Four Reasons OSH Professi
BETTER SALESPEO

By Matt Law

LIKE MANY OSH PROFESSIONALS, the author came into this career path "by accident." While most post-secondary studies were not directly focused on safety, health and the environment, the author was able to capitalize on favorite skills and experiences to achieve a noble goal: the potential to help a lot of people live better, healthier and safer lives. However, despite the ability to translate strengths into the core functions of an OSH professional and despite considering himself a technically minded philanthropist, the author has struggled with a skill that he believes turns expertise into action: sales.

Most OSH professionals probably did not seek out this career path to be business-minded salespeople. Indeed, sales may be as unattractive a role to some as safety is to others. Nevertheless, this critical skill must be learned, adapted and implemented into our work as OSH professionals for us to succeed. This article discusses:

- how to make safety an influential conversation;
- communicating the value of safety;
- why compliance is not the best motivator;
- why OSH success is in someone else's pocket.

Safety within an organization does not happen without people, and this includes more than just OSH professionals. All parties within the organization must be engaged in the OSH process, including CEOs, board executives, first-line supervisors, hourly workers, and even accountants, project managers and other business function leaders. OSH professionals are subject-matter experts and they must learn to influence without authority by using effective communication skills, particularly in organizations where OSH professionals have limited ability to hold these individuals accountable (Dunlap, 2011).

Even community-based organizations and nonprofits are becoming increasingly aware that they must develop business acumen, grow strategic partnerships and reduce barriers through reciprocal learning to have increased success and drive initiatives (Tatangelo, 2018). The skills that an OSH professional needs to enact this influence are akin to those of a sales professional. If the goal is to gather buy-in, create strong safety cultures and implement real change in the workplace, these are the top reasons why OSH professionals must develop business acumen and communication skills, and become safety salespeople.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Many OSH professionals possess the education and experience to perform the core functions of safety but lack expertise in an important skill in business: sales.**
- **Sales is a critical skill that must be learned, adapted and implemented into OSH professionals' work to succeed.**
- **This article discusses making safety an influential conversation, communicating the value of safety, why compliance is not the best motivator and why OSH success is in someone else's pocket.**

1) Safety Must Be an Influential Conversation

There are right ways and wrong ways to talk about safety. In his role as an OSH professional, the author experienced a confrontational encounter with a contractor tasked with a large project for the author's then-employer. Walking into a roomful of workers he had never met, the author witnessed a situation that, in his professional opinion, was immediately dangerous to life and health (IDLH). He yelled, screamed and asserted his authority as the subject-matter expert who could influence whether these workers kept their jobs. The supervisor immediately corrected the situation, but the supervisor showed a reluctance and lack of belief in doing so. In the moment, as an OSH professional, the author created a safer situation; but in that same moment, he failed to sell safety. Many safety professionals have been in similar situations. This article discusses why the author failed, how he could have sold safety better and how a modified approach helped him succeed in influencing change.

Much research has been conducted over the years to determine the most and least effective approaches to creating effective OSH programs. We know that approaches such as focusing on operator error (blame), technical solutions without employee engagement, and placing all emphasis on lagging indicators are not the most effective and our conversations should reflect that (Carillo, 1998). OSH professionals are both technical experts and facilitators of change. They are leaders, and their leadership strategies and styles directly affect safety culture (Lundell & Marcham, 2018). OSH professionals shape culture and perceptions through both language and action, and their influence can become more effective simply through developing the skill of how to have a conversation (Carillo, 2010).

To enact change, OSH professionals must create opportunities for dialogue and conversation rather than rely on rules and policies (Carillo, 2010). In fact, regulations, policies and procedures are generally no different between well-performing and poor-performing organizations (Carillo, 1998). OSH professionals must move beyond compliance-based conversations and dig into the items that will be most influential.

Like sales professionals, OSH professionals must be able to expand their contacts within the workplace, and build trust and create meaningful relationships with those contacts. Experts link trust with the willingness of the individual to make changes based on his/her relationship with an individual or organization (Carillo, 2010). The ability for good communication to occur between OSH leadership and both management and employees is contingent on an authentic, healthy relationship that allows for the flow of communication in all directions within an organization (Dunlap, 2011).

For example, Veltri and Ramsay (2009) delve into how to conduct an economic analysis of investments in safety initia-

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tives. While having a good base knowledge of the mathematics behind economics could be useful to the safety professional, it is not necessary for safety professionals to be accountants. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by what goes into true economic analysis to create a business case for safety, it may be possible to simply partner with someone else in-house who does that professionally. That is where the safety salesperson benefits from expanding contacts and building relationships.

Influential conversations also come through the OSH professional's ability to communicate that s/he cares. Blame, guilt and punishment can increase resistance (Carrillo, 2010). For optimal influence to occur, OSH professionals must turn this tide of using negative interactions to more positive conversations. In his article about creating safety habits, Page-Bottorff (2016) discusses how these negative approaches do not create lasting influence:

> An OSH team cannot intimidate or scare employees into changing their habits. With the average person needing just under 10 weeks to develop a new habit—and a sizeable minority of employees requiring longer—no single graphic video or shocking story will have a consistent impact on their behavior for the length of time required to establish a new routine.

Finally, OSH professionals should also recognize that personality traits and language power directly affect the ability to influence others. In a study performed on insurance salespeople, extroversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to new experiences were all found to be influential on a person's ability to sell (Ghazizade, Monfared & Baniasadi, 2016). Sales professionals are also taught that people who use a more powerful language are seen as more trustworthy, convincing, intelligent and competent.

Words and body language matter in conversation. Strong language power can be improved by simply reducing or eliminating weak language markers, including hedges (e.g., somewhat), verbal fillers (e.g., like), vocal hesitations (e.g., um), polite forms (e.g., sir), intensifiers (e.g., really) and rising intonation in declarative sentences. In addition, prosocial, nonverbal immediacy cues have been shown to create greater influence in conversations, including touching, decreased distance, forward lean, eye contact, orientation, higher rates of gesturing, positive head nods, positive facial expression, longer communication, higher speech rate, lower rate of hesitations, lower rate of halting and relaxed body positions (Gadzhiyeva & Sager, 2017).

Language power skills are not necessarily a core competency for OSH professionals and, for many, including the author, strong language power can feel unnatural. However, just as salespeople must hone these skills to have influential conversations, so should OSH professionals to enact change.

In the confrontational encounter described, the author missed many of these key points. Much of the author's perception of the IDLH scenario was compliance-based. In fact, a meaningful dialogue with the supervisor would have revealed that compliance with rules and policies was not valuable to the supervisor. Furthermore, such dialogue would have shown that the supervisor valued safety and had managed the risk with controls that he perceived were adequate for the situation. When the author entered the room with hostility, belittling the work the supervisor had done, his expertise meant nothing to the supervisor and the author's ability to influence was immediately discredited.

For OSH professionals to avoid similar situations, we must follow these key action items:

- Create opportunities for open, meaningful dialogue and employee engagement.
- Meet everyone in the workplace and involve them in the safety process.
- Demonstrate genuine care for people through positive conversations; discontinue the scare tactics.

•Recognize how personality affects the ability to sell and develop the traits needed to influence through conversation.

•Develop strong language power and perfect it through practice.

2) OSH Professionals Must Communicate the Value of Safety

When a salesperson faces a buyer, the conversation is not as simple as "here is product X, it costs Y" followed by a sale. OSH professionals should be familiar with this concept. When attempting to implement safety initiatives, OSH professionals constantly face some kind of opposition. Salespeople know that to make a sale the buyer must see the value in the product or service being sold. The idea of a safer workplace is often not enough to create buy-in from those who make the financial decisions (Druley, 2018), so OSH professionals must show the economic benefits of safety. Safety salespeople must be able to build a business case and communicate the value associated with safety initiatives.

When trying to implement change, safety professionals must address the inevitable question, "what's in it for me?" (WIIFM). OSH professionals must be able to show the benefit that comes from change to gain acceptance. Paint the picture of changes being made and how those changes will affect employees, management and the organization, both negatively and positively in the short and long term.

Cekada (2018) discusses how to address WIIFM:

> Adults need to know the value of what they are being asked to do. They are more likely to put time and energy into learning or making a change if they see its direct benefits to them. They can then make a quick assessment of the cost of taking the time to make the change or learn the lesson compared to the cost of not doing so. This answers WIIFM.

Dunlap (2011) says, "The business case for safety can be made by equating the investment of financial resources in safety to its effect on the organization's profitability." As part of creating the business case for safety, the value of a proposed solution can often be demonstrated as return on investment (ROI). Many experts agree that calculating ROI in safety is worth the effort to support an investment that yields positive results.

The good news is that data are available to show direct and indirect costs of injuries. Druley (2018) suggests a way to not only gather that data, but also engage new contacts and key players in the process:

> Take three to five workplace injuries that typically occur in an organization and perform a "deep dive" analysis with colleagues from the purchasing and accounting divisions to determine each individual cost associated with the injury. Spare no expense to quantify all related figures.

Especially for companies that only care about the bottom line, creating a business case is essential. Part of creating this business case can be demonstrating how injury costs come out of the organization's profits. However, it may not be enough to focus on preventing injuries. The buy-in may be stronger if the argument is framed in terms of what will keep an operation doing what it should. The OSH professional, the safety salesperson, must demonstrate and document how safety and productivity go hand-in-hand (Druley, 2018). In fact, as Dunlap (2011) says, "many employees and managers may feel a paradox exists between efforts in safety and production." The burden is on the OSH professional to quell the myths about this supposed paradox.

An important reason for building a business case and understanding safety's value is to create accountability for the implementation of safety initiatives. OSH professionals and management both must understand the business case for safety initiatives because, while it serves as a selling point, it should also serve as a check for wasted resources. Workplace safety initiatives can often be heavily funded with little result. According to Dunlap (2011), "developing a safety culture should not be confused with simply allocating financial resources to workplace safety efforts." Simply put, one cannot purchase a safety culture.

To communicate the value of safety, OSH professionals must:

•Be able to answer WIIFM.

•Learn the business they serve and be able to construct a business case for safety.

•Demonstrate ROI, but focus on immediate gains (e.g., productivity, employee engagement, customer satisfaction) instead of potential gains (e.g., injury and citation avoidance).

3) Compliance Is Not the Best Motivator

In both confrontational and nonconfrontational settings, one of the least effective approaches one can take to influence people is to assert oneself as a board-certified safety professional and an expert in the codes, standards and practices that apply to the situation. Safety professionals know we are right when in compliance and managing to the lowest reasonable risk. Because of our profession, that proof and motivation works. However, by asserting that we will prove the other person wrong through our credentials and the written code, we create a challenge that arouses opposition and makes the listener want to battle with us before even starting the conversation, regardless of whether a battle was our intention (Carnegie, 2019).

Rules and regulations alone do not perpetuate a strong safety culture (Lundell & Marcham, 2018). Simply having codes, standards, policies and procedures in place does not guarantee compliance, and people often have varying perceptions of the risk and consequences of breaking rules. While OSH professionals must be experts in understanding federal regulations and compliance standards, they also must understand that compliance is not the best motivator for gaining buy-in.

Salespeople understand that to make a sale they must dig into buyers' beliefs and assumptions about a product or service and understand what motivates them to make a purchase. Different people are motivated by different factors; compliance motivates some people, but others are motivated by productivity, organizational success, saving money, or gaining respect or control within the workplace. OSH professionals must speak in terms of the other person's interests and be able to understand what motivates key players within the organization (Carnegie, 2019). Others' motivations, not those of the OSH professional, should be used to tailor the selling process for safety initiatives.

Even if OSH professionals have the sole power or authority to implement changes to the safety program, forcing a change without addressing the beliefs about the change does not create long-lasting effects (Carillo, 2010). OSH professionals must develop injury reduction approaches that meet both their objectives and those of management (Dunlap, 2011).

As OSH professionals work to find common ground with management, it is important to be able to speak the business language and use terms that organizational leaders can understand. Ultimately, business leaders are accustomed to perceiving and learning from incidents that affect business performance, so safe-

ty performance must be communicated in this same language. OSH professionals must approach safety management by observing and understanding the organization's functions and unique equilibrium rather than entering with preconceived notions of what safety solutions are needed (Dunlap, 2011).

Remember that although many organizational leaders are driven by performance statistics, those with the power to implement safety culture may still be driven by compassion for employees. Safety professionals should be able to adapt their message to accommodate the emotional appeal to these leaders as well (Dunlap, 2011).

Additionally, many business leaders in today's market are focused on sustainability. Business leaders are becoming increasingly aware that long-term economic growth is not possible unless that growth is socially and environmentally sustainable. As both investors and executives begin to look more seriously at implementing sustainability efforts, OSH professionals would benefit from aligning their own initiatives with their organization's sustainability strategies to create value and address the motivations of executive management (Hill & Seabrook, 2013).

If we are solely focused on credentialing and compliance to influence others to safe practice, we are likely creating conflict and disinterest even without intending to do so. The key takeaways are:

•Respect that people who are not OSH professionals may have different opinions and motivations, even if they are wrong or misguided.

•Learn the business language and speak in terms that the other person can understand.

•Identify what motivates business leaders and align safety to those motivations instead of your own.

4) Success Is in Someone Else's Pocket

In the described conflict scenario with the contractor, the OSH professional's intention was to implement and manage a safety culture, not to supervise activities at all times. The author did not want to be the "safety cop," although he initially positioned himself perfectly to do so. To create a culture, the author had to make sure the right controls and leadership guidance were in place so that safety happened even when the OSH professional could not be there. It was important to recognize that success did not belong to the OSH professional, it belonged to the contractor; the author had to put the wheels in motion to turn over ownership of that success.

OSH professionals alone cannot make safety happen; even just having support from senior management is not enough. Creating real change in safety culture requires total employee population engagement while perpetuating current organizational goals (Carillo, 1998). Sales professionals know that their success is only brought to fruition if they can get the buyer to buy, and continued buy-in only happens if the success is mutual. The safety salesperson must recognize who their key contacts are within the workplace and find success in safety through them.

A key contact for OSH professionals to build rapport with is the line manager. Because safety professionals are the subject-matter experts, they are often viewed as the people most likely to enforce safety. However, line managers are the ones with the authority and resources to enforce safety (Carillo, 1998). Line managers must be positive and actively engaged in safety initiatives; otherwise, rules, regulations and expectations may be completely ignored (Lundell & Marcham, 2018). While senior management buy-in is critical to implementing overarching safety strategies, the initiatives will only hit ground level if the line supervisors see the value and drive it home.

Conclusion

It is time for OSH professionals to learn the skills necessary to become the safety salesperson. Just like sales professionals, OSH professionals must be able to have influential conversations, expand their contacts and build relationships with key players in the workplace to drive safety initiatives. This requires developing positive communication and strong language power, finding what motivates both employees and management, and demonstrating the value of safety.

OSH professionals should learn how to build a business case for safety and work with other business function leaders to help tailor that case and ultimately create buy-in at all levels. We may not have sought out this career path to become salespeople, but this is a set of skills we can no longer ignore to effectively protect people, property and the environment. **PSJ**

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