



# Problems facing the safety manager

by Timothy J. Ryan

**M**anagement of the safety program is a topic that has for too long been absent from most safety and health publications. Articles are seldom published concerning the subject of those responsible for the day-to-day activities of the various laborers, technicians and specialists composing an organization's safety or environmental health department.

Those articles that are published often deal with the Big Picture, or describe how to win over the CEO or Management to the safety group's perspective. Rarely is the middle manager's position recognized, much less described. But why are the difficulties faced by safety managers of any interest or value?

Why study the details of the manager's position if he is only there to get the job done, correct the problems and maintain the status quo?

Why bother to read about a middle manager's plight when popular belief holds that decisions only get more difficult the higher up an organizational chart one moves?

Are the stresses and strains on this person of any real consequence to the overall vitality of the safety group and the viability of its mission?

Some of the typical issues facing today's safety manager will be the focus of this article. The manager's job is not only important to the people he directly supervises, but also to the efficiency of the safety group, the organization, and, in certain cases, the surrounding community.

## Typical background

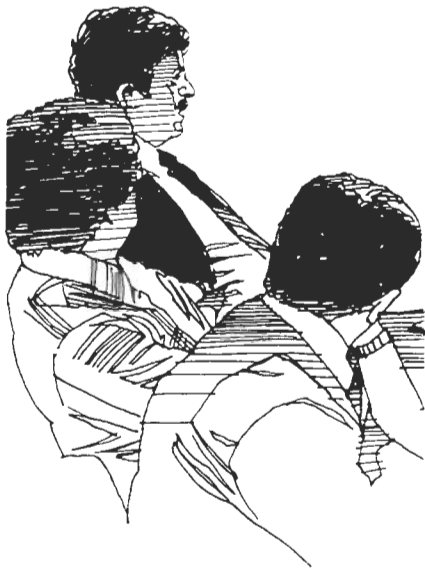
To understand the manager, it is helpful to look at the environment in which he or she functions. In some ways the safety and health manager shares commonalities with all managers. Yet in other very significant respects, the background of a typical safety manager may be quite different from that of his peers in industry, science, engineering, health care or government.

The novice safety manager can be at a disadvantage the moment he begins his duties. For many safety professionals who have found their

way into management, the new title came first—the skills were expected to follow. For those who were able to perceive what these alien management skills were, or who found mentors, or received specialized education, the transition to management was easier.

But not all of those presently charged with middle management responsibility have been as fortunate. The example of the technically competent manager who lacks adequate people skills is a classic used in almost every management textbook published.

Unlike more traditional staff or line positions in many organizational structures, the Environmental Health and Safety Department may be relatively new. Although safety has existed for many years in larger industries as a strong and vital endeavor, in the last twenty years the field as a whole has experienced strong growth. Consequently, the demand for qualified job candidates has also grown. This demand has been eagerly met by two-year and



four-year colleges and universities.

Regardless of the quality of education being provided in these programs, however, their product is deficient in one very important respect: On the whole, inexperienced job candidates are graduated. And whereas in more traditional industries current employees learn the ins and outs of an operation prior to taking on management duties, today's safety managers may be required to assume responsibility for areas in which they may have little or no firsthand knowledge.

Today's practicing safety or environmental health professionals have diverse responsibilities. Many have duties involving complex fields such as engineering, toxicology, law, chemistry and physics. To be completely up-to-date on developments in all of these areas is difficult for most specialists, and impossible for a busy manager. As a direct consequence, the manager can often find himself in the rather precarious position of having to make decisions involving the health or safety of people based on old, erroneous or limited information.

Safety managers, like all administrators, have their share of headaches and stress. Working in a variety of organizations, safety managers tend to share certain background characteristics. Additionally, and despite the diversity inherent in the safety profession, there are some unique problems shared by safety managers as well.

### **Recruiting problems**

The most common problem for safety managers is probably the most

common problem for all managers: difficulty in recruiting and retaining high quality personnel. Because the safety and health field is in a growth phase, the supply of qualified job candidates is simply not sufficient for the demand. Quite often a suitably educated candidate cannot be found and so the position is filled with somebody meeting only the minimum job requirements. Intensive training is then carried out at the employer's expense.

With the market as strong as it is today, the newly trained and now experienced employee may soon be recruited by an organization offering better pay, better benefits, or both. At the American Industrial Hygiene Association Conference in May 1988, well over half the job vacancy postings were in the one to three years of experience category, lending support to this observation.

### **Low priority**

To make the problem even more difficult for the middle manager, he is often not able to take the steps necessary to keep the exceptional employee happily employed. It is no secret that for many companies, safety department expenses are low on the budget priority list. In such an environment, a request for additional funds to retain a quality safety staff member may also be accorded quite low priority.

An upper level management decision to neither promote nor reward in the safety department is not unusual, and is indicative of a problem that plagues a safety manager. It seems that many of those in upper management prefer a safety department that keeps a low profile. In some ways, such an attitude is excusable because it is the nature of the safety profession that good safety programs produce unseen results (few, if any, accidents), or at least results that may not be obvious to upper management without statistical documentation.

Of course, when there are serious safety problems it is usually the safety department that must tell upper management how much it will cost to correct them. Because bad news is seldom embraced, there is a tendency on the part of higher management to avoid or minimize contact with the safety group.

However, the safety professional of today is usually a highly motivated and educated individual who, like

other employees, has a desire to be recognized for his contribution to the organization. Tolerating second-class status within the workplace, or even the perception of such standing, can be extremely deflating and unrewarding.

Those who continue careers in the safety field often do so not out of the need for great praise or advancement but more from the knowledge that they have a positive effect on workers' health and safety.

### **Straddling the fence**

Another reason a safety manager can have his own special set of difficulties is that he or she may be expected to support both sides of a particular issue. He or she is expected to be both a specialist and a generalist, or to be a confidant to the employee while functioning as the company's PR representative on certain issues.

The typical manager must be capable of selling a particular safety idea to upper management and at the same time be able to convince an unskilled laborer of the need to implement that idea. The shrewd manager knows how to legally present potentially damaging information to outside parties in a way that allows the organization to support its position and actions in the most favorable light.

Almost every environmental health practitioner has found himself in the paradoxical situation of having to explain to a layperson that a particular chemical is only "moderately" toxic. Skills such as these can take time to learn and may cause the manager considerable stress if the issue involves serious legal or ethical considerations.

Where legal questions are a concern, one must remember the liability factor inherent in the safety manager's position. In cases of civil suit the "deep pockets" truism applies, but also with increasing frequency, criminal provisions are being included in environmental legislation. Even in the likely case that criminal wrongdoings do not become an issue, the strain associated with litigation of any kind can be great for those unaccustomed to it.

Managers with experience in the asbestos abatement field recognize the very real threat of a lawsuit with each job they perform, and are well-acquainted with the burdensome recordkeeping necessary to protect both their company and themselves.

## Unsolvable problems

Nobody likes to admit that they cannot find the answer to a problem. Unfortunately for the safety manager, he or she may have to do just that in certain situations. The practice of safety is a profession and as such, acknowledges certain limitations. The provision of a full-time safety department will never guarantee an accident-free workplace.

This is all too clear when the environmental health group is called out to investigate an odor complaint. Experienced staffers, unable to find the usual dried out floor drain trap, or the HVAC cross connection, are left with no alternative but to report that whatever it was is no longer present. If the problem repeats itself, the chances of its cause being found increase.

But this type of complaint is more often not satisfactorily resolved, as evidenced by the large number of requests for outside assistance (vis-a-vis the NIOSH Hazard Evaluation and Technical Assistance group). In fact, an entire specialization is emerging within industrial hygiene dealing with indoor air problems and their resolution.

Numerous other examples of unsolvable, or at least unclear, environmental health and safety problems exist. Perhaps best known to the safety manager is the problem of the video display terminals (VDTs) and their purported effects on the unborn. Whether the two are associated, the entire issue poses difficulties in and of itself for the safety manager, for it is his job to decide what prudent safety and health controls must be implemented, keeping in mind both the cost of the controls and the uncertainty of their need.

## More regulations

Market demand for health and safety personnel can only be increasing if the seemingly ceaseless promulgation of federal, state and local regulations is any measure. Even larger companies with entire professional safety staffs can be surprised by the interpretations of certain rules. The current tendency of Congress to develop laws which more closely resemble regulations can also interfere with straightforward compliance.

Of course, the major difficulty for the manager is in the increased work load that results from the regula-

tions. In recent years, two extremely onerous and complex sets of regulations have been passed: SARA Title III and the Hazard Communication Standard. Although the amount of work that was, and in fact still is, necessary to comply with the rules is enormous, the safety staffs have seldom been enlarged to cope with the new responsibilities. For the safety manager this effectively means doing more with less, and opens up the possibilities for additional stress and strain with the staff.

## Inappropriate duties

Of all the categories of problems that complicate the duties of the safety manager, this may be the most bothersome. Although every job entails responsibilities one would rather not assume, professionals in the health and safety field tend to be asked to deal with a number of tasks that simply don't fit into other existing departments or divisions. Because there is often no group better qualified, the health and safety group is assigned the responsibility.

One of the most often encountered incompatibilities is the mixing of public safety and police activities with the functions of worksite safety and environmental health. There is virtually no crossover in the professional or educational skills between these two rubrics, yet it is not uncommon to see the two areas of responsibility lumped together under one director.

Another excellent example of the assignment of inappropriate duties to the safety group involves the combination of para-medical or first-aid duties with those of the environmental health and safety office. Just because the environmental health unit is responsible for processing certain chemical or biological samples does not make it either qualified or capable of drug testing urine or blood samples.

Needless to say, personal managerial problems that ensue due to a lack of knowledge or understanding of the extra function can be significant. In addition, the organization itself may suffer if the inappropriate responsibility is so highly technical, or so politically sensitive, that the manager assigned cannot possibly be effective in the duty.

## Expectations and perceptions

It is ironic that a safety manager can be perceived one way by one group,



yet in almost a completely opposite way by a second group. In other instances, what the safety manager believes to be his job can differ diametrically from what others believe it to be. Two cases serve to illustrate these situations.

Some line managers who request the assistance of the safety manager are surprised to learn that the safety manager has limited in-depth knowledge of the specific process in question. They expected an expert—an individual who would have the solution to their safety problem immediately available. Obviously, the practice of the safety profession is poorly understood by such people.

The opposite to this erroneous perception is the individual who believes that all aspects of safety are either obvious, intuitive or both. To such a person, the safety manager is a meddler and a threat to getting the job done with a maximum of efficiency and speed. Credit is not given to the safety manager's study and experience in matters of safety and health by persons of this opinion.

A second, classic perception problem that the safety manager faces is that of individual responsibility versus corporate liability. Far too many people expect the safety department to provide a workplace that is literally risk free. They reason, incorrectly, that the safety group is responsible for all aspects of their safety while they are at work, since that is what the safety manager's staff was hired to accomplish. Perhaps some safety managers subscribe to this view, but most are of an opposite opinion.

Most safety managers try, through in-house education, to make the em-

ployee realize the importance of individual accountability with respect to personal health and safety. The focus of these programs is to help employees understand safe behaviors and actions, and to conduct themselves accordingly. Such an approach is almost the exclusive remedy when dealing with health issues, as evidenced by the current surge of wellness and fitness programs nationwide.

### Conclusion

By understanding the nature and diversity of problems faced by most managers, it should be much easier to avoid similar problems in similar settings. Through rapid and thorough problem identification, creative solutions to problems should come more readily, more easily, and more often. Not all of these problems are unique to the field of safety, nor are they necessarily that insurmountable or complex. Yet they do exist, and they do recur with regularity. And recognizing a problem is the first step necessary for its solution.

Directors, vice presidents and former managers can benefit by staying in touch with the problems of their managers. In doing so, they can better stay current with the field. In fact, any employee, regardless of organizational title or position, can profit from understanding the pressures and forces that act on the safety manager.

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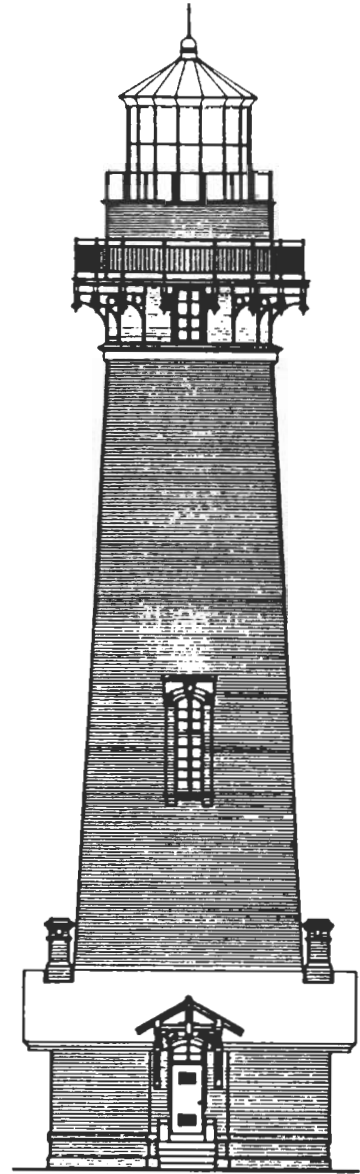
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