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Six Steps beyond the Yellow Brick Road: A Successful Journey for the Safety Professional

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In Frank Baum's classic "The Wizard of Oz," each of the three major characters is in search of an attribute. It was not a character flaw as much as a missing component that could in, each of their minds, make each of them "real." .If you remember the movie, these attributes consisted of a heart, a brain, and courage. Baum may have not intended these qualities to be interpreted as attributes needed by the EHS professional for success on the road to safety excellence. But the safety professional's needs are similar. He must have:

- A passion for safety and the profession.
- A thought leader to develop a plan focused on safety excellence
- The courage to execute the plan in spite of obstacles and bumps in the road like the wicked witches.

Organizational Excellence

Passion, courage and thought leadership should be desirable not only to the safety professional but also to all members of an organization. These attributes are considered desirable traits for any employee. Top management should posses these traits and many others. To embrace these traits may involve culture change. The idea of culture change with respect to safety has been written about in the safety literature for the past several decades. If companies have not discovered the importance of a pro-active safety culture they have no one to blame but themselves.

Complacency is the enemy

Imperial Sugar discovered the cost of complacency the hard way on February 7, 2008. On that date around 7:15 p.m., apparently an overheated bearing ignited sugar dust in Imperial's refinery in Port Wentworth, Georgia. It caused a series of dust-fueled explosions along the length of the facility's conveyor. The blasts and fire destroyed much of the facility and killed fourteen employees and injured dozens. The property loss was estimated at $275 million. It is impossible to estimate the cost of the fourteen lives lost.

The U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) cited poor maintenance, housekeeping, and equipment design as factors in the catastrophe and described the event as "entirely preventable." The Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued $8.7 million in fines to Imperial Sugar for numerous "willful" violations.

The NFPA Journal article published in March/April 2010 refers to Ron Allen, Senior Director for Environmental Health, Safety, and Quality for Imperial Sugar, as a "change agent." Guy Colonna, NFPA division manager for Industrial and Chemical Engineering, said, "Among safety professionals, changing a safety culture of an organization is commonly recognized as one of the biggest challenges for a safety program." Allen says it helps to think like a dance instructor. "Everyone thinks they know how to dance, but to dance well takes practice. I've had to make sure that everyone learns the lessons and keeps practicing," said Allen.

Dorothy- the great leader on the road to Oz

Based on the Imperial Sugar event we need a change agent to avoid/prevent a similar occurrence. A key component to accomplish change as it relates to safety and the safety culture is a leader or high-level, effective facilitator. On the road to Oz, Dorothy was that leader, played beautifully by the late Judy Garland. Throughout the journey Dorothy apparently thought the Wizard would be able to lead her home. In reality all she needed to do was click her heels together and say, "There's no place like home". If she had done that along the yellow brick road, she would not have accomplished her apparent task of leader of the group to Oz. Her journey would have ended and she would not have seen Oz or the Wizard.

Dorothy as CEO

In the line notes on the cover of their recent business research publication titled "Great by Choice," Jim Collins and Morten T. Hansen state one of the outcomes of the research indicated that innovation by itself turns out not to be a trump card in a chaotic or uncertain world; more important is the ability to combine innovation with discipline. The research allowed the authors to compare the characteristics and behaviors of leaders of seven companies who outperformed their competition and the stock market by at least 10 times based on stock value.

The three core behaviors of the leadership of these companies were:

- Fanatic discipline
- Empirical creativity
- Productive paranoia
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Along with a high level of ambition. These are defined as follows:

Discipline – in essence is consistency of action with values, long term goals, performance standards, and methods.

Empirical creativity– relies on direct observation, conducting practical experiments, and/or engaging directly with evidence rather than relying on opinion, whim, or untested ideas.

Paranoid behavior –is enormously functional if fear is channeled into extensive preparation and calm, clear headed action – productive paranoia.

These are combined to achieve something great, according to the authors. In effect Dorothy used all three to accomplish her task. She was consistent in action with a long-term goal, relied on direct observation, and used clear headed action to get to Oz in spite of uncertainty. The safety professional must embrace these same behaviors to be successful or settle for mediocrity. Collins and Hansen found that the "signature of mediocrity is not an unwillingness to change; the signature of mediocrity is chronic inconsistency." Safety programs that are not consistent in their values and direction are doomed for mediocrity.

What else does the safety professional need to do to get to excellence?

One way to get beyond average is to embrace a process that will enable the safety or EHS process to get to the next level. Compliance should be the minimum for safety. Getting to world class or at least best-in-class should be the ultimate goal. The use of a system that will identify the business risks and control or minimize these risks not only reduces the cost of risk but also prevents injuries and illnesses, as well as incidents. Operational Risk Management is a suggested method to accomplish this goal.

The ORM Process

ORM is a continuous process designed to identify, assess, and control risk while enhancing business performance and maximizing business goals and objectives. ORM provides a basic structure for the identification, assessment and the control of risk. Individuals/employees at all levels are trained to identify and control risks in the ORM process. The traditional four or five step methods for risk management have frequently taken steps 3 and 4 of the ORM and combined them into one step.

Six Step Process of Operational Risk Management

1. Identify the Hazard. A hazard can be identified as any actual or potential condition or action that can cause downgrading of an operation or task. These downgrading incidents can include injury, illness, and damage of property, equipment, the environment or material.

   Risk is defined as the probability and severity of loss from exposure to the hazard. The assessment step is the application of either qualitative or quantitative measures to determine the level of risk associated with a specific hazard. This process defines the probability and severity of an incident that could result from the hazard based upon the exposure of personnel, equipment, materials and the environment to that hazard.

2. Analyze Risk Control Measures. Investigate specific strategies and tools that reduce, mitigate, or eliminate the risk. Effective control measures can reduce or eliminate one of the three components, probability, severity or exposure of risk.

3. Make Control Measures. Decision makers at the appropriate level chose the best control or combination of controls based on the analysis of overall costs and benefits.

4. Implement Risk Control measures. Once the control strategies have been selected, an implementation strategy needs to be developed and then applied by management and the entire workforce. Implementation commitment from management of both time and possibly financial resources.

5. Supervise and Review. Risk management is a process that continues throughout the life cycle of the system, task, operation, process, or activity. Leaders at every level must fulfill their respective roles in assuring controls are sustained over time. Once controls are in place, the process must be periodically reevaluated to ensure their effectiveness.

These steps will require a transformation for most organizations. The EHS professional will need a transformation model and significant management commitment to make the transformation from average to world class.

Applying a transformation model to EHS

Harvard Professor John Kotter has written two books on the subject of transformation in organizations. The eight- step model can be easily adapted to EHS. Management commitment is implied but the EHS leader can be the facilitator for this process.
The process includes the following:

1. Establish a sense of urgency.

The EHS leader should analyze the current situation to determine what works and where there are apparent gaps. This examination should include existing problem areas (i.e. incidents, property damage concerns, etc.) and include both actual and potential loss sources. Look for opportunities for continuous improvement based on the analysis. The assessment must be presented to top management in terms to move beyond complacency toward a vision of excellence.

2. Create a guiding coalition.

There must be enough key people in a group to lead the safety change effort. The team approach should be used with all team members having an area of responsibility and accountability. Although safety committees are structured to accomplish this aspect of the process, committees often lack accountability. A management oversight committee may be needed to provide adequate guidance for this step to be successful.

3. Develop a vision or set of goals.

Protecting people, property, and the environment is the primary goal. This goal is part of the value system and a critical component of the EHS vision for the organization. The ultimate goal is to provide a direction for the change to take place. Establishing a goal of a 15% reduction in injuries has similar limitations as reducing the experience modification. A target of 100% compliance with PPE has far reaching implications. A strategy or plan to accomplish the goal is required.

4. Communicate the goals.
Technology has provided industry with numerous vehicles to constantly communicate the goals of the EHS process. The computer and electronic signage are just two methods to increase the awareness and to focus the resources on a safe and healthy workplace. The coalition or safety team has a key role in modeling the expected behavior for all employees. Top management must been on board by leading each communication with a safety message, comment or statement. Leadership speaks volumes in this aspect of the process.

5. Empower broad-based action.
If there are obstacles to change they must be removed. The obstacles can be numerous. It is important to note that obstacles are not only physical barriers. Systems and structures that undermine the goals must be changed to be successful. Employees should be encouraged to offer ideas that might be considered non-traditional or risk taking in nature. Safe job procedures might be needed to effect this change. Resources directed at safety engineering solutions versus traditional approaches.

6. Generate short-term wins.
Plan for visible improvements or wins. Create wins based on data improvement, audits and monitoring. Communicate these results and recognize those responsible and celebrate. Dance to the music.

7. Consolidate gains and produce more gains.
Credibility should be used to change the systems, structures, and policies that do not fit together in the process. Add and promote change agents and look for opportunities for continuous improvement. The late Dr. Deming would encourage a constancy of purpose. Keep up the good fight.

8. Integrate new approaches into the new safety culture.
Create better performance through employee safe behaviors. Articulate the connection between behaviors and success. Develop a means or method to ensure leadership and succession.

Is This OZ?

The information presented in this paper/article was meant to give the EHS professional several ideas to improve professionally and a method to look at safety through the eyes of a risk management/control methodology. Success is critical as noted throughout this document. It takes a leader not unlike Dorothy to take risks for the sake of others to accomplish that goal.

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