

## SIX LESSONS FROM THE FIELD FOR NEW SAFETY PROFESSIONALS

By Julie Hoffman Ceder

**Each year, new safety professionals enter the field from universities across the country with safety curricula designed to prepare them for their future careers. But whether you are a recent graduate seeking your first safety job or have been working in the field for a while, the road ahead may seem uncertain and does not come with a road map.**

**I have enjoyed** my safety career in manufacturing and view it as a great privilege. This article presents several lessons I have learned throughout my career.

### 1. Understand Your Role

This is perhaps the most difficult element for any safety professional to understand, especially if a strong safety culture does not exist. You may want to create a safety culture in your first safety assignment out of college, but that may not be the best place to start. Working for an organization that already understands why it needs you and has clearly defined OSH roles and responsibilities—not only for you but for the entire company—is crucial.

Working for an organization with a strong safety culture allows you to apply your technical skills and knowledge by maintaining safety processes and programs. Look for ways to improve those existing processes and programs as you begin your career. This may sound like dry stuff, but if you are working in manufacturing, simply maintaining safety processes is heavy lifting because of fast-paced changes brought about by new equipment, new technology, business growth or downturns, and employee turnover. All that adds another level of difficulty to the task.

If you work in an organization that does not understand the role of the safety professional, you may be assigned ongoing tasks or projects that take away from the time you need to spend learning and developing core competencies. But that is not the most significant impact. If

the role of the safety professional is not understood, line management does not understand their role either. Safety does not live in a culture without line management living it first.

### 2. Learn From a Mentor

If you work in an organization that understands your role on the team, you will also likely work directly with or have regular interaction with senior safety professionals within the company. Mentorship under a senior safety professional throughout your career will be extremely important, but never more so than in your first years. A senior safety professional will have seen what works, what does not and why. These reasons can be local and unique to the company or the facility. You cannot know what created the culture you are working in; you must learn it from others. Check your ego so you can learn from them. Naturally, you will want to try your own ideas, but if you collaborate with fellow safety professionals and operations leaders on the team, you will find solutions that stick. Mentors will want to help you because they like you; they see themselves in you and they see your potential. Act in a way that makes you likable.

### 3. Nobody Cares What You Know Until They Know You Care

Retired U.S. Army General Thomas Schwartz is a West Point graduate who served as a platoon leader and company commander in Vietnam, earning a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. His distinguished career spanned 35 years and his legacy was his soldiers. Schwartz is quoted as saying, “Soldiers don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” (Anderson & Anderson, 2016).

A corollary for the safety professional is, “Nobody cares how much you know until they know you care about their safety.” The responsibility you have toward your team members extends to their families and those they love. Trust me when I say that you want to meet their loved ones at the company picnic or the annual

holiday party and not in the emergency room. Unfortunately, throughout my career I have met many team members’ families and friends in that setting. This part of the job cannot be learned in the classroom. Loved ones see you as the face of the company and ask, “How did this happen?” Ready or not, you owe them an answer, even if it is simply a commitment to learn from the incident so that it never happens again. You also owe them your time in the emergency waiting room during surgery and often coordinate their follow-up care depending on company resources and organizational structure. You will play a critical role in returning injured team members to work and a full paycheck. This part of your job is not visible to many, but those you help will know you care.

### 4. Don't Try to Prove Yourself

When I began working, I thought I had a lot to prove. I was entering the workforce in the mid-1980s as a woman in a male-dominated profession. My father worked at Alcoa, and I was curious about the work he was doing with the corporate safety director, a remarkable man by the name of Jim Archibald. I was a high school student at the time and was looking at various health professions. It was through their work relationship and Jim’s mentorship over the next 5 years that I found the safety profession. Dozens of safety professionals have experienced his mentorship and it had a profound effect on their careers.

I worked for Alcoa as an intern while earning a master’s in safety. After graduating, I worked in offshore oil and gas production for 2 years but returned to Alcoa in 1990. I felt a strong desire to prove myself because I was working for the same company as my father. The desire to excel is healthy, but the desire to prove yourself may lead to taking unnecessary risks.

I shudder at one particular memory of conducting an elevated work survey while I was 6 months pregnant with my first child. A coworker and I climbed

### Vantage Point

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three fixed ladders to assess fall hazards and controls at the top level of an age-anneal oven that stood 30-ft high. I was completely ignorant of the risk I was in as a pregnant woman. I made it safely to the top and after a brief panic attack at the prospect of climbing back down, I carefully returned to ground level with the help of my coworker and stayed there for the rest of my pregnancy. I do not know that I proved much to myself or anyone else except that it was a foolish thing to do.

The sense of needing to prove yourself is not necessarily a gender-related pressure. It may be about age. It is difficult to separate the two. I am grateful for an engineering manager I worked with early in my career who shared her thoughts with me. "You may think you're being singled out for being female, but that's not what's going on," she told me. "It's because you're young, and we eat our young." I was relieved; competition is great, and it levels the playing field. It also framed things for me in terms of the team. The more accomplished a team is, the more likely there will be an informal but real pressure to perform at a certain level.

As the newcomer, you are an unknown, and your competency level will affect the overall team. Be aware of how your actions affect the team early in your career and keep that awareness as you grow throughout your career.

In more general terms, when you graduate from college, you may be different from everyone else for many age-related reasons. You likely are not married and do not have children. You likely have not juggled a two-career marriage. You may not have figured out how to respond to issues at work in the middle of the night with toddlers at home nor have cared for an elderly parent for an extended period while juggling work responsibilities. Nobody holds these things against you. But they do make you different. As you gain experience on the job, you'll also be gaining life experiences that come along with it.

## 5. Don't Worry About Your Next Promotion

If you are thinking about your next promotion, you will miss the opportunities right in front of you. Your peers and supervisors may think you are just in it for the money, the title and the trappings of success. Focus instead on learning your current job and doing it to the best of your ability. This will make up for many other shortcomings (and we all have them).



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To take advantage of the opportunities in your current role, assess your technical skills and gaps as well as your people skills and gaps. The best candidate for those future jobs will be good at both. They may not be the strongest technically, nor the best people person, but the one who is equally proficient at both will excel beyond their peers. Your supervisor or manager can assist you with this assessment and help you close those gaps. Each new project or additional responsibility you are assigned is an opportunity to develop additional skills and close that gap. An important caution: Do not expect a raise every time you take on something new. Raises do not come from doing more; they come from the results of your efforts on the team.

I joined Kaiser Aluminum in 2011 and joined the team in Chandler, AZ, following an acquisition. The management team was open to growing the safety culture. Watching the results of our efforts take root and continue to improve over many years was one of the most rewarding times in my career.

One of the most significant things we accomplished during this time was mobile equipment risk reduction. In 2016, we established a site-wide mobile equipment safety team with representatives from every department including a cross section of line management. The team conducted pedestrian risk surveys by assigned areas. Subteams completed plant

floor observations in assigned areas over time to understand where and why fork trucks and pedestrians intersected. These areas were risk ranked by calculating probability and severity to begin the process of eliminating the highest-ranked mobile equipment risks.

In 2016, pedestrian doors were installed at two bay doors that lacked a means to separate pedestrian walkways from fork truck aisles. In 2016 and 2017, fork truck alternatives were evaluated, and powered pallet jacks were purchased to transport scrap tubs. A ride-on pallet jack was purchased to deliver billets to three of the four presses in the extrusion press department. In 2017, a locked safety gate was installed at the fourth press to prevent fork trucks with aluminum billet from entering the mill past the delivery point. Rules were established for the supervisor to open the gate during non-routine tasks using specific guidelines. The team named it the "Damian Gate" after the press lead who spearheaded the project. The engagement throughout this project was amazing.

Additionally, scrap tubs and racks were modified for use with fork truck alternatives. Other carts and scrap tubs with lighter material were modified with casters for pushing manually. Designated walkways with guardrails were designed and installed to protect pedestrian traffic through the main walkways in the mill. From 2016 to 2018, fork truck alternatives were assessed to eliminate the use of fork trucks to load and unload age anneal ovens. In 2019, a multiyear capital project for several million dollars began to design, build and install automated cart pullers in the finishing department to load and unload age-anneal ovens, which would eliminate the highest overall mobile equipment risk in the mill. Engineering and maintenance expertise was essential during this project. The chief engineer and his team stepped up at every challenge and found solutions to meet the mobile equipment team's objectives. Today, feedback on the oven cart pullers is overwhelmingly positive. Specifically, they are not only safer, but also more user-friendly and a time saver.

These experiences would later lead me to a multisite safety role, then to operations roles. If I had been looking for the next promotion, I would have missed being a part of this highly engaged team whose efforts yielded year-over-year improvements in mobile equipment risk reduction. Enjoy the time you have in the



role that you are in, give it your all and let the rest take care of itself.

## 6. Own Your Mistakes

According to Anderson and Anderson (2016), “While it may be counterintuitive, owning your mistakes is a sign of strength, not weakness.” This is an extremely powerful message both professionally and personally. The authors elaborate:

If you own your mistakes, you avoid the victim mentality which is everywhere in business and in personal lives. Many leaders would rather eat a bug than admit to others they made a mistake or expose a weakness. Exposing your own failures is not a sign of weakness. Hiding your failures is! Nobody believes we are perfect. In fact, when we own up to our weaknesses, we are rarely telling them anything they don't already know.

When we admit our frailties to people who already know what those frailties are, what we gain

is respect. We gain trust. We gain allies. Exposing your weaknesses actually attracts followers. An interesting thing happens when you swallow your pride and begin to expose your weaknesses and failures to others—you begin to take ownership of them. You begin to grow and gain from others what you were afraid of losing—respect, trust and allegiance.

Sometimes all it takes to resolve conflict is admitting to being wrong. The air clears and the focus goes back to solving the problem at hand. This is what we do as safety professionals; we solve problems with operations and maintenance leaders to reduce the likelihood someone will get hurt at work. Keep that goal in front of you in everything you do.

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## Conclusion

I offer these lessons learned from my experience hoping to give new safety professionals some context or a bigger picture to help as they begin their careers. The safety profession is an incredibly rewarding path. You have been entrusted with a great deal of responsibility and you can have an incredibly positive influence on many people. Enjoy the journey. **PSJ**

## References

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## Cite this article

Ceder, J.H. (2022, Dec.). Six lessons from the field for new safety professionals. *Professional Safety*, 67(12), 36-38.



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