

Sustainability: Spin or substance

by Dave Johnson

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How can EHS pros get into the game?

Yes. Since sustainability entered the corporate lexicon in the 1980s, it has been often intertwined with spin, or public relations buzz marketing.

And yes, sustainability is increasingly embedded in corporate strategy. It can involve substantive management, customer and financial initiatives.

So it's not black and white, this question of the legitimacy of sustainability.

"It depends, how is that for a firm answer?" says James Leemann, an EHS consultant and professor at Tulane University's Center for Applied Environmental Public Health.

General Electric CEO Jeffrey Immelt uses sustainability as a "branding theme" to promote GE's "progressive" enviro agenda, says Leemann. "So from GE's perspective, sustainability is pure propaganda."

Other companies are "into sustainability" because their industry sector is pushing it, says Leemann. Think of the American Chemical Society's "Responsible Care" project, in part launched to win back public trust after the Bhopal catastrophe. "Whether these companies agree with the sustainability push or not, they have no choice but to play the game. Call it survival," says Leemann.

Competing to endure

That's the bottom line for a growing number of EHS professionals, particularly in large multinational energy and resource companies, chemical and petrochemical corporations and consumer products manufacturers and retailers. "To me, sustainability means the sustainability of our company," says one. Indeed, the most basic definition of sustainability is to endure.

Regarding survival, "Scientists and policymakers have begun to recognize that it would eventually be suicidal to allow a further undermining of the sustainability of ecological life support systems, locally and globally," reports the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP).

No wonder, then, 93 percent of global CEOs surveyed believe sustainability issues are critical to their company's future success, according to a recent presentation

by Tom Cecich, vice president of the American Society of Safety Engineers' Council on Professional Affairs.

Sustainability must be fully integrated into a company's strategy and operations, assert 96 percent of global CEOs, up from 72 percent in 2007, according to Cecich.

And in a survey of ISHN readers conducted last September, 39 percent said their personal involvement in sustainability activities for their company will increase in 2011. The larger the company, a larger percentage of EHS pros face expanding sustainability responsibilities.

These can include so-called "hard skills": green chemistry, planning and auditing, product stewardship, energy and waste management, sustainable food systems, watershed adaptive management, community economic development, sustainability science, business improvement, green building, international community development, and facilities management, according to the ISSP.

Whither health and safety?

Where is workplace health and safety in the sustainability mix?

Tom Cecich lists 35 issues and opportunities in the universe of sustainability. They span ethical behavior, corporate citizenship (aka social responsibility), executive compensation policies, standards and codes of conduct, product safety, product impacts on health, water usage, energy usage, materials and waste, pollutants and emissions, supply chain sourcing practices, child and forced labor, labor rights, diversity and equal opportunity — and yes, one category for occupational health and safety.

The American Society of Safety Engineers and the American Industrial Hygiene Association, to name but two organizations, see the sustainability train pulling away from the station and they want to be sure their members are on it. They are concerned, as Cecich points out, that of 295 sustainable development conferences scheduled for the next 12 months, none has safety and health as its focus. Cecich counts more than 35 sustainability centers or institutes; none has safety and health as its focus.

Whether sustainability is spin or substance, it is here to stay. It is rapidly growing and evolving. So the next question is: how can EHS pros get into the game?

"There is a lot of grousing in the EHS world that health and safety are afterthoughts to sustainability," says one source.

Getting EHS into the game

But the conversation is moving beyond grouching. “The EHS pro brings a fantastic ability to either help manage product stewardship and sustainability programs or show the organization where its internal and external risks are,” says Aaron Chen, a senior industrial hygiene consultant for DuPont. “For most of us, it should be a no brainer. Practicing EHS pros have been doing risk management for a long time. Now companies see we can bring a lot more to the table. Anticipate, recognize, evaluate and control risks — it is part of our DNA.”

“I have lived sustainability for the last decade in my EHS role,” says Zack Mansdorf, a consultant in EHS and sustainability. He explains most, but not all, sustainability directors and VPs for large companies are from communications or public relations departments. “This means in the environmental areas they rely on the technical expertise of the EHS professional. I worked with a lawyer in our corporate communications department to develop metrics and initiatives that he could use to promote our sustainability agenda.” Mansdorf worked directly with his CEO as well. “Our actions were real and the results were real,” he says.

Defining EHS's role

If many EHS pros are poised to get into the sustainability game (and a fair number are already playing), a third question is: What position do they play? How do you define their role?

Cecich points to several obstacles: there is no widely accepted definition of safety and health sustainability; the focus on safety and health, when there is one, tends to be on lagging indicators, results not processes — such as injury and fatality rates.

Mansdorf adds there is only one Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) metric concerning performance relating to safety and health; there are more than 25 environmental metrics. In sustainability reporting, most attention is paid to the rate of improvement (decreased waste, toxic chemical usage, a shrinking carbon footprint) and not to absolute numbers, except fatalities.

Mindsets must change for EHS to play a greater role in sustainability. One is to move beyond a fixation on outcome numbers (injuries and fatalities) — difficult because those “numbers” are all many CEOs understand about health and safety. Second, “sustainability is all about the future and not much about the present,” says Mansdorf. “Safety is mostly about the recent past or the present. There are no forward-looking safety indicators required or generally given.”

Third, many EHS activities are OSHA compliance-driven. In the sustainability world, there is no Federal Sustainability Administration, no massive Federal

Register of Sustainability Regulations, no Sustainability Enforcement Divisions and no Federal Sustainability Inspectors, explains Gary Rosenblum, risk manager for the City of Palm Desert, Calif. Sustainability involves audits and codes of conduct and risk management, but not policing in the “OSHA cop” sense.

Fourth, sustainability calls for a global mindset. In a survey conducted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development to identify skills and beliefs required for entry-level, mid-level and leadership sustainability positions, a global mindset, thirst for global awareness, geo-political awareness, understanding of global institutions and processes, and bridging cultures were key skills and beliefs.

What EHS pros bring to the party

But that same survey pointed to numerous skills and beliefs EHS pros already possess: staff and team management, communication skills, analytical rigor, influencing strategy, facilitation skills, networking, managing unpredictability, tenacity, warmth in human relations, and science as part of the solution.

“In general, more ‘soft’ skills are deemed of extremely high importance than ‘hard’ skills, summarized the ISSP in its 2010 Competency Survey Report. These are skills EHS pros have been honing for years: communication with internal stakeholders, problem-solving, inspiring and motivating others, team-building, consensus-building, facilitating and/or training groups.

These soft skills all relate to change management. Sustainability professionals confront the formidable challenge of building support, commitment and systems for a way of doing business that has no obvious return on investment. It’s the case of the missing business case, something all too familiar to EHS pros selling their value.

To manage change in sustainability practices, the ISSP survey states leaders must be change agents, ethical, decisive, confident, proactive, critical thinkers, versatile, process focused, open minded and accountable.

EHS pros, step right up.

Works in progress: A safety & healths ustainability index and a Center for Safety & Health Sustainability

A partnership has been formed with the American Society of Safety Engineers, the American Industrial Hygiene Association, and the United Kingdom-based Institution of Occupational Safety and Health representing 80,000 members to support a draft model safety and health sustainability index.

The goal is to raise the bar for safety and health globally, to influence the way safety and health performance is measured and reported, and to get ahead of the curve for standardized safety and health reporting, according to Tom Cecich.

Metrics in the draft index, which Cecich readily concedes needs an “industry sanity check” and by no means is finalized at this point, include: a written safety and health policy statement signed by the CEO; a code of business conduct incorporating safety and health standards; processes to screen contractor and supplier compliance with the code, as well as verify internal compliance; implementation of an occupational safety and health program meeting recognized standards; regular employee opinion assessments; professionally competent oversight; regular reports on safety and health activities to senior leadership; written assurance by a senior leader that all significant safety and health risks have been identified and are controlled; injury and illness rates; number of fatalities; percentage of total facilities conducting safety and health program audits by business unit; and a fleet safety rate of motor vehicle accidents per million miles driven during a five-year period.

The draft needs an employee involvement metric and occupational health metrics, says Cecich.

The ASSE Sustainability Task Force formed in 2009 developed the draft index and is preparing to validate it by testing it at several large and medium-sized organizations.

The task force has also recommended to ASSE the development of a Center for Safety and Health Sustainability. Main functions of the center would be to manage the metric index, partner with sustainability organizations, host an annual safety and health sustainability conference, develop a sustainability web site as a resource for EHS pros, develop workshops for professionals and the business community, and produce articles and case studies.

An official announcement regarding the center is expected at ASSE’s June Professional Development Conference and Expo in Chicago.

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