

What's an **Interim** Safety Manager to Do?

Bridging the gap for safety

By Mark D. Magill

I RECENTLY COMPLETED a short-term assignment as onsite safety manager at a manufacturing facility, following the abrupt (although voluntary) departure of the company safety manager. The assignment lasted approximately three months, when the position was filled. Since the client needed my services quickly, I only had time to devise a basic plan of action before starting. Primarily, this involved gathering information to review and identifying whom I wanted to meet early on. This article shares strategies for succeeding in a short-term assignment and some lessons learned.

Human Resources

Early on, I met with the head of human resources because this was the position to which I was reporting. I wanted to discuss the company's expectations, gain some insight regarding company culture and how the organization managed the safety effort, and learn about the on-site safety staff and what I might expect from them. I was particularly interested to learn whether safety was a managed process with an accountability system in place. This would indicate whom the company really viewed as responsible for safety.

My primary responsibility was to manage the existing program and staff in order to prevent results from degrading in the absence of a full-time safety manager. Additionally, I was asked to ensure that activities such as employee training, program audits and reviews and compliance-related activities continued as scheduled.

In-House Staff

I met with the in-house safety staff to determine not only program direction and technical competencies, but also the emotional state of the group given the



recent departure of the manager. My goal was three-fold: 1) determine whether my presence would cause resentment from any staff member who had expected to fill the vacancy; 2) develop a working relationship with staff members; and 3) clearly define my role as an interim facilitator until the position was filled.

Initially, I met with the entire staff for a general discussion. Then, I met with each staff member individually to review his/her responsibilities and roles within the safety program. These meetings were quite valuable and were held weekly. At first, these meetings focused on each staff member's specific assignments and activities. These sessions also provided an

opportunity to identify immediate concerns, such as critical exposures or regulatory compliance. Eventually, each staff member came to the meetings with his/her own list of discussion topics; these included policies and programs under development, review or revision; upcoming employee training; new processes or equipment under review or in design; and recent accidents with a review of the subsequent investigation and corrective action.

Another frequently discussed topic was concern that the safety program would take a step backward until the safety manager position was filled. This issue was also discussed with facility management during one-on-one meetings. To prevent this, I encouraged existing staff to take the lead whenever possible in order to maximize their contact and interaction with

production employees and supervisors. When that was not possible, every effort was made to involve them, whether through direct participation or as a valued resource to me. My goal was to maintain existing relations between safety staff and their client groups and to help production management see the safety staff as a visible, reliable and competent resource that would keep the program moving in the right direction.

Existing Policies & Procedures

One of my first tasks was to review the company's safety policies and procedures manual so I could determine who was responsible for what. This review also

provided insight as to how decentralized the program was and helped further define the role of the safety department in the overall safety effort. This review revealed that the facility had a well-established, long-standing safety program. Responsibility for its implementation and management within individual departments was clearly assigned to line management, while the safety function was defined as a technical resource, program auditor and management advisor. This philosophy was accepted by most of the management team—a fact discovered through my one-on-one meetings with managers and supervisors.

Those departments not exhibiting a high level of acceptance of assigned program responsibilities were identified as priority areas—places where the program could suffer the most without a strong safety presence. Where potential weaknesses were identified at the manager and supervisor levels, follow-up meetings were held with the appropriate director or vice president to ensure that I had their support to manage the program as detailed in the written policies and procedures. This was a sensitive issue as I did not want these actions to be perceived as drastic changes to the program or as judgment of existing personnel. Management needed to realize that my primary objec-

tive was to prevent regression in an existing, effective program.

Programs were in place to address all applicable compliance issues, although several policies were under annual review, an ongoing process due to the number of written programs at the facility. My review of these programs generated some recommendations for improvement, which were discussed with the safety staff, affected department manager and human resources when response was beyond the authority of the safety group.

Emergency Planning & Response

Another priority was to develop a working knowledge of the company's emergency planning and response programs. What actions were to be taken and what resources were available for response to events such as medical emergencies, fires, chemical spills, emergency evacuation, emergency weather situations, and acts or threats of violence? Through a review of written programs and discussions with safety staff and key managers and maintenance personnel, I was able to determine what references I would need for specific situations as well as identify internal and external resources and their assigned responsibilities. In addition, I contacted local response organizations—police, fire and emer-

gency medical response and chemical spill response companies. This exercise was beneficial for the company as well, as it reminded key on-site response personnel about their roles and reinforced the need for regular emergency response program review and drills.

Outside Resources

In addition to emergency response resources, I established a reference list of key outside contacts currently used by the company. This list included the local hospital, designated healthcare providers, consultants, insurance representatives and designated legal support. Talking with these contacts helped me to be more independent from the beginning in this assignment. Of course, I had to define with the client my degree of access to each external resource and kept the client apprised of situations that required contact with these resources.

Accident Experience & Regulatory Compliance

I conducted a review of the company's accident experience and regulatory compliance history. With regard to accident experience, I focused on what injuries/illnesses were most often experienced and areas with potential for high-severity-type events. With regard to regulatory compli-

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ance, I determined whether any compliance issues were pending and inquired whether regulatory agencies were regular visitors (and, if so, what their interest was). Knowledge of the company's recordkeeping practices and degree of detail with regard to documenting follow-up inspection activities was particularly valuable when meeting with management and conducting facility walkthroughs.

Historical accident data were available in the form of graphs and charts detailing incident frequency rates, body part affected and nature of injury/illness by department from OSHA 200 logs. Also on file were workers' compensation loss runs, which provided further insight into frequency and severity trends. The first-aid log was also reviewed. No record of near-hit incidents was maintained.

Accident data indicated that upper extremity pain related to repetitive motion exposures was the most-common type of condition reported, followed by back pain from lifting or pulling, and hand and finger lacerations from cutting tools and product packaging. Although this was not news to the safety staff, these findings were discussed at the weekly group meetings and with individual managers and supervisors in order to increase awareness and assess the effectiveness of controls.

Management Meetings

I also met with members of management—from top management down to first-line supervisors. Initially, I focused on production, maintenance and engineering, which had the most safety-related concerns. I also wanted to assess how involved production managers were in the safety effort. Were they aware of their safety responsibilities? Did they hold subordinates accountable for participation in the program? Did they know potential hazards present in their operations and the most-common injuries experienced? Were any efforts underway to address primary concerns? How well did they understand applicable safety regulations? I also wanted to determine what roles maintenance and engineering played in the safety program and what type of working relationship these groups had with production.

Facility Walkthroughs

From the start—and frequently thereafter—I walked through the entire facility or a particular department or process. Many meetings with mid- and first-line production managers were walk-and-talk-type meetings where discussion would continue throughout the tour of operations. This allowed me to become familiar with people and the processes for which they were responsible. I was also able to evaluate potential process hazards and assess the safety awareness of my guide as we walked through an area.

Eventually, I was able to tour areas unescorted and talk with production employees with minimal disturbance to operations. However, I often requested a supervisory escort in order to maintain direct communication with supervisors. In addition to production areas, I visited maintenance shops, warehouse areas, laboratories and administrative areas.

Transition Period

When a full-time safety manager was hired, I participated in a one-week transition period. It was critical to involve existing safety staff in this effort in order to foster the development of good working relationships between them and the new manager. To ease the process, I avoided giving opinions and focused on transferring information and expediting the new manager's orientation.

Similar to a New Position

I approached this interim assignment in much the same way I would a new position. Conducting an accident analysis, assessing regulatory compliance and reviewing existing policies/programs are critical first steps in a new safety position. It is also essential to meet with key management personnel early on in order to determine the value they place on safety and to understand their expectations. One-on-one meetings with managers and supervisors also affords them the opportunity to develop an opinion of you—through direct contact rather than in a group setting or by word of mouth.

I have found it quite beneficial in a new position, as I did in this short-term assignment, to meet frequently with existing safety staff members and other internal resources to ensure that they are a visible part of the program from the beginning. Failure to involve them early on can cause the manager to be perceived as a "one-person show," which can make it difficult to gain their respect and participation.

Conclusion

People issues were the most-challenging aspect of this assignment—as they can often be when beginning a new job. Critical to my success was clearly defining and communicating my role throughout the organization, then operating within established parameters for the benefit of the company, its employees, the onsite safety staff and the new safety manager. ■

Mark D. Magill, CSP, is a safety consultant based in Colorado Springs, CO. He has more than 15 years' experience in the safety and health profession, including positions in manufacturing, insurance and consulting. Magill holds a B.S. in Industrial Safety Sciences and an M.S. in Occupational Safety Management, both from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is a member of ASSE's Pikes Peak Chapter.



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