

# SAFETY IS ABOUT MANAGING PEOPLE

By N. Venkataraman

**OSH professionals interact with different people in the workplace and often encounter people with different behaviors, emotions, cultures and languages. People have different mindsets about safety compliance.**

**In a work environment**, safety can be just to comply with legal requirements or to go beyond to exceed safety performances. Safety is a shared responsibility but support from employees and resources from management are required. This article highlights the various dependencies of safety professionals and the behavior, abilities, skills and knowledge (BASK) model traits that enable safety professionals to perform in different roles as required in the workplace. Most researchers focus on ability, skills and knowledge as the key traits for competency, but the behavior of OSH professionals and workers should also be considered. Managing occupational safety is all about managing people in the workplace, external agencies and organizations. By having the right BASK, OSH professionals can succeed in their endeavor to create a safe workplace.

A safe situation is one where risks of injury or property damage are low and manageable. Safety culture of an organization develops as a result of history, work environment, the workforce, safety and health practices, and management leadership (Reason, 1998). OSH professionals often encounter people with different behaviors, emotions, cultures and languages. According to Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB, 2011):

Safety culture has been defined in a variety of ways including:

- “The way we do things around here”(Confederation of British Industry (CBI) 1990);
- “A set of attitudes, beliefs or norms” (Turner, 1989);
- “A constructed system of meaning (or shared understanding) through which the hazards of the world are understood” (Pidgeon, 1998);
- “A safety ethic” (Wert, 1986).

A useful framework based on the work of Cooper (2000) is to distinguish between three interrelated aspects of safety culture, specifically psychological aspects (often referred to as safety climate), behavioral (or organizational) aspects and situational (or corporate) aspects. The

psychological aspect of safety culture refers to how people feel about safety and safety management systems. This encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, values and perceptions of individuals and groups at all levels of the organization, which is often referred to as the safety climate of the workplace.

The objective of this article is threefold:

1. Understand the various dependencies that an OSH professional encounters in a typical workplace.
2. Suggest a model of traits that are required for OSH professionals to perform in different roles as required in the workplace.
3. Identify how a safety professional can cultivate the elements of the BASK model.

## Matrix Radial Interdependence

OSH professionals interact with various interested parties in a workplace at some point in time. Being a successful OSH professional requires support from all levels of the company, along with many hard and soft skills. An OSH professional often needs to get buy-in for ideas and earn respect from employees to gain their commitment to “doing the right thing.” OSH professionals are always caught between the demands of management, supervisors and employees. One major responsibility of the OSH professional is to ensure that the relation-

ships between various internal and external stakeholders are positive and effective. Examples of some interested parties that OSH professionals must engage are:

- Facilities departments, which handle operations such as water and waste management, power and other utilities, ventilation systems, indoor air quality, ambient air quality, chemical management and fire protection systems. An OSH professional’s interactions with facilities can be imminent and sometimes involve confrontation. In smaller organizations, there may not be independent departments, but the functions described in Figure 1 (p. 43) might remain the same.
- Finance department. For resource-related issues, interaction with a finance department is required. Whenever new regulations or concerns are raised, interaction with management and a legal department may be required.
- Procurement and supply chain. Interaction by safety professionals is required during the selection, evaluation and control of contractors and vendors.
- Human resources, administration and training departments. Interaction with these areas is required, especially during new employee training, badging, identification of training needs, competency matrix, incident reporting or claims.
- Manufacturing or production. Interaction with these groups is required for



Being a successful OSH professional requires support from all levels of the company, along with many hard and soft skills.

reviewing procedures, permits, licenses and more. In many organizations, quality department interaction is required at various stages including audits and product safety.

- Regulatory agencies. This interaction may be required for compliance, reporting and licensing.

- Management. This interaction includes committee meetings, inspections, risk assessments, updates, policy review, confirmation of objectives and targets, and allocation of resources and budget.

Thus, there is a great need for OSH professionals to adapt the BASK model to succeed in their workplace.

## The BASK Model for Safety Professionals

Skills, knowledge and expertise in related individual disciplines are essential for OSH professionals. To show professionalism when dealing with different people within the organization, safety professionals need to have the right (ideal) behavior, abilities, skills and knowledge. The BASK model is created for this study.

### Behavior

Behavior is all about an OSH professional's ability to handle people's emotions, show a positive attitude and develop a sound culture, their determination to do the job and take an unbiased approach, especially during audits, inspections and investigations. A positive safety culture exists when a set of shared values and beliefs about workplace safety and health influences and drives practices for preventing workplace injuries and illnesses. A positive attitude toward the workplace and people brings an enormous change in employee morale. This is best achieved by OSH professionals who are also safety leaders who exhibit personal safety behaviors and inspire others to do the same.

Behavior-based safety observation and intervention could be one model for OSH professionals to bring behavioral change to the organization. Safety professionals can use a safety culture questionnaire to better understand and gauge the culture (perceptions, attitudes, values and beliefs) of staff. Independent analysis of the findings from the completed questionnaires can be assessed by off-site personnel, by non-safety personnel or preferably by human resources. The questionnaire can be used to supplement other monitoring techniques such as audits to identify safety culture issues. Weaknesses in safety attitude can be identified using the

safety culture questionnaire, allowing management to develop an action plan to address any deficiencies.

Safety culture is all about values, beliefs and perception. OSH professionals must drive safety culture across the organization, and be easily approachable and accountable. Safety professionals should view safety and health as a value like honesty, working hard and reporting to work on time. Values must be embedded, while priorities might often change. Making safety a value leads to building a workplace safety culture. Thus, safety is fundamental to organizational excellence, which means safety is a core value. Safety professionals must drive and make culture changes.

One culture aspect that OSH professionals must bring is the commitment from top management and employees. Discharging the safety and health obligations, employee responsibilities, accountabilities and authorities are best managed by a safety professional. This is best done by having the policy endorsed by the top management, and by having a periodic safety meeting to get top management and employees committed to attend and share.

Safety and health performances are mostly determined by the behavior of staff. Rewards and sanctions may have to be used. OSH professionals have a greater role to play to ensure that staff behavior does not impact safety and health outcomes. This is done by having frequent meetings and interactions.

Safety professionals should be instrumental in bringing open culture in safety and health with relation to the admission of errors and fearless reporting of hazards and incidents. This helps to create an open culture that encourages people to share feedback and suggestions. OSH professionals must be determined and confident not to concede a point if conceived to be right. OSH professionals should be prepared to admit when they are wrong.

Safety professionals often need to be sensitive to others and their emotions. Believing in oneself is a good start. Employees should believe that safety professionals are trustworthy.

### Ability

Ability is all about the qualities of an individual's capability to be a good listener and to discuss with others, to be diplomatic on most occasions (rather than autocratic), to think outside the box, especially when solving problems, and to work as a team, especially while perform-

ing risk assessments, writing procedures and conducting inspections.

Some of the abilities that OSH professionals must have to be effective practitioners are:

- The ability to convince management and workers alike, especially when new processes or context are introduced.

- The ability and knowledge to analyze data.

- The quality of being a good listener. Others will have something to say. Be patient and be a good listener especially during incidents.

- The ability and mindset to prepare to communicate with others. Good safety is about good teamwork.

- Being diplomatic. Get positive engagement rather than negative confrontation.

- Thinking outside the box. This helps to broaden the thinking process and often helps to solve a complicated problem.

- The ability to work as a team, which always yields positive results.

- Learn quickly. Master related safety areas outside one's specific expertise and be current in legal and technological advancements.

- Focus. The ability and will to stay focused on real safety rather than trivial issues.

- Flexibility. The ability to be flexible and not just follow theories is important for OSH professionals to manage staff.

### Skills

Skills are about the ability to learn quickly about the working environment, people and processes, to be articulate and possess the soft skills that help gain management confidence and to focus on the issues, building relationships with internal customers and external agencies. The skills needed by safety professionals include effective interpersonal communication, problem-solving, information technology, an eye for detail, learning and teaching, and the skill to work as a team amidst a diverse workforce in terms of culture, demographics and language skills. Being safe itself is a skill. Lastly, OSH professionals must not be biased toward gender, age or race. Soft and technical skills that are necessary for safety professionals include (Skjerven, 2019):

- Compassion and empathy: These are guiding skills for every safety professional, as the role concerns people (e.g., injured, ill or greatly distressed people).

- Labor relations: OSH professionals may need to manage labor issues such as harassment, discrimination, and the negative and positive theory X-Y person-

## FIGURE 1 INTERACTION BETWEEN THE OSH PROFESSIONAL & OTHERS



nel (Kopelman et al., 2008). (Theory X assumes that the average person dislikes work and will avoid it unless directly supervised, employees must be coerced, controlled and directed to ensure that organizational objectives are met. Theory Y assumes that people are relatively ambitious, keen to accept greater responsibility and exercise both self-control and direction, and employees will, in the right conditions, work toward organizational objectives and that commitment will in itself be a reward for so doing.) An OSH professional's skill in managing labor in conjunction with human resources management is very important.

- Leadership: Safety professionals must be great leaders. Like any other skill, leadership is a skill that can and must be learned and practiced. Leaders are made by education, experience, professional development and the desire for personal growth. OSH professionals must learn to lead by being mentored and supported by their leaders, and be the new leaders by mentoring and supporting others in turn.

- Articulation skills: OSH professionals often make their points clearly to others, and particularly to senior decision-makers, which is favorable for a positive outcome.

- Relationship building: Sound working relationships with the internal and external world are paramount for safety professionals.

- Corporate finances: Managing finances is part of every safety professional's job, including creating and operating within a budget, and understanding economic principles such as return on investment.

- Ergonomics: OSH professionals must have an applied level of knowledge and must be competent in specialized areas of safety and health such as ergonomics. In doing so, safety professionals need to manage a successful ergonomics program element in a safety management system and be able to explain to management why ergonomic interventions are cost-effective.

- Fatigue management: Safety professionals are now in a different environment, as many people work from home. Fatigue can result in everything from poor production and quality of work to catastrophic failures and high potential

for incidents. OSH professionals need to have a good understanding and the skill to reduce fatigue at the workplace.

- Records and information management: The ability to organize and maintain records is a skill. Getting the information on time is one strength that safety professionals can cultivate.

### Knowledge

The process of acquiring and possessing knowledge is all about learning from others' failures (OSH professionals conduct root-cause analysis and communicate lessons learned from failures as a preventive action). Safety professionals must have the right knowledge. OSH professionals must know the latest and be able to update leaders on various issues that affect management. They must have knowledge on legal requirements but must also acquire or learn soft skills such as presentation skills, leadership and finance, as noted. It is important for safety professionals to know the latest information and keep up to date.

Often safety professionals act as advisors. To effectively advise, they should have thorough knowledge of the safety subject and perform the role as subject matter experts in at least one discipline or technical area.

Knowledge is wasted if not shared. OSH professionals should mentor and ready the team, and share knowledge with oth-

ers. Knowledge is not static. Safety professionals should have updated and good overall knowledge; they should read and interact with peers or supervisors to gain more knowledge on the company's business, whether technical, financial or administrative aspects.

Gap analysis is an important and first step for OSH professionals to understand where they stand concerning the traits of BASK. Although there are no standard tools that give a holistic approach to BASK scoring, assessments can be made on specific individuals to identify the gaps. Skills and knowledge can be acquired but changing behavior and attitudes is a long and committed

path. Employers should invest resources in OSH professionals. The ability to perform to some extent is a mindset but also depends on the work environment.

### Conclusion

The practice of safety and health is not always about writing and implementing policies, training and procedures. Managing OSH is all about managing people in the workplace and with external agencies and organizations. A good safety and health management program and system can help OSH professionals to succeed. Having the right BASK, safety professionals can succeed in their endeavor to create a safe workplace. **PSJ**

### References

- Cooper, M.D. (2000). Towards a model of safety culture. *Safety Science*, 36(2), 111-136. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-7535\(00\)00035-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0925-7535(00)00035-7)
- Kopelman, R.E., Prottas, D.J. & Davis, A.L. (2008) Douglas McGregor's theory X and Y: Toward a construct-valid measure. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 20(2), 255-271.
- Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB). (2011, Sep. 7). What is safety culture? Safety Culture Toolkit. <https://bit.ly/3u6Vbc2>
- Reason, J. (1998). Achieving a safe culture: Theory and practice. *Work and Stress*, 12(3), 293-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678379808256868>
- Skjerven, H. (2019, June). Seven skills every safety professional needs. *Professional Safety*, 64(6), 29-30.

**N. Venkataraman (Venkat) Ph.D, M.Tech, CSP, WSHO**, is principal consultant with Fides Global Pte. Ltd., in Singapore. He has more than 36 years of experience in the functional areas of environment, OSH, energy, and sustainability engineering and management in Singapore, China and India, within the semiconductor, process, manufacturing and consulting sectors. He holds a Ph.D. and Master's degree in Chemical Engineering and Environmental Management, and has authored several books, journal articles and conference papers.