



## ***Managing the Desert Island***

### ***Ten Ideas When Safety Professionals Find Themselves All Alone***

When it comes to safety in your organization, have you ever felt like it was you against the world? Recently, I received an email from a client. I could tell from the 'tone' of the email that she was in need of support. We arranged a conference call. It was on the call that she told me 'the story.' She was a safety professional for a medium sized manufacturer. Over the last few years, her attempt to move safety forward had been met on a number of levels with resistance. Her budget was thin. Support for ideas, products and programs was thinner. It was a 'check the box' culture, and no more. It was near the end of the conversation that I asked, "Do you feel like it's you against the world?" With a long sigh she quietly murmured, "Yes."

Unfortunately, she's not alone. Each day, safety professionals, safety supervisors, Human Resource staff with safety responsibilities and safety leaders feel like they are on a deserted island all alone. Even in organizations with supportive cultures, from time to time, one can feel this way. But, it's in times like these that safety professionals must re-double their efforts. Our environments are dangerous and mistakes can be life changing, not to mention the financial and legal exposures to our organizations. So instead of 'mailing it in' and waiting for a ship to come to your rescue, it is instead time to take bold action to advance safety and protect your people. Below are 10 ideas to help you take on the world when you feel all alone.

1. **Create Buzz!** - - "Leaders are the stewards of organizational energy," writes Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz in their groundbreaking book entitled *The Power of Full Engagement*. Like it or not, you are a leader in your organization. Being a leader, you are accountable for your organization's energy. Chances are very good that if you are feeling alone the energy level within your organization is near rock bottom. At times like these, it's time to create buzz, with the purpose of pumping energy into your work group. There are a number of ways to do this from funny safety related YouTube videos to rubber chickens. I would suggest that you outline a formal strategy that includes a number of concepts such as raffles, give-a-ways and contests. Include every level, and make sure senior leaders are visible. This is not only good business; it's great safety and a lot of fun.
2. **Play a Game** - - "When you can do the common things of life in an uncommon way," said George Washington Carver, "you will command the attention of the world." I know what you are thinking, there is no way that your people will 'play a game' or participate in an activity but let me tell you the secret, you don't tell them! There are tons of activities and games, that last anywhere from two

minutes to more than a half hour, that your employees will do, not realizing it's a game or activity. I recommend purchasing a resource. I, of course, am partial to my book, *ISMA - Involved Safety Meeting Activities, 101 Ways to Get Your People Involved*. You can also check out a helpful series called *Games Trainers Play*. Remember, engagement in an activity leads to involvement, involvement leads to ownership and ownership leads to results...and it gets you off the island!

3. **Give Something Away** - - Joe was a car salesman and he used some unorthodox techniques for results. For example, he deeply believed in the concept of handing an item to a prospective buyer. He explains in his book, *How to Sell Anything to Anybody*, that he had desk drawers full of items and that everyone that entered his office received a small token. He had a drawer of stuff for women. He had another desk drawer full of items for men. A third drawer was full of items for children. When people entered his office, the equation was unbalanced. In the customer's mind, Joe was going to be taking from them through a sale. In order to balance the equation, put the customer at ease, build trust and a relationship, Joe would give each customer an item from his desk drawer, each customer, each time, no exceptions. We can use that same concept in safety. Give away a small token; in safety it is called a SAI (Safety Awareness Item). This can be a candy bar, stick of gum, duct tape or an apple. The item should be useful, practical and handed personally to the employee. Remember, this isn't about buying safety, it's about the relationship and putting the customer, I mean employee, at ease so you can have a good conversation and begin working your way off the island. Does this work? Well, if you don't believe me, believe Joe...he holds the world record for individual new car sales in one year, 1,425 and for a career, over 13,000 vehicles!
4. **Block and Tackle** - - In sports, when things are not going well, the coach will always return to the fundamentals, or they get back to the 'blocking and tackling.' When we feel like it is us against the world we need to get back to safety's fundamentals; the safety process. A safety process is a formal and systematic set of procedures outlining safety in your organization. It includes management safety accountability, incident reporting, incident analysis, hazard recognition and inspections, and employee recognition, just to name a few. If you don't have a formal safety process, now would be the time to begin moving it forward. You can learn more from any number of reputable safety textbooks. If you have a process, take it out, dust it off and refresh your organization on blocking and tackling.
5. **Share a Story** - - Joe is a safety professional and a close friend. For years we worked together in the safety trenches. It wasn't until I had known Joe for a number of years that he told me that a close friend of his had died right after college. His friend, who was more than seven foot tall, was just drafted into the NBA. Joe was supposed to meet this friend to go out and celebrate but his friend never showed. Joe learned later that night that his friend had taken a curve too fast and his car left the road. He wasn't wearing a seat belt and was thrown from the car and paralyzed. He died less than two years later from complications from

the crash. Joe, for years, had been struggling with how to relate to our work groups when giving a safety meeting or training program. I looked him in the eye and said that you have to share that story, with everyone! Safety is personal and one of the best paths for organizational growth is through vulnerability - - the ability of people within the organization to share a story. To foster this, ask a number of people, especially senior leaders, to share a story. It doesn't matter what the story is, it matters that it is personal, heart-felt and honest. Keith Ferazzi, business leader and author, puts it like this, "Vulnerability is the courage to reveal your inner thoughts, warts and all, to another person." It's through this 'courage' that results are found.

6. **Professional Development** - - There is an old saying that reads, "In order to help another, you must first help yourself." I was working as a line-manager for a mid-western utility when one day the phone rang. It was the safety manager. I thought he was calling about a near miss report, but to my surprise, he asked if I wanted to serve in a temporary roll on the company's safety staff. I accepted the opportunity and the position was made permanent a year later. I had earned my journey lineman card earlier in my career, so I knew the operational side of the business, but I didn't know safety. I began to work on my professional safety certification; I pursued the Certified Safety Professional (CSP) designation. Nearly five years later, I passed my final exam! I tell this because through that process I learned safety. I found new ideas. I built great networks. I met study partners, who I still call on for support. If you find yourself feeling alone, don't forget to help yourself first. The new ideas and skills you find will help both you and your organization.
7. **Find your Informal Safety Leaders** - - Leadership guru John Maxwell writes, "Leadership is influence over others." No matter how 'alone' you may feel, take a moment to look around your organization. What you will find is a handful of people who are leading. Each person will be leading in a unique and different way but each person will have influence over a number of fellow employees. Once you identify these leaders, bring them together and ask for their help. Engage them in activities. Use their leadership networks. Let this group talk to senior leaders, to share ideas and frustrations. Appreciate these leaders, for what they do. These are the people who can help you build a raft, and pull you from the desert island.
8. **Bring Food** - - "The family that eats together stays together," reads that familiar saying, but why? Well, the family that eats together is not only sharing food but time and life. They are routinely together at the table talking about issues of the day, problems, and struggles. In sharing a meal, support is found. They are there, together, laughing and joking and telling stories. And, when problems arise they know, in part because of the time together at the table breaking bread, that someone is there to talk. It would be great to build that sort of atmosphere with a work group. Well, we can. Set up a structure to share a meal within your organization. For example, you can hold a monthly breakfast if the group makes it injury free or meets another safety related goal. You can hold quarterly luncheons.

Set up a lunch series with workers and safety staff or better yet with workers and senior management. Over time you will find, the work group that eats together, is safe together!

9. **Recognize the Power of Recognition** - -“Recognition is American’s most underused motivational tool,” said Richard M. Kovacevich CEO of Wells Fargo. The insightful book entitled, *The Invisible Employee* reported some remarkable statistics on the subject of recognition and appreciation. “According to a 2003 survey, 90% of workers say they want their leaders to notice their efforts and improve their recognition and rewards.” In addition, “In an ongoing Gallup survey of more than 4 million employees worldwide, there is remarkable evidence of the business impact of recognition and praise. In a supporting analysis of 10,000 business units within 30 industries, Gallup found that employees who are recognized regularly increase their individual productivity, increase engagement among their colleagues, are more likely to stay with their organization, receive higher loyalty and satisfaction scores from customers, have better safety records and fewer accidents on the job.” Safety is a tailor-made vehicle for appreciation and recognition. To work your way off the island, set up structured recognition including line and senior management. It is in the natural facilitation of safety process elements, such as job safety observations, safety team interaction, and safety goal achievements where consistent appreciation and recognition can grow roots and have a far-reaching positive affect on an organization.

10. **Work One Day at a Time** - -Francis Petro, President and CEO of Hayes International Inc. said, “The fact is, the only day an employee can get injured is today. You can’t get injured tomorrow until it gets here and you can’t get injured yesterday because it is gone. So, we have to be very, very clearly focused on what is happening today and that becomes part of our makeup, that becomes part of our nature, and that becomes part of our culture.” (McMillan 2007) Before 1997, Phillip Popovec, Site Director for International Specialty Products (ISP), said safety was, “terrible.” But, the chemical manufacturer surmised, “We came to the conclusion that we don’t have to worry about how many recordable injuries we get this year. We don’t have to worry about how many recordable injuries we get this quarter. The only thing we have to worry about is not getting hurt today.” (Smith 2005). Focusing on today allows everyone to clearly focus around today’s hazard. It helps with job planning and job safety briefings. Focusing on today makes a clear theme that can bring energy back to your group...energy that can carry you gracefully off the island.

In the end, we all feel alone from time to time. It’s not the fact that we feel that way, instead it is what we do about it that matters. Remember what Art Linkletter said, “Life turns out the best for those who make the best of the way life turns out.” Keep fighting the good fight and working hard to be a desert island survivor.

Matt Forck directs Safestrat, [www.safestrat.com](http://www.safestrat.com)

