

AN INSIDER JOB: 10 TIPS FOR IMPROVED INTERNAL SAFETY CONSULTING

By Carl Potter and Deb Potter

Often, it seems like the job of the safety director, manager, or coordinator is a “no win” job. Everyone blames the person in charge of the safety department when the safety performance is poor. Moreover, the safety manager just doesn’t understand why the rest of the company doesn’t “get” safety.

Sometimes, it’s a matter of perspective about the role of the safety function in the organization.

The most successful organizations treat the role of the safety director or coordinator as an internal consultant who has safety expertise rather than direct responsibility for worker safety.

A SUITCASE AND 50 MILES FROM HOME

What’s the definition of a consultant? An old joke in the business is that it’s anyone with a suitcase, 50 miles from home. A lot of people call themselves consultants, but sadly, many don’t know what that means.

The real definition of a consultant is someone who works objectively to bring knowledge, experience, and expertise to the organization for the purpose of improving its operations and profitability; the objective is to leave the organization better than they found it. Certainly, many good external consultants are available to work with your organization to improve the safety processes and outcomes.

But, you don’t necessarily have to go outside for that kind of assistance. You or someone in your organization may be a great internal safety consultant.

INTERNAL CONSULTANT: TWO SIDES OF THE COIN

The role of an internal safety consultant is much different than an external advisor – the biggest difference is that the outsider gets to leave eventually! The internal consultant gets to stay and deal with the politics and personalities of the organization. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is that the internal consultant’s role is to exert influence over an individual, group, or organization without direct

power to make changes. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, it’s just important to recognize it.

To make the most of this type of role, consider the following tips to improve your internal consulting skills:



1. IDENTIFY YOUR SPECIFIC AREA OF SAFETY EXPERTISE.

What’s your specialty – do you have specific experience in safety that makes you the expert? Maybe you have years of hands-on experience, education, or both. Leverage your expertise to build your credibility with your internal “clients”.

2. LEARN TO ASK GOOD QUESTIONS.

One of the traits of a good consultant is to ask a lot of questions. The focus is on “ask” rather than “tell”. You may want to start a list of questions to have “in your hip pocket”.

3. UNDERSTAND YOUR MISSION.

In a lot of companies, safety professionals end up in their jobs by default. Maybe they had the right mix of education and experience; often they have good technical skills, seem to work safe, and get along with others. Once they are in the safety department, suddenly they have to deal with the people they once worked beside. If you’re in that spot, it’s

probably tough to now be “the safety cop”. It’s easier to just be everyone’s good buddy. Safety coordinators often describe their role as building on relationships – translated: I’d rather make friends than enemies. Remember, your job is to objectively provide information and guidance and deliver the truth even when it’s not popular.

4. DEVELOP YOUR COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS.

Talk may be cheap, but it’s how you get things done in an organization. As an internal safety consultant, you’ll need to be able to talk with everyone in the organization from the CEO to the front-line employees. In your role, you have to be able to deliver information that no one wants to hear. Sometimes you have to stand in the gap and let management know that they are not being responsible or they are breaking the law. Your job is to determine how to deliver that kind of information so that it’s not rejected and so people will take action when necessary.

5. BE THE “GUIDE ON THE SIDE”.

Far too often, safety professionals either put themselves or allow themselves to be put in the position of making decisions that are best made by operational leaders who have the responsibility for creating and maintaining a safe workplace. Be the “go-to” person when it comes to your organization’s safety management process, but resist the temptation to take on activities best left to line management, especially when it comes to dealing with personnel issues related to safety.

6. LOOK FIRST AT THE PROCESS, NOT THE PEOPLE, TO FIND THE PROBLEM.

When it comes to safety, it’s easy to jump to the conclusion that “people just don’t follow the rules.” That may be true, but what is the underlying cause? Have you checked your processes lately? What is the process for communicating

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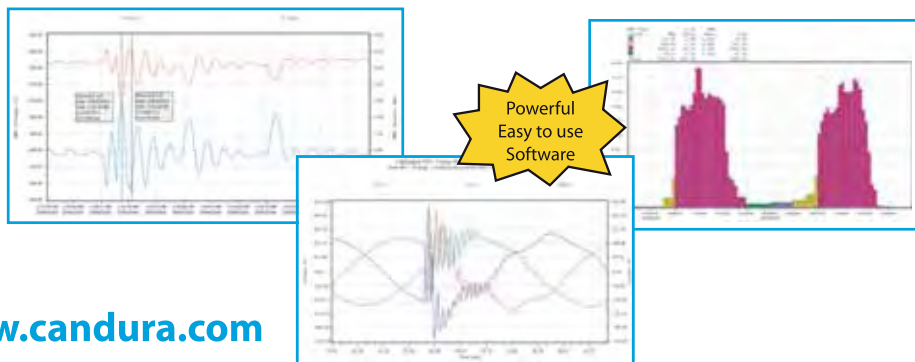
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work practices? Is there a process for variances when necessary? If you want to create a sustainable safety system, good processes have to be in place and people need to know what they are.

7. DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS AT VARIOUS LEVELS ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION.

Successful internal consultants find it essential to keep a pulse on the organization by developing a wide range of relationships in the organization. While the guy in the accounting department might seem boring because all he talks about is numbers, you might be surprised how he can help you when you're looking for budget money for those new safety tools or that improvement project. Get out of your organizational rut and build some new relationships.

8. HELP OTHERS UNDERSTAND THEIR ROLES WITH REGARD TO SAFETY

Too often, supervisors and managers in operational areas move up to those positions without having any formal safety training and they lead others based on their own experience, or worse, they think safety is someone else's responsibility. Help others understand that everyone has a role when it comes to safety. Discuss specific responsibilities with leaders at all levels of your organization. Get clear about your role and help them get clear about theirs when it comes to safety.

9. LOOK AT SAFETY FROM THE BIG PICTURE PERSPECTIVE.

Safety isn't just about preventing injury. While that's certainly the desired result, creating a safe workplace requires things like knowing how to plan and budget, how the safety process affects and is affected by quality and productivity requirements, and what can lead to improved profits. No longer can safety professionals just consider the technical and regulatory aspects, but also, to be successful they must understand the business in which they work.

10. KEEP ON LEARNING.

The most successful consultants, whether internal or external, are lifelong learners. What you know today is not all you need to know to be successful in the future. The world is a rapidly changing place and new advances in safety technology, management practices, and leadership are revealed constantly. If you're not constantly learning new things, you're consistently falling behind.

ASSUME THE POSITION

The concept of an internal safety consultant may seem a bit foreign to you. However, if you think about it, it can help you position yourself as an expert in your organization. Use these ten tips to improve your own internal safety consulting skills to make your organization a safer place to work. If you're not in the safety department, pass this information along to those who are. Work together to make your workplace one where nobody gets hurt.

Carl Potter, CSP, CMC and Deb Potter, PhD, CMC work with organizations that want to create an environment where nobody gets hurt. As advocates of a zero-injury workplace, they are safety speakers, authors, and consultants to industry.