just reading the front pages of newspapers that are free on the Internet is a great start and tutorial to begin expanding your business horizons.

Further Reading

Fifer, B. *Double Your Profits in 6 Months or Less*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishing, 1995.