

Corporate Environmental Strategy: Building Environmental Business and Leadership Skills Through Dialogue

John Milliman, John Grosskopf* and Virginia Winter

EH&S professionals face the twin tasks of being technically proficient in complying with regulatory standards, while developing the business acumen to “sell” environmental initiatives to senior management. Even with the heightened need to integrate EH&S functions into core business strategy, the EH&S function is still perceived as a cost-center by many in the organization. What follows is a description of how facilitated dialogues between EH&S professionals in a variety of organizations is useful in developing key leadership and communication skills necessary to reach senior level management. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

John F. Milliman received his PhD in Business Administration at the University of Southern California. He is an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. His research interests include environmental partnerships and environmental management systems.

John Grosskopf is a professional engineer (PE) and Board Certified Diplomate Environmental Engineer (DEE) with over 25 years experience in the environmental industry. He consults with firms to assist in the overall development and improvement of their environmental systems, programs and business practices through strategic environmental management, environmental management systems and ISO 14001.

Virginia Winter is an organization development specialist and master-level facilitator. She is the principal of Equinox; a woman owned small business operating nationwide since 1989. Her expertise includes organizational learning, strategic planning, and group and team development, meeting effectiveness, environmental management systems and approaches to sustainability.

*Corresponding author: College of Business, University of Colorado, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80933-7150, USA; Tel.: +1-719-262-3316; fax: +1-719-262-3494; E-mail: jmillima@mail.uccs.edu.

Environmental, Health, and Safety managers face the twin challenge of leading corporate environmental practices while seeking to align their programs with core business needs. EH&S managers meet these challenges while often being perceived only as a regulation driven support function. Thus, they exert comparably less influence than most other departments. One approach to raise the profile of environmental management to senior-level attention is being tried in Denver, Colorado by Virginia Winter of Equinox and John Grosskopf of Environmental Resources Engineering through a series of dialogue sessions. These sessions, entitled “Environmen-

tal Health and Safety Leaders Dialogue”, occur quarterly to discuss mutual issues, ideas, and solutions. As a result, managers report improved leadership and communication skills, a greater sense of support from fellow EH&S professionals, new information and ideas for solutions to EH&S and business issues, enhanced communications with regulatory officials, and valuable networking opportunities. In essence, environmental dialogue sessions serve as a knowledge management tool to import new ways of thinking into an organization.

What follows is an examination of the critical issues that EH&S managers face and their need for improved leadership and problem solving skills. We present examples of topics addressed in past dialogues and discuss a specific format for dialogue used to facilitate a deeper and more contemplative conversation of corporate environmental issues. Finally, we conclude with key learnings of the dialogue sessions and some thoughts on setting up your own dialogue sessions.

Why EH&S Managers Need To Enhance Their Communication Skills

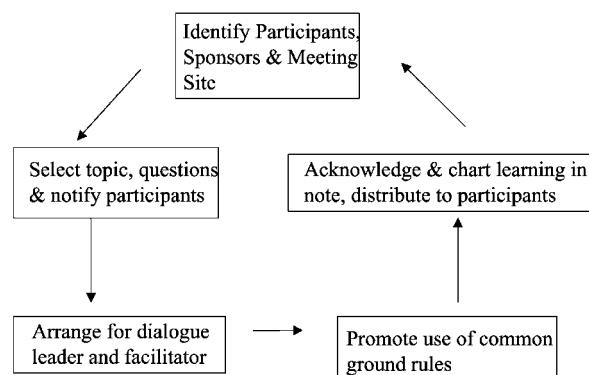
EH&S managers require a diverse set of skills to be included in strategic business planning. These skills require technical competence and managerial know-how. They must be able to interpret environmental regulations and interact effectively with a variety of regulators, non-government organizations (NGO’s), other stakeholders, and the public. But to be effective they must communicate with executives and other business managers to align environmental practices with the values and business priorities of their organizations.

While EH&S managers face these varied challenges, others in the company often miss the value of EH&S to the overall business strategy or the bottom-line. As a result, the EH&S function often receives less than opti-

mal support. Often, EH&S is viewed as a “lone eagle” and a cost center forcing other functional areas to deal with complex and burdensome, and ever-changing governmental regulations. Given these challenges and constraints, it is essential that EH&S professionals gain the strategic knowledge, skills, and learning capability to help their companies successfully navigate the tension of “being green” and profitable at the same time. As discussed in the next section, the Denver-based EH&S leaders’ dialogue sessions offer one way for participating managers to increase their knowledge and conduct in-depth problem solving on strategic environmental issues.

The Process Of Setting Up EH&S Dialogue Sessions

A flowchart of the major steps in setting up an EH&S manager dialogue session is shown in Figure 1. A typical dialogue session in Denver involves fifteen to twenty participants from a wide variety of organizations,¹ select regulatory officials, academia, a facilitator, and a session leader. One of the keys to making these sessions effective is the selection of relevant, challenging, and provocative topics of interest to the participants. Topics are selected based on current trends and



Note: An important pre-step is to create a charter and empower a Dialogue Champion

Figure 1 Organizing EH&S Dialogue Sessions.

Box 1 Strategic issues discussed in the Denver EH&S Dialogue Sessions

1. Why go beyond Compliance? What is the business value?
2. Selecting a strategy to move from an EHS program to a system and moving your organization toward that goal
3. How organizations develop and prioritize their EHS objectives and how meaningful metrics are assigned and tracked
4. What's Working? Getting the job done in the face of adversity
5. Internal and external reporting — the challenges of communicating EHS program results.
6. What is most important to EHS managers in "getting the job done?" What keeps you up at night?
7. Breaking down the EHS business barriers in your organization — demonstrating the true value of EHS to your business.
8. Doing more with less while achieving and maintaining regulatory compliance.
9. What are the "ins" and "outs" of a systems approach to environmental management?

perceived needs in the EH&S industry and tend to address the strategic issues EH&S managers face. Some examples of past topics are listed in Box 1 (see Box 1).

All participants receive the topic along with specific questions to provoke thought in advance of the sessions. For example, the main topic of one dialogue session was "*What's working? Getting the job done in the face of adversity*". The participants were asked to consider the following in advance of the session:

- What experience do you have in convincing top management to support your EH&S programs?
- What can you do without support and budget?

- If you have the support and budget, what were your steps in getting them?
- How are you meeting your customers' expectations?

Facilitating Sessions

Setting up meetings on strategic topics with a diverse group of EH&S professionals is an important first step. However a facilitator provides needed focus, and avoids the trap of falling into a gripe session, replete with "war stories". In the Denver sessions a specific form of dialogue process is used by preparing the participants in advance of the meeting with the topic and associated questions for thought. This works to raise expectations for a meaningful dialogue.

During the meeting a facilitator guides adherence to the dialogic process. This involves a disciplined process for speaking, listening, and inquiry in a group setting. Some of the guidelines introduced by the facilitator at the beginning of each dialogue session are shown in Box 2. They include pausing to reflect before speaking, speaking without judgment, and suspending the role and status differences of the participants. (see Box 2)

Box 2 Guidelines For A Meaningful Dialogue

- Balance inquiry with advocacy (advocating is what is already "known" to you)
- Suspend or slow down judgment
- Pause before speaking
- Suspend judgment of participants' roles and status
- Speak to the center (the whole group)
- Keep confidences to build trust and openness
- Surface or clarify assumptions so they become transparent to the whole group
- Focus on generative learning, not specific outcomes

The essence of the dialogue approach is to practice thinking together, to clarify assumptions, and allow for the emergence of new ways of thinking. Says Jim Ives, environmental manager for the City of Aurora, "It's easy to be an advocate and give your opinions. It is much more difficult to state the rationale behind your thinking". The inquiry approach also involves asking thoughtful and in-depth questions of others and offering them new perspectives. Ken Lykens, environmental compliance officer at Denver Water, observed, "Differing opinions are seen as beneficial. Disagreement is encouraged. This is beneficial because in our companies we usually avoid disagreements and conflict".

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Another intent of the ground rules is to encourage a "safe" and open environment, thoughtful listening of others, and to obtain collective wisdom on how to resolve issues. "People leave their egos at the door. You also leave your title, company, education, and experience behind and you speak and debate. It allows people to speak more freely", says Selin Hoboy, area manager of EH&S of Stericycle, Inc. Such a process also helps people understand their underlying assumptions of how the world operates and enhances their ability to look at reality in a new and more open way. Jim Easton of Colorado Interstate Gas noted, "There is no downside to thinking out loud. You won't be chastised because you had a moment of uncertainty. Many things are not clear-cut. You can discuss a variety of paths to get a solution. If you can do that you can truly have a team orientation and matrix approach to problems".

Sometimes the learnings from these types of discussions are immediate and can be applied right away, while at other times there

Box 3 Benefits of Environmental Dialogue Sessions

1. Dialogue Process Skills Enhance Communication and Thinking Skills
2. Encouragement and Support for EH&S professionals
3. Content Learning Points – Examples:
 - Integrating environmental issues with core business needs
 - Communicating skills to executives and other managers
 - Instill environmental values and culture in the company
 - Creating new environmental metrics and ways of resolving regulatory issues
4. Improving Regulatory/Industry Communication and Trust
5. Networking For Information/Problem Solving

are more subtle shifts in thinking that manifest themselves over time. To enhance learning, the facilitator or participants may make notes on flip charts during the meetings. The dialogue portion of the session is normally slated for approximately ninety minutes with the last twenty minutes used for debriefing. The debriefing includes what the participants learned in practicing the dialogue process itself (e.g. did they suspend judgment, use deeper listening techniques, etc.) and what are the content learnings of the dialogue. These include what new insights or questions the participants' experienced, what collective themes were surfaced, and what 'take-aways' arose from the conversation. A transcription of the notes from the debrief is later e-mailed to the participants to identify key learnings, and facilitate follow-on thinking. A summary of the key learnings of the sessions which are discussed next and summarized in Box 3 include improved listening, thinking, and communication skills from engaging in the dialogue process itself, substantive learnings and encouragement and support from the discussion, improved communication with regulatory officials, and networking contacts (see Box 3).

Learnings From The EH&S Dialogue Sessions

Enhancing Communication Skills

In the debriefings, many state that the dialogue process made them think about their communication style, how deeply they reflected on the subject matter, how much they were able to suspend their judgment during the session and how often they were able to use an inquiry, rather than an advocacy approach. Hoboy of Stericycle commented that, "We are getting better at ... asking more probing questions and getting to the root of the issues". Ms. Hoboy also found that the dialogue approach also helped her create a deeper level of understanding and communication in meetings back in her own company.

Peer Support

A less tangible benefit is a greater sense of support and encouragement for the EH&S managers to continue their often solo quest for environmental progress in their organizations. Says Ken Lykens, "You get to talk with a group of peers who understand you are dealing with the same issues... This provides some source of comfort". Similarly, Jim Ives noted, "a reinforcement of ideas and concepts that I have held before and that these ideas do have some benefits. It provides encouragement for me to keep after it".

Knowledge, Ideas and Solutions

The most important benefit of the sessions is the opportunity for learning new information, generating ideas, and playing out possible solutions. This is particularly important because many of the EH&S managers find themselves extremely busy dealing with day-to-day operational and regulatory issues and often have little time for reflection, strategic thinking, or obtaining external perspectives. Jim Easton of CIG observed, "When you get caught up in the day-to-day activities you lose sight of the external world. We are often

locked into our traditional approaches. We often have predetermined traditional solutions, which are not always the best. The dialogue sessions allow us to go outside the box to get new approaches and find untraditional solutions."

The sessions have also caused managers to think about the relationship of their department to the core business of the company — and how to align the two. "Know the business, talk the talk of our businesses, find out more about your business", commented one EH&S manager. Another stated "Today reinforced the importance of using the language of business, not the language of environmental or safety or health per se". Accomplishing this environmental-business linkage is not always easy in practice, but the discussion reaffirmed the need to keep on addressing this important issue. Regarding this point, George Larsen, Director of EH&S of Lockheed-Martin Space Systems Astronautics Division observed, "It's one thing to say the words 'integrating' its another thing to do it. Today's dialogue re-affirmed this for me".

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do it.*

A related point to understanding the organization's business is the need for different approaches and better communication with other corporate executives and managers. Ives of the City of Aurora stated of one session, "We have talked about how EH&S is perceived by executive management, how to get a seat at the table with top management, and how to deal with barriers to environmental management. It is an interesting challenge". Some EH&S managers have commented that the discussions have enabled them to increase their ability to secure involvement or buy-in by from executives and

other managers. For example, one participant concluded, "Infiltrating other department's meetings can benefit your understanding and help acquire new knowledge". As an illustration of this, Easton of CIG observed of his communication with top management, "Before I would just propose an idea or solution. Now I explain my assumptions more, state why I suggested what we did, what we discarded or included, and our process of picking the best approach. We can then say here is what it means in real (business) terms. Once management understands the underlying principles they understand environmental compliance better".

A related challenge is making environmental practices part of the core values and culture of the organization. One manager stated, "Instilling the environmental culture is challenging and will take patience; remember that's how 'Safety' acquired its reputation". Similarly, Steve Frost, Environmental Coordinator with Raytheon Polar Services Company observed that EH&S managers must, "Move 'it' (EH&S practices) from a priority to a value, because values tend to persist".

Improved Regulatory/Industry Communications

The dialogue sessions have resulted in increased communications between regulatory and industry officials. This has led to a greater understanding what each faces in their daily jobs. Distrust is increasingly being replaced by understanding as these dialogue sessions have created an atmosphere where all opinions are appreciated and valued. Though progress has been achieved, there is a long way to go. Dialogue sessions are one useful forum to increasing the partnership that is needed to improve the often fractious and contentious environment that exists in portions of the environmental field.

Networking

A final benefit of the dialogue sessions includes opportunities for networking. For

instance, one EH&S manager noted that he contacted another session participant for ideas and advice on how resolve a difficult remediation issue. Another manager commented that he had contacted another participant on how to approach regulatory officials on a delicate issue. Thus, these sessions not only provide immediate benefits, but also opportunities to obtain useful information and assistance outside of the meetings.

Lessons Learned For Future EH&S Dialogues

Dialogue sessions are an important forum for environmental professionals to discuss issues and dilemmas, share information, and think together about how to better meet these challenges. In essence, they provide an informal, but systematic, process by which managers can enhance their business and leadership skills and receive support in discussing mutual pressing issues with other professionals.

Dialogue sessions are one useful forum to increasing the partnership...that exists in portions of the environmental field.

Future EH&S dialogue sessions will involve regulatory officials to participate in selected meetings on certain topics. The purpose is to create a deeper discussion on how to handle cutting edge regulatory issues and business-government partnerships. According to Ken Lykens of Denver Water, "Sometimes we make progress on an issue, but we can't resolve it further without the regulatory people being there". In addition, some participants wish to focus on how to more specifically implement some of the ideas that have surfaced in the past dialogue sessions. This may leave room for "special" dialogues or for task groups to form to explore a

particular issue or strategic area in more detail.

Setting up EH&S Dialogue Sessions in Other Cities

Because of the success in Denver, an important matter is how these sessions can best be developed in other cities. Winter and Grosskopf provide some lessons learned from their approach in Denver:

1. It is probably most important to clarify the specific purpose and overall mission of the dialogue sessions and to establish some guidelines that promote an atmosphere for open communication and freedom of expression.
2. These meetings hold a greater value if a facilitator is used. Ives of the City of Aurora commented, "The idea of having a facilitator is important... It is hard to be involved in the discussion and (at the same time) keep the discussion on time and on track.
3. To ensure broad based participation, select dialogue topics that are current, timely, and provocative. Our participants respond best to cross-cutting topics with strategic ramifications, rather than day-to-day issues they routinely face.
4. It is important to recognize that getting started is the toughest challenge. Chief among the startup issues are finding champions willing to work with little or no upfront budget and who are willing to establish the mission, identify candidates for participation and getting them to attend the initial dialogue session. Getting exceedingly busy EH&S professionals out of their workplace to a new type of forum is not easy. We've learned that a number of organizations initially frown on their employees attending what they believe to be low value added activities.
5. Once dialogues are initiated, some participants may consider some of the issues proprietary and may be unwilling to openly

share with others. To deal with this issue we are careful to point out before sessions begin that the discussion is intended to be kept confidential after the meeting is over and that we understand that some information which is brought up may be proprietary in nature and therefore we respect any organization's wish to remain silent. Another barrier to the free-flow of information occurs when regulatory and industry personnel are both present. For this reason it is probably best to begin with a core group of corporate EH&S managers and invite environmental regulatory officials only after the participants have gained more experience and trust and have developed some specific regulatory-related issues to be discussed. In addition, much of the success of having regulatory officials at the meeting depends on the sensitivity and temperament of the participants themselves. Selecting the right people and creating conditions of trust and openness is critical here. While there may be some discomfort to openly share information with regulators, we have witnessed many benefits of open discussion to both corporate and regulatory officials.

Chief among the startup issues are finding champions...willing to establish the mission...

EH&S dialogue sessions provide a number of benefits to the participants, including enhancing their strategic thinking and communication skills as well as providing support, new ideas and information on environmental issues, improved communications with regulatory officials, and networking opportunities. We hope the readers of *Corporate Environmental Strategy* are encouraged to create informal learning environments such as these dialogue sessions to help EH&S managers better deal

Dialogue Sessions

with the difficult challenges corporations face regarding business and the environmental issues in the future.

Endnotes

1. Organizations that have participated in these dialogue sessions include Lockheed Martin, Johns Manville, Schlage Lock, Optima Batteries, Conoco, Ball Corporation, Colorado Interstate Gas Company, EPA Region VIII, and Denver Water. For more information on how to set up and conduct environmental dialogue sessions contact John Grosskopf at grosskopfjw@worldnet.att.net or Virginia Winter at equinox@rkymtnhi.com.