

Interview series.

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Anne-Sophie Heitz

In her latest role as Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) Leader for global water technology provider Xylem Europe, Anne-Sophie Heitz builds on a vibrant passion for safety that began when working in the power generation industry. Anne-Sophie talks to dss⁺ about how a curious mind, a thirst for knowledge and getting to know her audience have been crucial qualities for conquering safety leadership challenges.

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You have a strong history working in the power generation industry; how has that journey influenced your latest role in the global water technology sector?

The early part of my career was in the gas turbine sector in Europe and involved a spell in the United States. During this period, I was more focused on lean manufacturing and operational excellence. It was when I was leading a cultural change programme that my interest in the leadership element of safety began to blossom. As my curiosity grew, I started diving deeper into the topic and developing the required technical skills. The more I learned, the more I realised how important leadership was to safety success.

My mandate now builds on my passion for safety to develop a One Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) programme for Xylem Europe so that all business units and sub-regions are in lockstep with each other on safety issues. While it's essential that health and safety rules are understood and followed, there also needs to be a constant two-way dialogue between leadership and colleagues on the ground so that everyone understands why they need to be safe - with a heavy emphasis on the why. I've learned that having such close conversations helps promote a high impact culture and create a safe working environment in a streamlined and structured way that is more meaningful and long-lasting.

Some people tend to see safety as a 'glass half empty' experience, so engaging with them on reasons to take a more positive approach helps safety become something people aspire to rather than tolerate.



You are a big believer in using soft skills as a force for good. How does that work in practical terms?

There is no one-size-fits-all in terms of safety. It's crucial to thoroughly investigate and understand what levels of risk occur across the organisation. While you have to build a set of core safety rules, you also need an element of customisation that covers different service areas based on the type of site, the location and whether the role is on or off-site. To achieve this you have to know how to listen and show empathy. When people see you have put in the effort to understand their specific safety circumstances and concerns, they are much happier to treat safety rules seriously.

I fundamentally believe that we can achieve unbelievable things when we are passionate about a topic. While I realise that not everyone I come into contact with will share my passion, as a minimum I aim to nourish their interest so they are happy to get on board with safety improvement plans.



What's the most challenging stage of implementing a safety programme, and what are the overlooked benefits of a successful EHS programme?

Probably one of the most challenging exercises is implementing a long-term cultural change that considers safety as a positive rather than a negative. Some people tend to see safety as a 'glass half empty' experience, so engaging with them on reasons to take a more positive approach helps safety become something people aspire to rather than tolerate. It's also about taking the fear out of reporting safety issues and understanding it's an opportunity for leadership to learn from mistakes. This will help to build up relevant safety defences and prevent re-occurrence in the future.

As well as the apparent reduction in safety incidents and a happier, healthier workforce, a sometimes overlooked benefit of a well-developed EHS programme is the advantage to the broader business. The depth and breadth of safety management across an organisation provide a vibrant scan of a company's priorities. As an insight into company culture, a successful EHS programme clearly shows the care and effort made to change hearts and minds on safety issues. Getting safety right on such a large scale says a lot about your overall approach to running a business.



What are your tips for improving an organisation's safety maturity?

Depending on the safety maturity of the organisation, establishing golden safety rules can help clarify expectations. Defining the associated enforcement frame as well as fostering identification and learning about near misses can be a first milestone to successfully increasing safety maturity. Implementing safety dialogues focused on both positive and negative re-enforcement when facing safe and unsafe situations is a good way to move to the next maturity step.

In the end, any safety programme should make people feel connected. For example, introducing a safety week can be a powerful way to compliment other activities such as first aid training, hand-focused activities or developing a connection with safety at home. Safety week is a way to reinforce good safety actions in a more memorable and connected way.



Any mental health issue, whether caused by workplace or external social problems, will likely affect the ability to make safe decisions. So, we must continue to ensure support and help are available.



What did COVID-19 teach us about mental health, and do you think we need to do more?

COVID-19 certainly helped give mental health issues much-needed prominence, but we now need to take what we have learned and continue improving. This is crucial when it comes to safety. Any mental health issue, whether caused by workplace or external social problems, will likely affect the ability to make safe decisions. So, we must continue to ensure support and help are available. This includes working more closely with human resources, communications, and other areas of the organisation to close gaps and use all options available. But it's important to ensure that people are comfortable with the format. In a post-COVID environment, people will naturally revert to being more guarded on mental health issues. Offering a secure environment where they are not judged is crucial.

It's also about being active rather than passive on mental health issues. If something doesn't work, be brave enough to try something different. It's about accepting that we are human beings with all the fragilities that entails.



Where do innovation, technology and communication fit in the safety leader's toolbox?

If we drill the topic of health and safety down to one function, we would be in bad shape. I see innovation and technology as enablers rather than human replacements. For me, tapping into smarter working practices to gather data, creating reports and supporting risk assessments is where the value of technology lies. When launching a safety campaign or programme, we want to make sure it is based on data analysis first to focus on our areas for improvement. It's about using technology to complete repetitive tasks that help to keep safety at the front and centre of working practices, prompting people to remain switched on and alert to risks.

But humans are essential to analyse the risks and the nuances of safety practices. We need to be able to connect person to person to witness whether safety practices are working and to make any necessary adjustments.

When it comes to communication, I would not be able to achieve my goals if I didn't work closely with the communication team who are more skilled at conveying messages that resonate with the audience. Safety is all about driving a cultural change and having subject matter communication experts to support that approach is essential. When we are bombarded by information on a daily basis, safety communication has to mean something; otherwise we dilute the impact. So I have no problem reaching out to our communication experts to ensure safety is communicated clearly and crisply.

// Safety is not a matter of cutting and pasting rules and regulations; it's about having strong safety foundations and adapting messages and practices that fit the environment.

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What best practices do you rely on to drive safety forward?

Safety is about changing hearts and minds, so I would always explain 'why'. In Europe particularly, moving the safety dial to where it should be can only be effective if people understand why something is necessary. It's also important to know your audience. Safety is not a matter of cutting and pasting rules and regulations; it's about having strong safety foundations and adapting messages and practices that fit the environment. Safety functions must be regularly refreshed to ensure they match new tools, materials and working practices. Then, always have a plan to work from. A plan can always be managed and adapted and used to notch up milestones to keep safety positive and engaging.

In terms of driving safety forward, a safety leader needs to be resilient and humble enough to take critical feedback from safety users and practitioners to continue to improve. Finally, we all need to find the magic key that unlocks the door to safety as a force for good across the whole organisation. Mine is being passionate about my role and believing in what I do can make a positive difference to the people I work with, including their families, and loved ones.

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