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BUSINESS UPDATE

Communicating Environmental, Health and Safety Value

First identify the real obstacles to communication

By Richard MacLean

Environmental, health and safety (EHS) managers are keenly aware that their careers and longevity within their organizations are dependent upon their ability to demonstrate that they bring something of value to the table beyond just the donuts for a meeting. It's a subject in need of considerable attention, especially in today's tight economy. This month we examine how to identify the communication barriers that impede real progress.

The Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI) is extremely well-tuned to current issues and has developed an excellent three-part series on identifying environmental value.[1] This is just one resource in a virtual ocean of information at your fingertips. Do a Google search on the words environment and value and you will get over eight million hits. Lots of information is out there, so it should be easy. Right?

Wrong. EHS managers struggle to communicate how they add value, often with marginal success. There is a lot of self flagellation, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy among EHS managers who struggle with these issues. "If only we could get our message across!" they exclaim. "Then they will see how critical our function is to the business. Oh, we must be such poor communicators."

Quite the contrary, EHS managers are probably better communicators than the managers in most other functional areas, with the possible exception of the silver-tongued sales and marketing folks. Yes, EHS professionals have historically talked in a foreign language called NEPA (National Environmental Protection Agency) and TOSCA (Toxic Substance Control Act) and have been slow to adopt the business language of ROI (return on investment) and NPV (net present value). Yes, they have used major turnoffs such as, "You'll go to jail!" But unless they have lived under a landfill for the past decade, this self-defeating behavior has been curtailed significantly. So, what is really going on here?

Communication 101

Communication concepts have evolved into complex modes based on dozens of models named after their developers (e.g., Lasswell, Shannon, Weaver, and McGuire). Figure 1 simplifies these models and arranges them into a business framework

Educating executives on environmental intangibles and long-term business risks requires a focused communication strategy.

EHS communication (the MacLean model?). This figure indicates that there are a number of key communication channels and feedback loops where problems may (and often do) arise if there are any serious communication breakdowns. Addressing only the link between middle management and EHS professionals or the link between EHS professionals and front-line employees will not significantly improve performance if there are other factors that control the dynamics.

Most corporations are hierarchical organizations that can respond quickly to issues if there is clear direction from the top on down through each organizational layer. The most critical communication links are those: (1) between executive business management and middle management; and (2) between EHS management and executive and middle management. (These key links are highlighted in the figure.) The former is critical due to the nature of how employees respond to top-down direction, and the latter is critical in properly formulating the messages communicated by business management throughout the organization.

There are, of course, other communication links that shape the scope and priorities of EHS programs, specifically, links to and from external stakeholders. These are identified in the upper left corner of Figure 1. They can have a significant influence over EHS programs, but how these are best influenced and managed is beyond the scope of this article.

Communicating environmental concerns can be difficult because the risks may be vague and far off into the future. As a result, the desired future state sometimes is communicated down through the organization in general terms that sound more like value statements than any sort of specific, measurable goals or marching orders. For example, "promote the protection of the environment for a sustainable future" may sound inspiring, but what does this really mean to a plant manager in actionable terms? It gets lost in more direct, top-down management messages communication such as "increase production by five percent in the next quarter."

In a similar vein, company environmental policies seldom offer little actionable direction. Safety communication, however, tends to be better aligned: the consequences for poor performance (i.e., injuries) are obvious and traditional

metrics [e.g., lost time injury rate (LTIR)] are well understood and comparable among peer companies.

Through my work inside scores of companies, I have found that there often are significant disconnects or misunderstandings between business management and EHS management over areas such as the current status with respect to environmental issues and the desired future state. These disconnects are relatively easy to detect, but surprisingly few EHS managers ever measure them. I have used a proprietary rating scale to gather this information within many large companies and the results are invariably revealing and surprising to the clients. These disconnects can lead to confusion and conflicts over program objectives, resources, and priorities.

Communication links are strongly influenced by individual knowledge and behavior as outlined in the three broad groupings in Table 1. Employees need information to make rational choices, but their actions also are influenced by two additional factors: their attitudes toward safety and environmental protection and their personal feelings over issues such as risk.

Good communication by EHS professionals can strongly influence the first characteristic (knowledge), but it may have limited influence over personal value-based decisions. To put it bluntly, there are some employees who may have all the EHS facts skillfully delivered to them, but still refuse to take what EHS professionals consider to be appropriate action. This is especially true in the case of individuals who are risk takers, ambitious, and focused on short-term objectives. Effectively influencing their behavior requires not just the facts, but top-down communication through the chain of command.

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Moreover, if the organizational behavior (i.e., company culture) is not supportive, the challenge can be even greater. The classic unsupportive culture is one where front-line managers and employees believe that EHS is not their responsibility, but is the job of the EHS professionals. How often have we run into that culture? If you are now grinning, you know exactly what I'm referring to.

The Real World

My favorite line from the 1967 movie "Cool Hand Luke" was when the warden (played by Strother Martin) announced to the chain gang, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." In the case of EHS communication, yes, there may be some of that "failure to communicate" going on. But more than likely it is a poorly executed communication strategy: lots of good communication in the wrong places, not enough in the places where it is needed the most.

A common situation that I have encountered is one in which top executives espouse EHS excellence, but after years of struggle and frustration the EHS managers resign themselves to delivering a portfolio of programs that could best be described as minimal compliance. There may be one or two programs that reflect excellence, but deep down these managers recognize that if the company's full spectrum of programs were held up to independent scrutiny, they would not be delivering what executive management, at least on the surface, is calling for.

Indeed, executives may only want to be in the middle of the pack. On the other hand, excellence could be the true desire from the top, but rarely do EHS managers test their own, possibly mistaken, assumptions. How much energy is spent assessing the real marching orders or determining if the CEOs understand the issues?

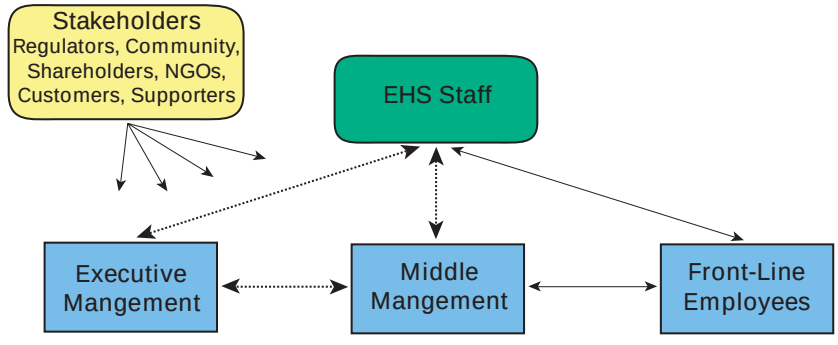
I can recall one annual EHS gathering where the CEO was present and I was having a side discussion with an EHS manager over strategy. I said, "Well, let's just go over and explore this with the CEO." You should have seen the look of panic that spread over the manager's face. To be fair, any discussion with executive leadership should be done thoughtfully (this issue could be the subject of an entire *Manager's Notebook* article). But even the most casual discussions are sometimes feared.

Educating executives on environmen-

Table 1. Communication Determinants

Individual Characteristics	Examples
Knowledge	Awareness of the facts, ability to assimilate complex issues and arrive at logical conclusions, communication skills
EHS Values	Attitude toward environmental health and safety issues and corporate social responsibility
Personal Values	Tolerance for risk, individual business priorities, willingness to set stretch goals, ambition

Figure 1. EHS Communication Links



tal intangibles and long-term business risks requires a focused communication strategy. Making the case for individual projects, even those with positive ROIs, can be problematic if management does not understand what is really at stake. If they did, they might be supportive. On the other hand, an informed management may want to only support EHS programs that are required by regulation or whenever the ROI is a complete no-brainer. How do you know unless you evaluate and test the communication links?

The Bottom Line

If there is serious dysfunctional and unsupportive behavior with regard to EHS programs, it is not necessarily solely due to poor communication skills on the part of EHS management. Yes, a well-developed business case and additional staff training on communication can help get the EHS message delivered to wider audiences inside the company. But significant progress requires that the corporate culture and all of the key communication links be evaluated and dealt with aggressively. The "broken links" discussed in this article are the source of far too many elephants in the room that some EHS professionals refuse to deal with. It is much easier to endlessly seek the magic bullet business case than it is to face the root causes for inadequate EHS support.

EHS managers have good communication skills, but they continue to be locked into traditional (read: safe) approaches for delivering their messages to the same audiences. It is not just about conveying the business case for value, but slowly and deliberately educating management at the top-most levels. Those discussions need quality time and a well-thought-out strategy. Getting "on the same page" with executives is challenging and has a degree of risk. They may see you for what you are. You may find out what they really want accomplished vis-á-vis EHS. Marketing, sales, and business executives constantly jockey for opportunities to do just this. Why not you? EP

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