

## **Gaining that support**

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### **Introduction**

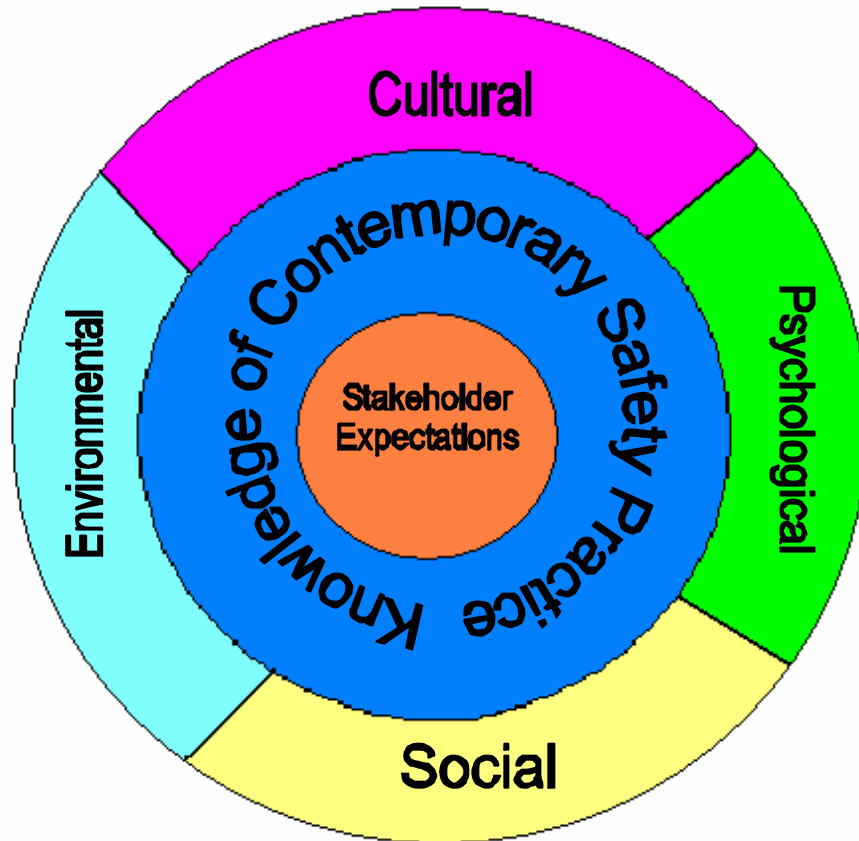
In the last two decades we have witnessed increased pressure on managers and leaders in organisations throughout Australia. The eighties brought about rapid technological changes. In the nineties we saw radical changes that were aimed at improving organisational efficiency. *Downsizing, rightsizing, re-grouping, rationalisation, total quality management* and *business process re-engineering* were the buzzwords. In many instances these processes failed with significant consequences for the organisations. Senior executives often moved on, while the organisation's long term managers and leaders were asked to pick up the pieces with a leaner workforce and increased output expectations. While the pre-nineties view of management has almost disappeared from our memories over the last two to three years, we are recognising that the role of managers and leaders within organisations is continuing to evolve.

In many organisations managers and leaders are not only expected to perform their traditional functions of supervising, organising, directing and controlling, they are also required to develop a great breadth of knowledge across a variety of complex business disciplines. With rapid changes affecting managers and leaders coupled with increased expectations from the organisation's stakeholders, it starts to become clear that it is often difficult for occupational health and safety to realise its' true importance as a critical element of an organisation's well-being and success.

### **Influential Factors**

Extensive research has been conducted over the years in leadership (Bass, 1990; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Senge 1990; Senge et al, 1994; Wheatley, 1994). Many views now surround the psychological makeup of leaders and managers. Recognising that several influential factors impact on a leader/manager's safety decision-making process and overall attitude toward safety can be important to understanding their preferred platform for safety management. These factors may include stakeholder expectations, knowledge of contemporary safety practice along with underlying influences from cultural, psychological, social and environmental issues. Perceptive occupational health and safety practitioners appreciate that these factors may influence a manager's interpretation of their role in the safety management process.

## DIAGRAM ONE FACTORS INFLUENCING SAFETY LEADERSHIP



In attempting to gain an understanding of each of these issues affecting management attitudes & behaviours, the safety practitioner can begin to comprehend the manager's rationale for decision-making regarding safety. Failure of the safety practitioner to acknowledge the impact of one of these issues upon behaviours may result in preconceived judgments of their manager or leader and subsequently impact the effectiveness of their "influencing" capabilities.

Consider this extreme example of a senior manager. *William moved to Australia ten years ago from a third world country where he had worked in operational roles for ten years. He is a hard worker, a man of technical excellence. He has worked in a number of supervisory positions in Australia and was recently promoted to a leadership role based on his technical excellence and hard work. He is now ultimately responsible for the safety of an entire department. A safety practitioner reports to him. The selection criteria for his position did not reflect safety performance. He has never been held accountable for safety performance before and in his former country "industrial safety" is not recognised. What preconceived views might William have?*

The manager/leader's **perception of their role with respect to safety** will be also influenced by the other factors highlighted in diagram one. Experience shows us that,

in many senior management roles in the workplace, decisions and implementation strategies are often based on an individual's subjective interpretation and assessment of the requirements of the role. While their interpretation may be largely influenced by stakeholder expectations, once again, cultural, psychological, social and environmental issues all may indirectly contribute to an individual's perception of their role.

To assist in ensuring role objectivity, many leading organisations now recognise the importance of incorporating safety accountability into position descriptions, job instructions and establishing key performance indicators for individual or corporate safety performance. These processes have largely proven successful in reduction of Lost Time Injury Frequency Rates (albeit that some have been deceptively doctored to ensure that a projected result is obtained).

In considering all these issues, safety practitioners must recognise that managers and leaders view the tasks and the role of the safety practitioner through the "*rose coloured glasses*" of their life experiences. If practitioners can recognise and focus on the positive attributes of our leaders occupational health and safety experiences, we can establish a basis from which to develop our platform for improved safety performance. If we don't or won't recognise our manager's views on occupational health and safety we are trying to build our platform on a base, which may be unstable.

## **#PRINCIPLE ONE**

**We should find out where our Manager/Leader is coming from and use this as the starting point for influencing safety culture.**

## **PRACTICAL TIPS**

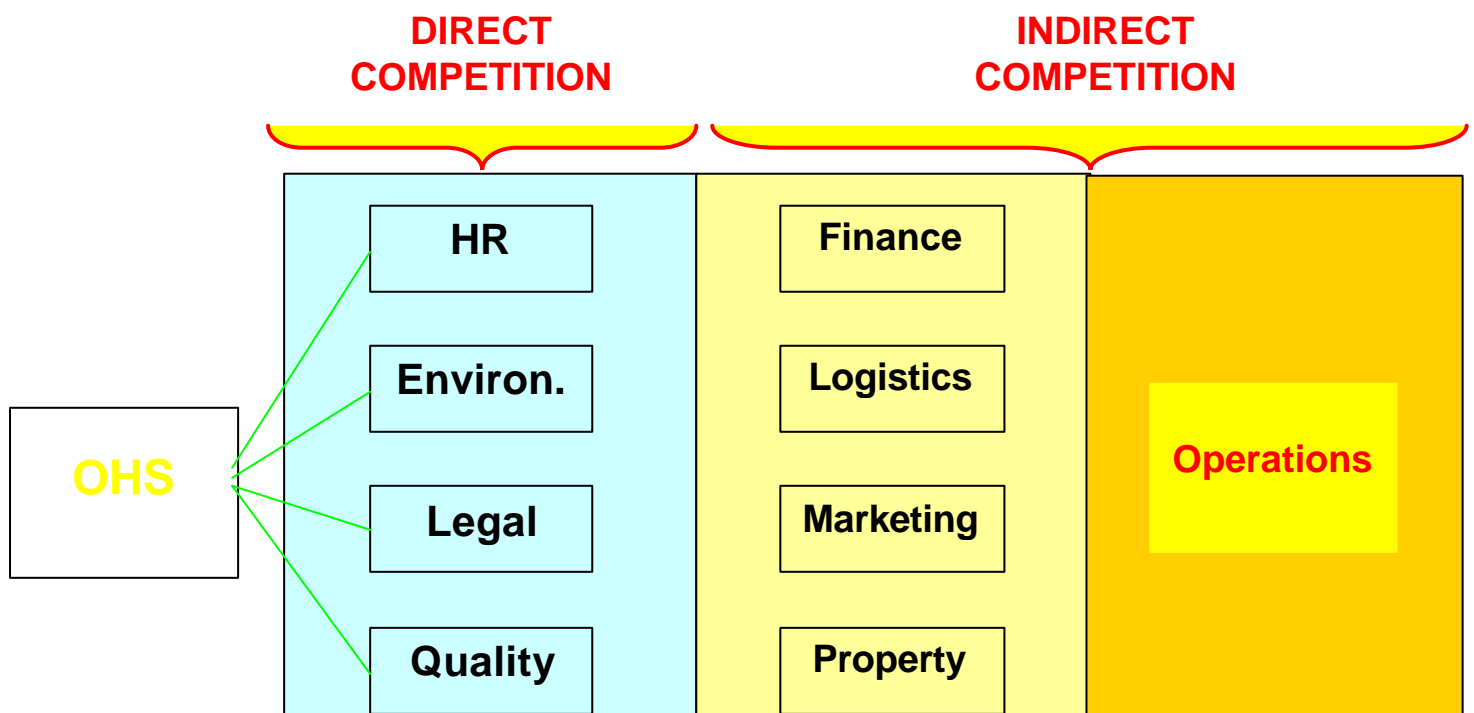
**Make an appointment with your manager and ask them some open-ended positive questions like:**

- **What do you consider important for me to focus on?**
- **Do you have any ideas on areas that you think I could improve?**
- **We had X accidents over the last three months, I am concerned that this is a reflection on me as a safety practitioner. What do you think I should do to help eliminate these accidents?**
- **From your past experiences, can you highlight to me any best practice approaches to health & safety that I could be using?**

## Market share

While it is recognised that pro-active occupational health and safety should form one of the cornerstones used by management/leaders to build a successful organisation, practitioners must also recognise that there are other critical factors related to the creation of a successful organisation. Many of these functions compete for management attention.

The occupational health and safety practitioner must distinguish that they are competing for management commitment and availability in the same way that organisations compete for market share but on a smaller scale. The occupational health and safety function may directly compete for management attention and, in some respects management commitment, with departmental groups including human resources, environment, legal and quality. In many organisations we see these functions (often labelled as cost centres) are grouped together. Grouping may occur, and a functional head such as a human resources manager or a corporate services manager may be appointed to oversee these activities. The aggregation of these functions may result in decreased management attention on occupational health and safety as information filtering to senior management occurs through a biased departmental head. Ideally, direct reporting relationship to senior management should be established for the occupational health and safety practitioner to minimise information filtering and ensure correct decisions relating to safety can be made rapidly.



The occupational health and safety function may also indirectly compete with finance, logistics, marketing, property and operations. While it is anticipated that management attention is focussed on profitability and operability of the organisation, the operational aspects of their role may consume management such that support functions do not receive due attention.

Practitioners must recognise that marketing of their function is important to gaining support and commitment. Further, they should regularly become marketers of their function and comprehend that such marketing must be carried out internally (management & stakeholders) as well as externally to the workforce. To achieve this, a strategy and plan should be considered to *target* your market.

Consider these aspects of the process:

- You need to understand what your situation is now. I.e. Your capabilities and external factors that impact on your function.
- Develop your objective i.e. “focus management/leadership function on OHS”
- Establish strategy to meet your objective. Identify whom you want to target and how you will position yourself to meet these targets. You might consider your manager as well as your manager’s manager
- Develop an implementation plan
- Evaluate and control

As discussed in the principle one, practitioners need to understand their manager/leader such that they develop an effective strategy to promote the function to him/her. Understanding that, like people in any market, different managers have different *buy in* patterns. Consider a technocratic leader. Practitioners must aim to market towards their technocratic tendencies eg. Discuss the ways in which technology and occupational health and safety may integrate. Table One details a number of different personality traits. Practitioners must consider how they market their services to managers/leadership dependant on their style.

**TABLE ONE  
EXAMPLES OF TYPES**

<b>Bill Smith</b>	<b>Fred Nurk</b>	<b>Cathy Jones</b>	<b>Graham Collins</b>
Critical	Pushy	Supportive	Enthusiastic
Picky	Tough	Respectful	Egotistical
Serious	Dominating	Dependable	Ambitious
Orderly	Efficient	Agreeable	Excitable
Exacting	Decisive	Conferring	Dramatic
Persistent	Practical	Pliable	Undisciplined

(Adapted from Kotlar, P, *Marketing Management – Millenium Edition p p213*)

Consider how you might market occupational health and safety to these types of leaders such that you could gain increased commitment?

## **#PRINCIPLE TWO**

**We must consider the need to effectively & continually market the occupational health and safety function to our management/leadership.**

### **PRACTICAL TIPS**

- **Consider writing down five to ten words that describe your manager. Now write down ten ways in which you might market your services to appeal to their personal traits.**
- **Read a book about marketing or enrol in a course to find out how the experts do it.**
- **Develop and implement a marketing plan for marketing occupational health and safety to your leader/manager and his/her superiors.**

### **Multi-directional leadership**

Henry Ford once said, “*You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do*”. Planning the activities of the occupational health and safety function are essential to on-going program's success but demonstrable commitment to the cause will assist you to gain the respect and status that ensures your capacity to influence managers and leaders. In many respects the occupational health and safety practitioner must exhibit leadership qualities not unlike that of a highly effective CEO.

Sarros and Butchatsky (1996 p. 283) highlight that there is an increasing emphasis or prevalence among successful CEO's to assume the role of a virtual leader. This model of leadership involves working with management and employees by developing other leaders within the organisation, modelling behaviour and distributing power to make decisions and be held accountable for outcomes to all workers. Ideally, these traits are also desirable for effective occupational health and safety management. Sarros and Butchatsky itemised the key features of virtual leaders:

- They lead from within instead of out in front

- They promote responsibility among their followers
- They make leadership a shared activity not just the prerogative of an elite few
- They guide and nurture, not command
- They are not concerned with power
- They earn respect because of what they do, not what they say.
- They communicate often and clearly
- They monitor the messages they send out
- They work with people at all stages of implementing new programs and ideas
- They are committed to instilling some sense of belongingness in workers
- They achieve credibility through honesty, competence, forward looking behaviour and intelligence
- They delegate often
- They are visible and accessible
- They do not interfere but know what's happening
- They listen well and with empathy
- They captain and coach, guide and counsel as well as direct and control

Leadership capacity, although often overlooked, can be a key element of the occupational health and safety practitioner's repertoire of personal attributes. Not only must the individual lead the organisation to develop safety as a key aspect of the organisation's culture, he or she must also lead the manager's and leaders of the organisation to developing a proactive approach to safety management.

Underpinning occupational health and safety leadership, direction and vision for the future must be created in the organisation. If there is no direction or vision for occupational health and safety, there may be many misdirected efforts by well-intentioned individuals that in due course result in disillusionment when the vision is eventually established. Ultimately, energies are wasted and frustration and disenchantment become written into the organisation's culture.

Roughton (2002) p53 uses the analogy of an airline pilot taking off without a written flight plan or a businessperson going on a trip without an itinerary. In the same way, vision and direction for the occupational health and safety must be developed from the organisation's leadership. Occupational health and safety practitioners must seek to align themselves with the organisations vision and contribute to its achievement through effective plans and demonstrable actions. Where no vision for occupational health and safety exists, the practitioner must aim to influence management and leadership to create a vision for the future. To use the old adage "If we don't aim for anything, we will surely hit it " is appropriate.

## **#PRINCIPLE THREE**

**Demonstrate your capacity for leadership through your on-going actions that align with the organisation's direction and vision for the future.**

### **PRACTICAL TIPS**

- **How do you demonstrate leadership in occupational health & safety to your organisation? Ask a confidante to assess you against Sarros and Butchatsky's leadership model.**
- **What have you implemented that demonstrates your commitment to organisational vision.**
- **Explore the organisation's vision. How does occupational health and safety align with this vision?**

### **Summary**

One of the most fulfilling and often most frustrating issues facing the occupational health and safety practitioner is their relationship with managers and leaders. Availability of quality time with management will no doubt continue to be pressured by operational responsibilities that are essential to survival of the organisation. Practitioners must identify alternate strategies to ultimately improve relationships and, influence leaders/managers to focus due attention on establishing a vision for an incident free working environment.

Not only must the occupational health and safety practitioner be competent in light of the professional requirements, he/she must also be skilled at objectively assessing their manager's viewpoint, strategically marketing the occupational health and safety function and demonstrating leadership traits that are in parallel with highly effective leaders.

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