Set Up Your Corporate SHE Leader—and Safety Organisation —for Ongoing Success

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Charismatic and passionate, a winning SHE leader requires a specific set of characteristics that won't appear on their resume. In fact, the right person may not be a safety professional at all. Once in the role, the organisation must give them true support and independence in order to extract lasting, company-wide value.

You might be surprised to hear that the SHE leader is not responsible for operational safety. In reality, the line is responsible for safety—and it's one of the SHE leader's roles to make sure the organisation understands that.

In fact, in a safety and risk -focussed organisation, the SHE leader has three primary functions:

Implementation supporter and coach: The SHE leader's core responsibility is supporting the organisation in the implementation of a world-class SHE program designed to raise competencies to a high standard. What's more, they are central to embedding the idea that good safety is good business. In order to help the organisation embrace this concept, the SHE leader must guide the executive team towards an understanding that safety is everyone's responsibility.

Conscience keeper for the board: The SHE leader must interact directly with the board to ensure that safety, health and environmental issues are among the highest priorities, and to keep the board is apprised of what is working and what is not. Independence is crucial, as the SHE leader must be able to determine how and what to present to the board, including key leading and lagging safety indicators that will give board members a clear, fair view of performance.

Ongoing examiner: Once standards have been written and implemented and the safety organisation moves towards becoming an autonomous entity, the SHE leader's role is to continually check on the vigour of the program through robust audit processes and independent oversight.

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1

Look for the right qualities, in the right places.

An effective SHE leader needs to come from inside the organisation. An external hire will never know the operations, culture and personalities well enough to positively influence change and garner stakeholder support.

Rather than focussing on safety professionals, note that the best people for this role tend to come out of operations. The SHE leader will have safety professionals on their team who understand the nuts and bolts, who can perform the hazard analyses and so on. Instead, you're looking for a person with a passion for safety who can motivate and inspire. This might be a plant manager or regional operations leader who wants to advance a global role. The key is that they understand the business, they're good networkers and influencers, and they can ignite others' enthusiasm for safety.

2

Get the reporting structure right.

Many companies bundle safety, health and environment under one leader. Some pair safety and health, managing environment-related issues separately. Still others separate all three. The most seamless, efficient solution is to keep at least safety and health together, as there is a great deal of crossover, although combining all three also works well.

More important than what the role comprises, however, is the reporting hierarchy. SHE requires total independence to assure that the leader can speak freely about potential challenges and risks. Many organisations incorporate SHE within human resources, finance, legal or supply chain, but reporting directly to the CEO is by far the best approach. Accountability through other areas, particularly supply chain, can create conflict around how information is presented, potentially underplaying real risks or driving a penny-pinching mentality.

3

Keep the pipeline flowing.

The SHE leader position should be a stepping stone, not a car park. After all, if you want a high performer to take on the responsibilities of rallying the organisation around safety, they need to be able to see that it will help them fulfil their own long-term goals.

Ideally, companies should consider a three-year rotation, with a robust pipeline filled with future safety leaders from different regions and sites. This allows you to recognise and intellectually stimulate your best people, building loyalty and fortifying against inevitable departures as you develop capabilities across the operation.

Your forward-looking safety organisation begins with strong SHE leadership.

Companies tend to equate zero incidents with a safe workplace or multiple incidents with an unsafe one, often congratulating or blaming the top safety professional. But a well-chosen, well-supported SHE leader can help the organisation see how safety is everyone's responsibility, and that reported incidents and a proactive approach to continuous improvement are opportunities for positive change.

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