PROFESSIONAL PROSPERITY:

The Narrowing Road

By DONALD J. ECKENFELDER

It behooves every profession to remain ever-watchful concerning its future. Signs of impending shifts that could alter the number or quality of career opportunities available deserve careful analysis and pre-emptive activities or, at least, contingency planning. Several professions have been successful at lobbying to protect themselves. Safety is not among them—and nothing indicates that will change.

The medical profession has been altered forever by managed care, with the most profound effects yet to come. Despite a powerful and well-financed lobbying capability, the medical profession has been unable to shape the future to its desires. Lawyers have been more successful at limiting tort reform that could put many attorneys out of work.

Gross simplification of U.S. tax laws would leave towns full of accountants looking for something else to do (not to mention buildings full of bureaucrats). Although it is not clear who is stopping that from happening, it is probably those granted unique exemptions under the existing system. The "beancounters" are just benefiting from the greed of special-interest parties.

Since profound changes are affecting safety professionals; since those changes are unlikely to be averted or even modified by influence; and since virtually every safety position will be affected, shouldn't all safety professionals be taking steps to protect themselves?

OMINOUS SIGNS

Here are a few signs that safety professionals should be noting and what I think they mean to the safety profession.

Most Rapid Growth is in Small Firms

Most projections show job growth occurring in small and newly created companies rather than in the Fortune 500. Traditionally, the best safety positions have been within big firms, but the number and quality of those positions are shrinking.

Trend Toward Flatter Organizations

Organizations are flattening; as a result, middle management positions are disappearing. Many of these positions have been (and will be) safety jobs. Nothing suggests this trend will change in the next 10 years.

Manufacturing Sector Shrinking

Much manufacturing has gone off shore (outside the U.S.) and more will in the future, at least in the short term (the next decade). Most traditional safety jobs have been in manufacturing industries, where most work injuries occur. Less manufacturing means less perceived need for safety professionals. Perception is reality. Hence, perception of what safety professionals can and will do must be adjusted if job shrinkage is to be moderated.

Self-Directed Work Groups are Proliferating

Empowerment is a watchword in American industry. U.S. employers have not been universally good at it, and many are still trying to learn how to make it work. But the great benefits that accrue to those who have figured it out will entice others to keep trying until they do. A self-directed work group environment has less need for safety and health professionals and the kind of work they do is, or should be, very different.

Safety Still Not Connected to Quality

Quality is another watchword. It should open, not close, doors for safety professionals. Yet, that has not occurred. Thus, safety and health professionals must take some actions to make it so. It won't occur naturally.

The Insurance Environment is Changing

The insurance market is softening, and that is unlikely to change in the near future. More and more large companies are buying fewer and fewer insurance company and broker services. Many safety jobs have been in these service sectors and many have been lost or are in jeopardy.

Regulation is Diminishing as Trend to Smaller Government Unfolds

Democrats are joining Republicans in calling for smaller, more efficient government. That means truncated regulatory agencies and fewer jobs in enforcement and the ripple effect that filters down to all compliance-oriented jobs.

"Leaner, Meaner" Firms Seek to be "Visionary"

As the marketplace becomes more competitive, more firms are realizing that the best insurance against failure is to be superior at what they do. These organizations are striving to determine what it takes to be successful or world class at what they do and are trying to get there. This can result in the elimination of positions that are not seen to add value. All too often, safety is on that list.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE SAFETY PROFESSIONALS?

If these signs are, in fact, trends—trends that are unlikely to reverse in the short-term—how should the safety profession and individual practitioners plan for their futures?

The first step is to encapsulate what the trends mean to the safety professional. Here is my perspective:

1) In the future, fewer jobs will be available, but those that do exist will be better; they will call for people with deeper and broader skills.

2) "Safety positions" will be more comprehensive. These positions will often be folded in with quality, general excellence and efficiency.

3) As the "age of show business" continues and the senso-

ry assault from marketing experts escalates, it will become more difficult to communicate the loss prevention message. Thus, credibility and communication skills will be more important than ever.

4) "Standing still" will be deadlier than ever. The world will pass by any practitioner who does.

5) If you cannot demonstrate that you add value, you will become an artifact.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE/AVOIDING OBSOLESCENCE

Individuals can utilize various techniques and methods to prepare for the future. Following are some pre-emptive activities that all safety professionals (who want a future in safety or related areas) should be engaged in now.

The good news is that the safety field can greatly benefit society and facilitate the optimization of profits for business. It can produce significant cost savings and serve as a vehicle to develop skills and cultures that lead an organization on the path to excellence. The bad news is that safety professionals have not told this story very well and not many people are listening (and the number who are seems to be shrinking daily).

•**Obtain basic training and certification, then get an M.B.A.** Rather than an end in itself, obtaining basic safety education, then becoming certified and/or licensed, should be seen as a means to an end. The end is applying loss prevention know-how to make society and industry better. One way to do that would be to follow-up safety education with an M.B.A.

•**Broaden your abilities; gain practical experience.** A safety internship is a good start, but it is only a start. Experience in manufacturing, law, finance, quality and other disciplines should be pursued at every opportunity. If specific opportunities do not present themselves, then associate with people who engage in these activities. Listen very closely and ask a variety of questions.

•**Be flexible and stay on the move . . . intellectually.**

Efforts to grow intellectually should not be limited to safety. Read the best business books, subscribe to business magazines and keep abreast of what is transpiring in society. Always try to envision how safety and health activities can be applied to areas that can provide the broadest benefit, not the narrowest.

•**Interface constantly with new people and new ideas.** Keep old friends. Make professional friends who share the same vision of the field. Associate with inspirational and forward-thinking colleagues. To have a friend, you must be a friend, so never miss an opportunity to help a colleague. Then, make new friends all the time including many in fields other than safety. Ask what they do and how they do it, and envision how to help them and people within your organization who do the same thing. Then, act on conclusions reached.

•**Extend your thinking and skills constantly.** If you take the first four actions described here, this one will occur naturally. But, it isn't a bad idea to make this an annual resolution. Track your progress.

•**Focus on the many social aspects of safety, yet don't lose technical competency.** Technical competency is basic. However, although the basics are always necessary, they likely will not elevate you above mediocrity unless your orientation is purely technical. The people (social aspects) of loss prevention is where the greatest benefit can

be harvested. If prospecting for oil, you go where geology suggests oil might be. If prospecting for professional growth and security in the safety and health profession, the "gold" is in the behavioral and social areas.

ONE SOLUTION: VALUES-DRIVEN SAFETY

I have always felt better about taking advice from someone who practices what s/he preaches. I have tried to act on the advice offered here. The values suggested in my book, *Values-Driven Safety*, are displayed in the "maturity grid" (Figure 1). This grid displays levels of maturity (titled "predictor/descriptors" since they describe levels of maturity and predict outcomes) against the values that produce excellent safety performance. I encourage others to build on this work and develop ideas that will elevate the safety profession to the stature it deserves.

REFLECTIONS AND VISIONS

Successful loss prevention skills and knowledge can be applied just as easily to the successful practice of business. This idea is presented in *Values-Driven Business*. This book suggests values based on 21 world-class company clues (WCCC) synopsized from various books (e.g., *In Search of Excellence, Aiming Higher* and *Built To Last*) that characterize "visionary" companies. Not surprisingly, many attributes of world-class companies sug-

gest loss-resistant environments. The characteristics that differentiate them are cultural, not technical . . . just as is the case in loss prevention.

What can be learned from this? In my opinion, safety professionals have "the keys to the kingdom." But, we must use them in order to gain entrance to enriching, rewarding careers.

The "clues" to a "visionary" company would all be facilitated by a values-driven safety process. That should not surprise those in the loss prevention business. Successful companies usually have effective loss prevention processes (and vice versa). Which comes first is not worth arguing about. Safety comes first for each individual safety professional, so lead with it.

Following are eight of the 21 WCCC—those that resonate most clearly to the safety profession and safety professionals.

•Culture is at the core.

•Clear success patterns define "winning" organizations.

•Writings must be supported by and, better yet, preceded by behaviors.

•Persistence is vital.

•The most important ingredient is people.

•High expectations are pervasive; everybody loves them.

•Emphasis is on the process, not short-term results.

•Solutions to most workplace problems are sociological, not technical.

The following values will produce an organization that will exhibit these clues.

Value #1
Never "shoot the messenger."
Value #2
Only respond to root causes.
Value #3
Do it right the first time.
Value #4
Everyone needs to buy-in.
Value #5
Above all, keep it simple.
Value #6
Loss prevention can and should be your leading edge.
Value #7
Learn from every experience and improve every day.
Value #8
Employ healthy people or help get them healthy.
Value #9
Inspire someone—anyone— every day.

Methods & Techniques to Avoid Obsolescence

•Obtain basic training and certification; then get an M.B.A.

•Broaden your abilities; gain practical experience.

•Be flexible; stay on the move . . . intellectually.

•Interface constantly with new people and new ideas; keep old friends.

•Extend your thinking and skills constantly.

•Focus on the many social aspects of safety, yet don't lose technical competency.

Value #10
Act on what is likely
to happen, not what
has happened.

The system that can be used to apply a values-driven process is value inspired resource optimization. The primary tool is the maturity grid. For business maturity, this grid resembles the loss prevention maturity grid, but with a broader perspective. (Although I believe that Value #6 should be number one, I have elected not to place it at the top of my list of business values.)

Aside from the obvious benefits of self-actualization and commercial gain, two reasons have driven my efforts to expose the virtues of values-driven processes for safety and business. 1) To see the safety profession elevated in the eyes of business leaders. 2) To see the career potential for safety professionals expanded. Application of the ideas presented in this article—if applied and championed— have the potential to accomplish these goals. Won't you join me in spreading the message?

CONCLUSION

The safety profession has much to offer, much of it largely undiscovered by business. Since others will not trumpet our value and virtues, we must exhibit the great contributions we make. Let's start now. I hope this article will stimulate additional thought on the process that will lead to a better road to professional prosperity for safety professionals (albeit a narrowing road). ■

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Safety Value	0. Darkness Ignorance	1. Dawn Entry Level	2. Mid-Morning Novice
1. Do it for the right reasons	Safety driven by regulation, management directives and cost of accidents.	Concern for people occasionally mentioned but not backed up with actions. Employees don't believe it.	Flashes of real concern for people occur, but cynicism is ever present.
2. See it as part of the whole	Safety is handled independently of the rest of the management process.	Safety is occasionally considered at staff meetings and during appraisals.	Efforts have been made to integrate safety, but they have been token and have often failed.
3. Recognize there is no end	Safety is managed by reaction and quick fixes.	Root-cause determination and prevention efforts occur but are the exception.	Awareness that loss prevention is hard and ongoing is occasionally seen.
4. First, it is a people business; things are a distant second	Safety is keynoted by inspection and compliance.	Employees have some feeling of involvement in the safety process, but don't exhibit any sense of ownership.	Employees are beginning to have a sense of ownership for the safety process that goes beyond participation.
5. Put the right person in charge	No emphasis is placed on who supervises safety or on the qualifications of safety practitioners.	Token efforts are evident concerning safety staffing, but they have not been very effective.	Safety parity is a goal but is clearly not a reality. Everyone knows safety is often the first thing to be cut.
6. Use a yardstick everyone can read	Safety performance measurement is not understood nor discussed at business meetings.	Safety measurement is mentioned, but with little conviction and no substantive responses.	Awareness of safety measurement is growing and at times elicits responses.
7. Sell benefits . . . and they are many	Everyone talks about the burdens of safety. Benefits are rarely discussed or appreciated.	Occasionally, someone points out the virtues of safety, but it is the exception, instead of the rule.	Safety is sold in company organs and at some meetings, but it is not integrated and response is casual.
8. Never settle for second best	Safety is last when it comes to allocating funds and the first to be cut during times of austerity.	At times, safety achieves parity with other considerations. Again, it is the exception, not the rule.	There is "safety first" talk and posters, but such talk is rarely supported by top management.
9. Be guided by logic, not emotion	The only way to get action on a safety item is to get emotional.	Safety is said to be part of the management process but is driven differently. Action stems from accidents or complaints.	Management is transitioning to act (and not react) and look for root causes, but old habits persist.
10. Empower others rather than seek after support	If the safety professional doesn't do it, it doesn't get done.	The safety professional plays a dominant role and delegates duties reluctantly.	Empowerment is starting, but in the absence of a safety advocate, the process loses momentum quickly.

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3. Late-Morning Mediocrity	4. Noon Excellence	5. Full-Light Perfection
Concern for people is balanced with compliance and injury costs, but is seen as a separate subject.	Concern for people is major safety driver but not in <u>real</u> harmony with other goals.	Sincere concern for employees drives safety and is in perfect harmony with other activities.
Safety has parity with other staff functions, and management has a vision of how it should be integrated.	A plan to totally integrate safety exists. Independent safety discussions are becoming less frequent.	Loss prevention is totally integrated and accepted as essential for business success.
Management is initiating efforts that are self-perpetuating. Evidence of long-term commitment to safety appears at times.	Critical behaviors and conditions are being defined and measured. A long-term commitment is evident.	Everyone recognizes that safety excellence is never ending, like the Shewart Cycle.
Focus is on employee involvement. Culture and attitudes are more important than physical defects.	A well-developed process for measuring and monitoring behaviors exists. The organization is moving toward deeper understanding.	The focus is on beliefs, values and culture. This focus drives all other efforts and is correlated with all other measures.
Reporting relationships are good and safety staff are generally well-qualified and have adequate resources.	An effective top executive supervises safety. There are sufficient safety professionals and they are almost all highly qualified.	Only the best people are placed in safety positions. Their leader is an influential executive who goes to bat for safety.
Safety measurement is good but largely retrospective. There are responses, but rarely targeted with predictable results.	Measurement of safety is clear and generally understood. it is moving toward being more predictive than reactive.	Safety measurement is prospective, positive and credible. It is an effective tool that correlates with all that matters in the organization.
The benefits of loss prevention are often touted—at times with conviction. But, loss prevention is not fully integrated and comes in waves.	The selling of safety is consistent and integrated. Employee involvement is "built -in." Talking safety is encouraged.	Talking safety benefits are inherent in the organization's culture. Safety is fully integrated. Everyone is aware of its benefits.
Safety normally has parity with other considerations, but at times it is clear that there are higher priorities.	Loss prevention is considered essential to business success. Safety professionals are considered equals with other staff.	Safety is viewed as a profit center, not as overhead. Safety professionals are viewed as valuable assets to the organization.
Loss prevention is driven by process. Appeals to emotion still interfere more often than they should.	Emotion rarely affects safety decision making. Occasionally, however, pressure will prevail over prescience/foresight.	Management refuses to react to anomalies. They have complete confidence in their process and stick to it tenaciously.
The organization understands the correct role of the safety professional but frequently reverts to dependent behavior.	Safety professionals are working themselves out of a job. They are secure with their empowerment strategy and implementation.	Dependency on the safety professional has been shed. The function is used to optimize performance. The professional likes it this way.

Donald J. Eckenfelder, P.E., CSP, is the principal consultant for Profit Protection Consultants, Glens Falls, NY. Prior to becoming a consultant, he was corporate director of loss prevention for Chesebrough-Ponds. Eckenfelder served as ASSE president from 1981-82 and was named an ASSE Fellow in 1987. He has served as president of the American Society of Safety Research and on many other professional and community committees. In addition, Eckenfelder has taught graduate-level courses at the University of New Haven and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. He is a professional member of ASSE's Eastern New York Chapter.

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