Bringing safety out of the silo

Accident reduction

Occupational accidents are the symptoms of the disease of poor management, says Michael Stephens.

The main function of a safety professional is to prevent accidents and ill health at work. It is here that many concentrate their efforts – investigating accidents and near-misses and persuading management to implement control measures to prevent recurrences. This is the traditional approach and at this moment there are probably many thousands of health and safety professionals around the world talking to senior management about Bird’s triangle and targeting near-misses. But is it the correct tactic?

Unfortunately many risk professionals are generally trained to think tactically, not strategically. This means that their health and safety management is often seen as an add-on or a necessary evil. To make an impact we need to view the bigger picture and we need to understand that accidents, ill health and near-misses are all symptoms of the disease of poor management. This view is used by the Medical Research Council’s safety, security and resilience team to inspire its scientists and managers to adopt good management practice in health and safety. By taking a business approach to health and safety management and working with occupational health and human resource managers, a reduction of 90% in lost time accidents has been achieved. We need to get off the side line and treat ourselves as a business unit serving the rest of the organisation as our customer. We can do this by having a business plan for health and safety.

Health and safety professionals constantly repeat the adage that ‘good safety is good business’. But do we manage the health and safety department as other managers expect us to run their sections of the business? Generally speaking, we consider ourselves to be experts and are there to give advice, often independent of the business that employs us. We need to redefine our role and treat ourselves as a business unit serving the rest of the organisation as our customer. To do this we need to have a health and safety business plan that will radically change our health and safety performance.

1. Define your business
You need to know why you exist and what is expected of you by your market. You need to identify fully your customers, service/products, suppliers and assets. Do not assume that the customers you served yesterday will be your customers tomorrow. Be very clear at the end of this which services/products you supply and to which customers. Also, which services you ought to be supplying but don’t and which services you do supply but don’t need to.

2. Know thy self
What are the team’s achievements, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? You need to know what you are capable of achieving, identify your weaknesses and plan to address them.

3. The future
Using the information from steps 1 and 2, plot the team’s own skills and knowledge, map the health and safety departments future with that of the company. Look at product development – yours and the company’s; marketing and sales; information and administration; technology; organisation; management; people; and overall business results. In all of these areas how can you support the business?

In the pharmaceutical industry, time to marketplace is important, as a potential product may spend a substantial part of its patent life in research and development. A good example of this was the introduction of a networked programme for completing and authorising genetic modification submissions and risk assessments. The result was a cut in the bureaucratic process time from two weeks to three days and an improvement in compliance. It was not the

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compliance benefit that sold the project to management was the time saving. Safety professionals need to look past the first line safety benefits of their services/products.

4. Your vision
You are now in a position to shape your vision of the future; not weasel words, but a clear, crisp statement of what you intend to achieve and by when. Your vision should be unique, personal, challenging, achievable, simple and graphic.

5. Values and beliefs
This says how you intend to operate and shows your professionalism and ethical approach to your work.

6. Priority strategic objectives
From your vision, understanding and awareness of your company’s goals, you can develop your priority strategic objectives. These are essentially the key targets you have to achieve within the next few years in pursuit of your vision. They form the basis for developing practical plans of implementation to convert your vision into reality. These will decide how you work, what you work at and where your resources go over the next few years. They are critical so work at them. For example, what are the biggest health and safety concerns within the company with regard to reputation, financial, regulatory risk? These should be quantified and a judgment made on how they might impact the business. From then you need to decide what priority and slice of the resource cake that each will receive over the next few years. This might be old hat to risk managers but it’s still very new for many safety professionals.

7. Plan development
For each of your strategic objectives you need to put in some milestones. Where do you intend to be in one, two or three years’ time with each of them? How much should be budgeted for each of them? How are you going to measure their effectiveness?

8. Test the plan
Is it making sense? Is it factual, credible, sensitive, cost-effective and positive?

9. Sell it
First of all identify the prime movers; those people in the organisation with clout. Those people whose opinion is respected by management. Discover what benefits they would be looking for in the plan, their particular business passions; and, more importantly, what

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Think like your manager
By establishing this strong foundation of partnership with your senior managers you will find that results come automatically. You need to keep up the momentum but success will breed success. You have also focused on where your manpower, finance and time should be prioritised. You have essentially managed the time of your department and its members and you find because you all know what you’re meant to be doing, the results you want, by when and at what cost that a new team harmony develops. You have made your team more effective. Just how effective should show in your accidents statistics.

It is not easy for safety professionals to focus away from the traditional view of concentrating on accidents and identifying causes. We know the cause; it is management failure in one guise or another. It is much easier to obtain results if we, the safety professional, think like our managers rather than trying to get our managers to think like us.

Michael Stephens is Head of Safety, Security and Resilience at the Medical Research Council (UK). His book, Bringing Safety Out of the Silo, produced by IIRSM, is available to purchase at www.amazon.co.uk/Bringing-Safety-Out-Silo-Publication-ebook/dp/B01FDPDSYK