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WHITE PAPER



The People Side of Safety: 5 Strategies for Aligning Talent and Safety

DEKRA

Specialized safety expertise has long been the focal point of an organization's EHS performance. Even as methodologies evolve, new tools emerge, and thinking changes, organizations have counted on the safety practitioner to guide the core of EHS functioning and provide direction on safety strategy. Despite their importance, safety practitioners, and safety leadership in general, have received little attention from the talent management function. Few organizations consider the development of safety talent or have the systems to accurately assess current safety talent strength. Even fewer organizations focus on safety leadership competence as critically as they focus on other leadership competencies for their senior leaders. It's common to see robust succession planning processes that give ample attention to operational leadership while letting safety leadership languish at the bottom of the chart—if it is put there at all.

As organizations begin to recognize the strategic importance of safety, the role of the safety practitioner and the focus on safety competence has and will continue to become more prominent. At the same time, there are significant emerging challenges to the development of safety talent now, for instance:

- A tendency for organizations to see an “inverted bell curve” weighted heavily at senior and primary positions, but lacking in sufficient qualified succession pools at mid-levels
- A growing gap between the anticipated demand for talent and the available supply. One recent survey, commissioned by NIOSH, found that employers plan to hire 25,000 EHS professionals over the next five years, but only 12,000 students are expected to graduate from academic programs related to occupational safety and health
- Increased competition for talent in a rapidly shifting demographic landscape

Keeping up with the growing, and ever more challenging, demand for safety talent and safety competence clearly requires solutions that extend beyond traditional staffing approaches. Specifically, building and positioning the human capital required to meet safety’s current and future objectives will require a greater alignment of safety with talent management. This paper proposes five strategies for creating this alignment and advancing the “people side” of safety.

The Importance of Safety Talent

“The talent void in safety positions has transformed from an organizational challenge into a critical business issue”

– Dina Pyron, Partner, Ernst & Young Oil & Gas Sector

Safety management has historically been an afterthought as a place for the most talented professionals in the organization. In part, this is due to the stigma that safety is a “shop floor” issue, focused on how workers interact with technology. Studies of industrial accidents and safety systems, however, show that rather than an isolated function, the workings of safety are deeply integrated with every aspect of organizational life. Exposures are created or mitigated not just at the shop floor but also in an organization’s structure, leadership decisions, and cultural norms. The influence of leadership on the way people think and act on the job is a driving factor of an organization’s overall safety ethic. This is what makes the role of the safety practitioner so critical; safety talent directly influences the intersection of people and technology across the enterprise.

When safety professionals are limited to the enforcement of rules and the running of programs, the expertise available to the leaders who drive the strategy and operation of the organization is similarly limited. On the other hand, when organizations engage safety professionals as partners in change, they necessarily create access to safety and

performance expertise at the highest levels in a way that supports operational excellence. A similar parallel exists with all operating leaders in the organization: expertise in safety rounds out an executive’s ability to leverage and support the human capital that drives the enterprise. In talent management terms, this means that in high-functioning organizations, safety is both a “path” and a “gate” for career development:

Safety as a Path — For safety experts (those whose chief role is safety-related or who fill safety functions), the challenge is to provide the development necessary to support both the organization’s need for expertise as well as the individual’s need for growth. Rather than leaving safety experts in a kind of specialist cul de sac, safety is treated as a path to higher roles in the organization. Here, development activities focus on broadening beyond technical expertise to include also leadership competency and experience.

One company we worked with did this by developing their safety professionals into advisors to the senior leadership team. These professionals had long been technicians: collecting data, compiling reports, and, frequently, acting as enforcers. Seldom did their insight or experience ever make its way up to where safety strategy was formed. Using serious injuries (a major organizational concern) as a focal point, the safety professionals were coached both on how to analyze and interpret data as well as how to collaborate with others on addressing their findings. Safety professionals in this organization now routinely partner with executives on assessing and addressing risk. They point out areas of concern, advise leaders on how best to apply resources based on potential, and provide an “on the ground” picture of safety functioning that executives wouldn’t get otherwise.

Safety as a Gate — In addition to expanding and developing the role of safety experts, high-functioning organizations also use safety as a “gate” through which future leaders must pass on their way to more senior positions, much the same way that operational positions have been used for many years.

Paul O’Neill’s tenure at Alcoa is frequently cited as the exemplar of connecting leadership and safety—among his first actions as CEO was to make safety outcomes the primary indicator of senior leadership performance. From a development standpoint, positioning safety as a gate means articulating specific safety competencies that leaders must possess and placing future leaders in positions that give them hands-on experience in managing safety issues.

The specific ways in which an organization aligns safety and organizational talent will vary depending on the organization, its size, objectives, structure, and other factors.

Building a Talent-Rich Organization

“The single biggest constraint on the success of the organization is the ability to get and to hang on to enough of the right people.”

– Jim Collins, author of “Good to Great”

The goal of all talent management strategy is to build what we call a “talent rich” organization: a place where we have enough of the right people in all the right places to support our mission. Talent-rich organizations continuously think about where they are and where they want to be with respect to their employee base. In other words, they ask themselves: Who’s on the team and what skills and expertise are they currently exhibiting? In addition to assessing the “who”, talent-rich organizations also ask the “what”: What do we need to look like in the future if we are meeting our strategic objectives? Are there talent gaps between today’s team and the future team? How are we closing these gaps?

The same principles apply to safety. Identifying the “who” and the “what” of safety talent, and formulating solutions to support them, is a vital step in creating and sustaining safety excellence. There are five strategies that organizations can adopt to begin building a safety talent-rich organization.

1. Integrate Talent Management with Safety Leadership

The scope of the safety practitioner’s position, function, and contribution correlates with the sophistication of safety strategy and execution. When the highest-ranking safety specialists are auditors (writing rules for others to implement) or where the extent of leadership competency development is advising leaders to “resource and allocate” it shouldn’t be surprising that safety is isolated from other performance areas. The safety talent in these organizations simply isn’t equipped or expected to influence organizational change. In some cases, unfortunately, being a safety practitioner is seen as a “retirement job”.

Organizations need to think of safety talent development as something that extends beyond technical expertise. The highest-ranking safety leaders need to have not only broad and deep safety experience and knowledge; they also need the skills and organizational position to function as effective change agents. To begin making this transition, focus on how safety roles are defined and the career progression of these roles:

- **Work Profiles** — Are there job descriptions for safety experts in the organization? How are the roles described? Do we define and focus on safety competencies in leadership development programs throughout the organization? How are competencies assessed and developed?
- **Career Path** — Is there a career path for safety experts? If so, what does it look like? Does it include advancement to larger safety responsibilities? Advancement to non-safety responsibilities? Does the career path for high-potential executives mandate a rotation within the safety arena? Is the career path used for the development of high-potential executives?

2. Build Safety into Talent Management Efforts

The strength of safety performance is strongly tied to the human capital that drives it. Safety today is increasingly treated as a business function with tangible business impacts, rather than as a discrete function managed by a handful of specialists. More organizations are expecting safety thinking and engagement from employees across levels and functions—including senior leaders.

These developments, while undoubtedly positive, pose a challenge to talent management. Do we know how safety focused our leaders are? Are we confident our safety professionals have the strongest base of capability and expertise available? Do we have a plan to fill the succession pipeline for safety talent now and in the future? Some critical focus areas here include:

- **Talent Assessment and Selection** — How do we assess the safety talent we bring in to, and promote within, the organization? Do we include safety as an assessment criterion for leadership selection and development?
- **Safety Talent Development** — How do we develop the safety talent we do have? Is there a leadership development platform for safety management progression? What are we developing towards—do we have a safety talent objective?
- **Safety Talent Search** — How do we identify talent in the market to support our safety objectives? How do we attract and select a safety leader? What does our onboarding and assimilation process look like for the safety professional?
- **Talent Retention** — Do we engage our safety talent in the ongoing success and progress of the organization? Are there sufficient professional opportunities to facilitate the

progression of the safety career track? Do we celebrate and recognize the safety professional as we do other critical role holders in the organization?

3. Develop a Cultural Value for Safety Leadership

In order to drive safety as strategy, an organization's executives must have a deep understanding of, and appreciation for, safety culture. As with any other culture changes or culture builds, the belief systems, values, and vision of the leadership is critical in establishing an effective culture. Specifically here you will want to ask about:

- **Safety Leadership's Value** — How important is safety competence to the organization as perceived by senior leadership? How is that value expressed in the equation of organizational priorities? How is safety weighed in key business discussions?
- **Expectations** — Has the organization defined what good safety leadership looks like? What behaviors do effective safety leaders practice?
- **Vision** — What is our vision for safety? What do we see as its role in the wider business? How do we resolve perceived conflicts between our safety vision and other business goals?

4. Identify and Address the Safety Risks that Rise from an Organization's Talent

What we determine about staffing levels, supervisory development, promotions, budgets, or new projects all introduce changes into the systems that provide consequences for organizational behavior. When we separate consequences from our declared performance targets, we reinforce old ways of doing things and, in some cases, undermine the change we are trying to create, e.g. telling employees they must report all injuries at the same time as providing attractive incentives for workgroups without injuries. Talent management plays an important role in aligning organizational priorities around safety. Critical focus areas here include:

- **Organizational Structure** — How does the structure of the organization align with safety objectives?
- **Performance Management** — How do we set performance expectations? What do we evaluate? How is safety included?

- **Rewards and Recognition** — What behaviors and practices are recognized or compensated?

5. Foster a Partnership Between the Talent and Safety Management Groups

Throughout the enterprise, it will be essential that safety and talent management leaders work together on managing issues related to talent and safety. There are several focus areas here, including:

- **Common Touch Points** — To start, foster an understanding of the many complex ways in which talent and safety interact. For example, are there regular talent reviews regarding safety? Are the necessary training and development activities for safety professionals coordinated with the talent management team?
- **Executive Coaching** — Talent leaders can provide invaluable guidance in supporting the development of safety leaders. Specifically, expertise in coaching and mentoring for safety, in terms of both leadership behaviors and tactical safety management practices, cannot be understated.
- **Strength of Safety Leadership** — The goal of the talent-safety partnership is to support the organization's highest safety objectives. Primarily, this will mean a focus on the strength of safety leadership. Ask: Do we understand the strength of leadership talent regarding safety? Do we have passionate champions in critical safety leadership roles and do we have high expectations for competency and capability?

Realizing Potential

Aligning talent management with safety is one of the great opportunities open to leadership today. As organizations advance in safety practice, they see that the boundaries between safety and business begin to dissolve. Safety, it turns out, is not just a "necessary" function but a valuable asset to operational integrity. Done well, safety helps the organization meet its goals; and its practices complement other business functions. At the highest levels of functioning, the potential for safety to engage employees at a human level becomes not just an idea but an actuality. This is what makes the role of talent management so critical to safety: it facilitates the natural partnership between safety and the business.