

Safety Professionals and Art of ‘Blending In’

By Goran Prvulovic, MOccHlth&Saf

There has been a great deal of debate on LinkedIn and other forums about what is more important in the role of a safety practitioner, formal education or practical experience in safety.

Whilst the truth is probably somewhere in the middle, the whole debate is largely obsolete as safety professionals, just like accountants, lawyers or engineers need to have a solid educational, technical background as well as practical experience to be successful and value adding to organisations which employ them.

Number of organisations where an old and outdated 'safety servant' model is applied has been consistently reducing over the last 20 or so years, in favour of the business model where safety practitioners are coaches, mentors, technical experts and guides to those who own risks at the line management level. The model of 'safety servants' which utilises safety people as 'checkers', monitoring and confirming that workers at sharp end are doing their jobs 'safely' is very counterproductive as it disables and disempowers line management risk owners from taking ownership and accountability for their people based process inputs and outputs.

After all, if an organisation needs safety people to field check and ensure trained, competent and qualified people are executing the work 'safely' at sharp end, the point has been largely missed. If this is the model used and perceived as needed, the organisation applying it really needs to ask the following questions:

Do we have right people employed in right jobs at the front line levels?

What is the quality of supervision, training, pre-employment and recruitment strategies?

Where are we on our [cultural journey](#) of change?

Do we know what good safety performance looks like and if not, why not?

Sadly, this model still lives in some organisations to the great detriment of its people and shareholders, but things are slowly getting better. Voices of reason are being heard and increased number of organisations is fast tracking towards the HSE business partner model, in line with our Human Resources brethren who have positioned themselves very smartly in his area, some years

ago. Unlike safety professionals who are still trying to get the status and recognition safety profession rightfully deserve, HR profession is quantum leap ahead of us. Days where HR was expected to jump in and hands on manage operational, people based issues are pretty much gone. HR we know today across a range of different industries is very much in the space of a partner, coach and a mentor.

Safety practitioners shouldn't be any different from a HR professional, accountant, lawyer or an engineer in that space. We build safe systems of work, leadership programs and develop key organisational strategies for management of risks and corporate governance, and for this, certain level of tertiary education is absolutely necessary, at least at more senior levels. Otherwise, what would be the point of having it available at tertiary levels.

Maybe the right way to approach this whole issue is to ask a different question.

Why does the perception exist that anyone, (from wide range of functions) can manage and practice health and safety? Maybe this is the core of our problem. It seems to be seen as an 'easy' function to look after on organisational levels, despite being the most difficult one. How often do we actually see proper, educated HSE professionals at executive levels, as opposed to people from other technical and support functions trying to manage safety function? As a thought, maybe this is also the reason why many organisations fail to gain consistent improvements in safety performance and apply latest, innovative ways of thinking in safety.

Proper accreditation of safety professionals is a story for another day. It is certainly badly needed to ensure quality of safety professionals and separate good from mediocre and even worse.

On another topic, one of my LinkedIn contacts recently asked me seemingly straight forward, yet interesting question.

Apart from qualifications and experience, what is the one single, most important skill safety professional needs to have?

This really got me thinking and after some thought my answer was as follows:

The ability to blend in the organisation, build productive relationships based on mutual respect and develop technically accurate, custom approaches that are perfectly suited for an organisation at that particular point in time, taking into account organisational appetite for moving forward, ability to see the next step and destination on the journey, availability of resources and ultimately, a readiness and willingness to make hard decisions.

A mouthful of an answer, for sure, but this is traditionally an area where 95% of all senior safety practitioners fail at some stage in their careers and also find most difficult to master. This is one

area where qualifications help as much as the experience and ability for one to master self-control, our own cognitive dissonance and exercise almost inhuman patience and self control. It is this particular ability and understanding of organizational states and capacity which separates safety academics from safety practitioners. I suppose when it comes to this, there is no substitute for practical, hands on experience. It is a fine art and a tough balancing act which often takes heavy personal toll.

Let's examine this difficulty in little more detail.

Most good safety practitioners are able to relatively quickly establish where an organisation is on their safety journey and where it really needs to go. There are several models out there, I personally use my own [model](#).

Naturally, as passionate safety professionals we feel that we need to immediately take the organisation on a fast tracked journey of self-discovery and improvement, design a plan and obtain support for its implementation. We seek to go from 20 kph to a 100 kph (in some cases, even from zero) in a blink of an eye and take everyone else on this journey at blinding speed. After all, we can so clearly see it, even feel it, we cannot resist temptation to raise issues, over promote (read preach) safety and its personal impacts, use emotional hook approaches and over - saturate relevant stakeholders with safety under internal beliefs that what we are doing is actually 'influencing'. Safety evokes emotional responses in people and safety professionals are just as prone to this response as anyone else. In many cases, probably even more, as safety is so dear to us professionally.

Trouble is, this passion often has an opposite effect.

As we keep pushing the organization towards where we as safety professionals believe it needs to go, we experience 'push back' and obvious signs of damaged relationships. In many some cases this results in a 'burnout' of the safety practitioner or a 'burnout' of the critical stakeholders. The end result is the same, the safety professional leaves the organisation under (often erroneous) beliefs that the grass is greener on the other side and future role will produce more satisfying job environment. On the other hand organisation starts from scratch after losing a valuable asset, often not even realising severity and long term implication of this loss.

Sad situation for all involved, but it happens all the time. I am sure many safety professionals can associate themselves with this type of situation, usually from firsthand experience.

There are a number of factors and principles involved in this common problem. For the benefit of the upcoming generation of safety professionals (at least those with true passion for this occupation), I will list a few things to consider:



- You can clearly see issues and where organisation needs to go, but this does not mean everyone else does. In fact, many of your stakeholders will not be able to and will struggle to unlearn fallacies they accumulated over the lifetime. This is the toughest barrier to overcome. Accept that you will fail at some stage as some critical people simply will not be able to grasp modern safety concepts, especially those described by Reason, Hopkins, Rasmussen and similar progressive thinking in management of safety and risks. Persistence, data gathering and ongoing education of critical stakeholders is the key. You must be prepared to compromise as in many cases, your vision will not be supported and you will be expected to run with scaled down version of the plan, or something else. Make personal decisions accordingly. Either commit to small wins and long term strategy or vote with your feet
- Just because people are in agreement and verbalising their commitments, does not mean they actually mean it or understand the starting point, the journey or a destination. There is nothing more dangerous as a 'lip service' to safety and many organisations are locked in this particular delusion where verbalisation of safety at every opportunity is erroneously understood as a 'good safety culture'. Any solid plans for improving safety culture in an organisation must include specific and measurable KPI's for those who own risks – line management functions. Implementing those things we actually need to do for safety and enforcing accountability for safety at senior line management levels is notoriously difficult tasks in any organisation, due various leadership issues
- Each organisation has its culture and set of subcultures but more importantly, its own speed on the journey of change. This speed is commonly understood to be a factor controlled by executive level and CEO. Although this is ultimately true, there is often a significant delay between CEO and executive team pressing the gas pedal and actual response of the engine of the organisation (operations). In many cases pressing the gas pedal results in nothing more than a 'burp' and an assumption that because pedal is pressed and engine is producing noise, organisational vehicle must be moving. In many cases this is just an illusion and organisational vehicle is very much standing still. Drivers (CEO's and executives) need to check that wheels are actually spinning and this is where effective and diplomatic communications of risks by skilled safety professionals can make a big difference. This is of course assuming that critical people actually want to know if the wheels are turning as in many cases, ignorance is bliss in management of safety at senior organisational levels, despite increased legislative obligations relating to risk awareness and due diligence. Either way, if a safety professional runs too fast for the organisation, no amount of skill or leadership will produce desired outcomes. Organisational 'vehicle' can only go as fast as the driver(s) wants it to go. Your ability as a safety practitioner to determine capacity of the organisation to embark on the journey, in particular potential for speed of achieving a change is critical not only for the success of a safety program but also for your success as a safety practitioner. If you do not assess the capacity and set achievable goals or have realistic



expectations of the organisational ability to change, plan will likely fail and so will you as a driving force behind it

- Unless top organisational layer of decision makers is deeply committed to a particular approach and journey, the travel will involve frequent stops, breakdowns and arrival at different destination than originally intended. This deep commitment needs to transpire in an organisational ability to hold people at all levels accountable for safety performance, which is one of the hardest things for an average organisation to enforce. Any safety plan needs to begin with a discussion around this critical requirement, to prevent failure and cultural damage resulting from a half-hearted approach to safety change. Job of a safety professional is to prompt those discussions and provide leadership in this area. Deep commitment of top decision makers does not automatically mean commitment of their direct reports. This is a different process of accountability and this is why individual KPI's and clear delegation of responsibilities for execution of safety plans to those who have authority and resources to implement and execute it at operational level is a must, to prevent an illusion of collective accountability and resulting collective failure. If everyone is accountable for safety, usually, no one is
- Successful journey requires adequate resources. Just like obtaining support from the most senior decision makers, here is no point embarking on a plan that has no adequate resources needed for success. Obtain support for safety plan and define it in practical terms before anything else. This point cannot be overemphasised enough.
- Change in safety culture always means making hard decisions and being able to hold people accountable, especially at the senior levels. Do not underestimate importance of this factor, although it is largely outside of your control.
- Patience and ability of safety practitioner to master his own cognitive dissonance is paramount. The journey will be full of mistakes and decisions made by others which are frustrating, hard to understand and rationalise, but this is an unavoidable part of the journey. Many safety professionals 'frustrate' themselves out of businesses and even from the safety profession, purely for not being able to cope with cognitive dissonance associated with the process of organisational change. I suggest [this article](#) in terms of understanding and mastering management of cognitive dissonance for support functions

Creating successful safety cultural program or a strategic road map requires a plan that is custom made for a particular organisation and takes into account above mentioned factors. Ability of safety practitioners to analyse organisational issues and understand that organisations have their own speed of moving forward, irrespective of moral or legislative issues and requirements is critical for organisational progress and also as a survival in safety profession.

In many cases this involves a step change approach to things based around 'aim small, miss small' methodologies.

As critical support functions, safety professionals must reinvigorate their roles in organisations from servants to technical and finally into business partnership and leadership space, regardless of the stratum level. They must be able to understand organisational dynamics and development and insert themselves in that space, as well as be mindful of specific operational reality and a step on cultural journey, plan a custom approach with specific milestones and devise a way of engaging and communicating safety and risk in innovative, enlightening and productive ways. Coaching, mentoring and guiding is the name of the game, with a lot of patience as the elephant cannot be pushed up the stairs.

Cultural changes are not plane trips. You won't get there in a hurry. They are similar to old fashion horse and carriage travel. Slow, bumpy, often painful and full of detours which often go backwards to go forwards.

Copyright 2016. RiskWise Solutions All rights reserved.