

Transitioning From UNIVERSITY TO INDUSTRY

By Kory Pearson

New graduates with safety degrees from accredited programs are often eager to join the workforce and start utilizing their safety expertise and influence. However, as adequate as many institutions are at teaching safety guidelines and best practices to aspiring professionals, they may fall short when it comes to the people aspect of the job.

No matter what industry you work in, being an effective safety professional is less about enforcing regulations, programs and audits, and more about managing the different personalities one encounters in the workforce.

This article aims to help inexperienced safety graduates, who may believe that workplace safety is as clear-cut as in their textbooks, navigate the gray areas of workplace safety. Reflecting on my past 10 years of experience, it was the first couple of years that provided subjective insight and perspective to that gray area. This article broadly defines three groups found in every workplace and offers advice on how to best proceed to achieve success.

The Boss

What do you see when you look at the image in Figure 1? Some people see an old woman; others see a young one. This well-known ambiguous image is a great example demonstrating perspective. In your career, understanding your manager's perspective on what makes a good safety manager, then focusing on embodying those things is imperative for success. Not only will it make you more effective in your current role, but it will also help you gain valuable insight and experience that will help you improve down the line in your overall career.

That being said, every manager is different. Therefore, it is best to be direct with whomever you report to and ask, "From your perspective, what makes a good safety professional?" Some bosses believe that a good safety professional should be the workplace "safety cop," finding rule infractions and disciplining errant employees.

Other bosses think employee training and program development are most important. Others still believe a good safety professional should have a plethora of audit forms and checklists available for supervision and support staff. Clear communication about expectations will reduce overall frustration and confusion for both of you while ensuring that the job still gets done to everyone's satisfaction.

Hourly Employees

Workplace safety has come a long way. According to Greengard (2012), when employers started paying attention to workplace safety factors, they discovered a relationship between safety culture and insurance cost. Today, managing employee risks and injuries has become status quo for those running good businesses, and that is why companies hire safety professionals.

Our primary job is to establish and enforce workplace practices that will promote the safety of every employee. Sometimes, this requires making significant changes to the existing system. Change may be met with resistance because it is not the way "things have always been done." Safety professionals must strike a delicate balance. Make it clear that you can and will address unsafe conditions and risks. But, at the same time, if employees view you as negatively affecting their jobs, they could (intentionally or unintentionally) make your job more difficult by withholding potential hazard information from you. That hurts everyone because you cannot correct missteps that you do not know are being made.

For this reason, it is important for a safety professional to earn employees' trust. Clearly explain your role

so there is no confusion that you are there to keep employees safe while still working efficiently. Practice being personable and relatable so that employees feel comfortable discussing issues with you. Be consistent with recommendations and honest in your feedback so employees recognize you as the expert. Over time, you will earn their confidence and trust. Moreover, it will garner you even greater influence in the company's overall safety culture and performance.

Other Employees

Beyond hourly employees with whom we work directly, safety profes-

FIGURE 1 AMBIGUOUS IMAGE

A well-known ambiguous image that depicts both an old woman and a young woman, and can be perceived as either by the brain. The old woman is looking off to the left, while the young woman is facing away, looking over her right shoulder (the old woman's nose is also the young woman's chin).



Note. Reprinted from "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law. They Are Both in This Picture—Find Them" [Illustration], by W.E. Hill, 1915, *Puck*, 78(2018), 11. Public domain.

Vantage Point

Vantage Point articles in *Professional Safety* provide a forum for authors with distinct viewpoints to share their ideas and opinions with ASSP members and the OSH community. The goal is to encourage and stimulate critical thinking, discussion and debate on matters of concern to the OSH profession. The views and opinions expressed are strictly those of the author(s) and are not necessarily endorsed by *Professional Safety*, nor should they be considered an expression of official policy by ASSP.



No matter what industry you work in, being an effective safety professional is less about enforcing regulations, programs and audits, and more about managing the different personalities one encounters in the workforce.

sionals also have the unique challenge of influencing other employees we do not directly supervise. These individuals typically include salaried team members who work in departments such as human resources, management, information technology and others. Safety professionals will inevitably work with and need the assistance of these individuals. For example, assistance from human resources counterparts could be in the form of a discipline plan for safety rule infractions, or assistance from information technology may involve a rollout of a new injury reporting software.

Following the aforementioned tips about understanding different perspectives and being relatable will help you in this mission. However, it is also important to find ways to serve these coworkers, invoking the reciprocity principle. In his book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, Cialdini (2006) states that human beings are wired to return favors and pay back debts. In practice, if a coworker needs help coordinating an improvement project or seeks a weekend volunteer, find a way to help. The next time you ask the coworker for assistance, s/he will find it difficult to say no because, in theory, the person would feel the need to repay the previous favor. This reciprocity principle can be useful; more importantly, it works with any group of people. A word of caution: Do not be the safety professional who,

in an effort to provide help, takes on more responsibility than can be effectively managed. For the reciprocity principle to work, there must be balance and repayment.

Conclusion

Employing safety professionals with a strong educational foundation in the safety sciences is the minimum needed for most workplaces today; safety professionals must have knowledge of safety principles and regulations gained through formal education. However,

Kory Pearson, M.B.A., CSP, is currently working as a safety specialist for a tire manufacturer, and has 10 years of experience in various roles and industries. He holds an M.B.A. from Union University and a B.S. in Occupational Safety and Health from Murray State University. Pearson is a professional member of ASSP's Augusta Chapter.

Math Toolbox, continued from pp. 48-52

Answers: The Case of the Overloaded Sling You Do the Math

Your answers may vary slightly due to rounding.

$$1) T_{per\ sling\ leg} = \frac{4,283}{2 \cdot \sin 45} = 3,028.54\ lb$$

$$2) T_{per\ sling\ leg} = \frac{6,315}{2 \cdot \sin 60} = 3,645.97\ lb$$

$$3a) T_{per\ sling\ leg} = \frac{5,427}{2 \cdot \sin 20} = 7,933.74\ lb$$

3b) Due to the extreme stresses created by sling angles of less than 30°, most standards and regulations would prohibit

new safety graduates who believe that their education has prepared them for the dynamics of a real workplace may become frustrated when things are not as clear-cut as some compliance literature makes them seem.

Take what you learned in university and apply it, but also recognize that the end goal is the well-being of employees. Reaching that goal may require some adaptability, professional experience and growth. Additionally, to be taken seriously and to be most effective, safety professionals must earn the trust and respect of the people they work with. That is why one must strive to find perspective, develop trustworthiness by being relatable and honest, and, when necessary, invoke the reciprocity principle to influence the action of others. If done right, the transition from academia to the workplace can be successful in creating strong, effective safety cultures in businesses. **PSJ**

References

- Cialdini, R.B. (2006). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. New York, NY: Harper Business.
- Greengard, S. (2012, Jan. 4). Playing it safe: A look at workplace safety during the roaring '20s and now. *Workforce*. Retrieved from www.workforce.com/2012/01/04/playing-it-safe-a-look-at-workplace-safety-during-the-roaring-20s-and-now
- Hill, W.E. (1915, Nov. 6). My wife and my mother-in-law. They are both in this picture—find them [Illustration]. *Puck*, 78(2018), 11. Retrieved from www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010652001

the 20° angle of loading unless approved by a qualified person. Note that the stress on each sling leg, individually (7,933.74 lb per leg), is greater than the weight of the entire load (5,427 lb).

How Much Have I Learned?

$$4) T_{per\ sling\ leg} = \frac{3,487}{2 \cdot \sin 48} = 2,346.11\ lb$$

$$5) T_{per\ sling\ leg} = \frac{4,092}{2 \cdot \sin 62} = 2,317.24\ lb$$

The Language of Sling Leg Tension

6) b; 7) e; 8) a; 9) g; 10) f; 11) c; 12) h; 13) d.