In Their Own Words
Building Competitive Advantage Through Health and Safety

NATIONAL SECURITY AND PUBLIC SAFETY
In Their Own Words: Building Competitive Advantage Through Health and Safety
by Bjorn Rutten

Preface

Beyond the obvious benefits that come from health and safety initiatives, some organizations are recognizing opportunities to improve their competitive advantage.

The Conference Board of Canada conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 11 CEOs in which they reveal what health and safety means to them, the personal actions they have taken in their organization, and the resulting benefits.

This report shares the perspectives of these senior leaders as they discuss the benefits of pursuing excellence in health and safety. It also provides ideas and inspiration for other CEOs on how they can improve health and safety in their organizations while also improving their overall competitiveness.

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Foreword

Wile many organizations are only starting to sense that there is a competitive advantage to continuously improving health and safety performance, certain CEOs have long held this conviction and have successfully applied this new understanding to their health and safety programs. These individuals have transformed health and safety to not only make their organizations healthier and safer, but also more prosperous.

In this compelling collection of personal interviews, 11 CEOs and presidents identify the manifold benefits of pursuing excellence in health and safety, share examples of effective actions they have carried out, and provide advice that others can use to improve health and safety in their own organizations.

These individuals have transformed health and safety to not only make their organizations healthier and safer, but also more prosperous.

While the interviewees come from a variety of organizations, they are united by their understanding of health and safety as an enabler and agent of positive change across their organization. For one company, this understanding provided the impetus to create for the first time a comprehensive health and safety program. For others, it drove sustainability initiatives for established programs and spurred activities to overcome complacency.

The men and women you’ll meet here provide very personal views of what health and safety means, what actions they have personally taken to improve health and safety, and how these efforts have benefited their organization. Some highlights:

- Interviewees share how health and safety has a profound effect on the recruitment and retention of employees. This is particularly relevant in high-risk industries, such as power distribution or mining.
- Companies that are in competition for contracts see it as an advantage vis-à-vis their competitors in the bidding process, if they can demonstrate to the client that they have a health and safety program that effectively protects the safety of their own workers and the customer’s.
- Interviewees confirmed that a strong health and safety program translates into lower operating costs for the company, thanks to the continued availability of employees and lower lost-time injury (LTI) costs. But they also emphasized the contribution such a program makes to a positive working atmosphere, which in turn boosts performance within their organizations.
- Knowledge-based businesses in particular place a high importance on health and safety since they are highly dependent on their employees who possess specialized knowledge or who maintain deep relationships with their clients.
- For the majority of interviewees, having an outstanding health and safety program and culture is a reputational issue.
In one way or another, all interviewees acknowledged that the benefits of a successful health and safety program and a strong health and safety culture are experienced throughout the organization. In other words, health and safety contributes positively—and in more than one way—to the overall performance of the organization.

“You can talk about all kinds of different reasons for doing it, but the real reason for doing it is because it is the right thing to do.”

One of the interviewees put it this way: “The impact of not having a strong health and safety program in place can have a far-reaching impact, not only on your safety performance or the dollars you spend on reactive measures after an incident, but also on other parts of your company, the employees and their families, and the competitiveness of your company as a whole.”

While CEOs and presidents naturally focus their answers on the business impact of health and safety, it is clear that they all subscribe to the belief of one interviewee who said, “You can talk about all kinds of different reasons for doing it, but the real reason for doing it is because it is the right thing to do.”

About the CEO Health and Safety Roundtable

More than 300 leaders have signed the CEO Health and Safety Leadership Charter. Among them are a number from organizations that have also committed to providing financial support for the wide range of activities and resources put in place under the Charter to ensure the success of CEOs leading the transformations. This dedicated group forms the CEO Health and Safety Roundtable, which worked with The Conference Board of Canada to identify forward-thinking individuals in health and safety and to make their ideas and practices accessible to their peers across Canada in a way that conveyed both their individuality and their enthusiasm. This was the origin of the In Their Own Words compendium.
Providing Value to the Company

*My role is to demonstrate leadership by emphasizing the importance of health and safety and its priority to the company and to me. This supports the functional leaders as they work to build the necessary culture.*

**Q.** How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

**A.** We have become certified with the Alberta Star program, and that has given us a competitive advantage with some customers in that province, along with reductions in workers’ compensation premiums. Last year, we had 26 external awards. This year so far, we’ve had 36 external awards for safety performance. A number of big customers are starting to ask for our health and safety performance as a condition before signing contracts. So when asked, we have a great record to show them. Also, if we are doing contract work on their job sites, we make sure that they are comfortable that we are conforming to the requirements and that the company stands behind its employees and their commitment to safety,

Generally, as the costs of injury go up for everybody, nobody wants to bear those costs. There is now more recognition that there is a cost to doing business associated with poor safety performance.

**Q.** What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

**A.** Even though I am not the functional head of safety, I speak about health and safety often and take a visible leadership role. Along with encouraging our managers to walk the floor, I make safety the first agenda item and talk about the elements of a sustainable safety culture when I visit any of our locations. I don’t leave the discussions of health and safety only to the functional leaders. I encourage everyone to ask the relevant questions whenever they have the opportunity. When
somebody starts a meeting without talking about safety, I will be the person to stand up and raise the question. I make sure that health and safety are part of the job of the business managers and part of their value proposition to the marketplace, which includes delivering a quality product and developing and building the product in the right way. And part of doing it the right way is providing a safe environment for our employees and our contractors.

When I walk a shop floor, I make sure that I know the content of the last inspection report. By following up on specific issues, it demonstrates to our employees that the leadership is paying attention. My role is to demonstrate leadership by emphasizing the importance of health and safety and its priority to the company and to me. This supports the functional leaders as they work to build the necessary culture.

**Q:** Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

**A:** Health and safety provides value to the company. If we look at how we want to be positioned in the marketplace, with a quality value proposition to our customers, an important piece of that value is how we get the job done. This means we want to deliver our products and services without hurting our customers, our employees, or our neighbours. As a result, health and safety is one of our important values as a company. When we look at how we operate, this means that we have to adopt a safety culture in our daily activities—when we are on and off the job. We have to make sure that all our employees feel that we are doing all we can to ensure that they are working in a safe environment—even if we don’t own that environment, such as a customer site. Our employees have to know that we will support them if they are put in a situation where they would be unsafe. We are initiating these actions because it is part of the values of the company, and it’s how we do things. It is integral to the perception and the quality of the product and the services that we deliver.

**Q:** What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

**A:** The greatest challenge is the combination of our broad product line with a fairly large employee population of around 10,000 employees that is also widely dispersed over 260 sites, not counting customers’ locations. As we started to develop a program, and as we looked to resource it, we had a number of questions: How do we reach all these employees? How can we creatively, cost-effectively, and efficiently deliver our program? How do we teach and emphasize our values to new employees? How do we make sure that they understand the values and really get it? And how do we ensure that they act accordingly?

To overcome this challenge, we put a lot of effort into training, and we are doing this in very creative ways. First, we teach employees how to do their jobs properly. Then we make sure that we engage them in building and sustaining a health and safety culture in their workplaces—wherever that may be. Most of the training is online and required. Managers can track employee progress. They get notified when somebody has not yet completed their training, and they can follow up. Of course, we also have on-the-job training.

We incorporate health and safety messaging across all our communications activities—whether online, via training programs, newsletters, or employee town halls. The message has to be consistent. We leverage technology to reach employees, to report incidents, to report against our monthly performance metrics, and to comment on health and safety action items. It is a consistent global system that is visible to all managers and officers throughout the corporation. Every quarter it provides a full report on performance and related action items at all our global locations.

We also provide immediate praise to team leaders with outstanding performance and spread the message to people outside of the EHS [environmental health and safety] function. Appreciation
for a job well done by leadership outside of the function reinforces the message that we all value the team’s work. For example, recently our Canadian head office was the first multi-business location to receive GE’s Global Star health and safety rating. Accolades came in from the global head office, international EHS and business leaders, as well as HR and other functional leaders. It is important for our employees to know that their efforts in health and safety are appreciated broadly across the company. It can be simple actions such as when I handwrite personal letters of congratulations and appreciation to team leaders. That is part of my job, part of my responsibility. The same applies to when there is an incident—the entire organization reacts quickly to make sure the local team gets all the resources and help it requires.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: Everybody is so overburdened with activities that we have to make sure that the programs and the demands we are putting on the group are as simple as possible. Because of the breadth of activities at GE, and that’s just the nature of the company, we need to identify simple tools that are readily adaptable to different kinds of work in different environments. We are also trying to make it as “grass roots” as possible. The more employee involvement we have, the better. We have to learn what engages employees so that we can make sure that this same type of local engagement in on-the-job health and safety also translates to our environmental programs. We currently have sites where the health and safety audit programs (self audits, peer audits) involve salaried employees, and we want to also include hourly employees and ensure they share the ownership for some of the elements of the programs. We are already involving the hourly employees in various ways in different locations. The lesson from this is that where people are engaged, it is always better. We now want to take the best practices—for example, from aviation—and encourage others elsewhere to determine if these would work for them in building hourly engagement.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: I think most people come to work wanting to go home at the end of the day in the same shape—if not better shape—than when they arrived. It is part of my responsibility to make sure we are doing everything we can do to make this happen. It’s all about personal involvement. As a leader, if you don’t discuss health and safety, its importance to the company does not get reinforced. When I go to a town hall meeting and talk about safety or a specific incident in the company, or when I walk the floor and discuss a recent problem at that site, then the employees know that EHS is important to the company’s leadership and that their health and safety performance is noticed. It shows we care about how we do our work and the personal safety of our employees.
Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: The retention of skilled employees with minimum lost time from illness and injury is critical. We are a small organization with 29 employees. Because we are in the knowledge transfer and support business, we are highly dependent on their expertise and ability to function. Having experienced and knowledgeable staff who are healthy and continuously engaged with their clients is extremely important to achieving quality and value-added business outcomes. We are proud to be able to say that we have minimal sick time and no lost-time injuries.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference in achieving this goal?

A: Health and safety is incorporated into our everyday business activities. Everybody owns it and takes responsibility. It has become part of our culture. We view health and safety as a competitive advantage, and we actually encourage this practice with clients as we guide and assist them to adopt a health and safety management system. Health and safety shouldn’t be an adjunct or afterthought. It should be central to workplace practices, policies, processes, purchases, and strategic planning activities. Health and safety is a component of our employee-orientation program. We discuss health and safety at our business meetings, where we continue to raise awareness and align
our prevention practices with workplace expectations and associated policies. For example, our staff are not expected to drive into work during inclement weather conditions; they can connect into their office computer from home. We also analyze the safety infrastructure needs around their job and respond accordingly. We conduct ergonomic assessments of workstations and home offices, perform regular workplace hazard inspections, and provide staff with advice on how they can ensure they stay safe. We make it clear that we expect them to put safety first. Many of our employees travel by car to visit clients, so health and safety is an important component of our travel policies and practices. Employees who are required to drive as part of their job attend skid school and provide annual proof of a safe driving record and a vehicle safety check. All staff members attend a basic certification program, and all health-and-safety-related investments are incorporated into our budget planning cycle. We are all role models for each other. I am held to the same level of accountability as my staff.

When we see the potential for a safety issue we discuss it. Our employees also have the latitude and flexibility to take control and/or initiate actions in situations where they believe there is a potential safety risk.

Q.: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A.: Safety is our business. We must lead by example. Our staff know that safety comes first, and it is an expectation of their job performance. This message also reinforces the knowledge that we really value and care about them. Health and safety shapes the culture of our organization. We talk about it, we reinforce it, and we continue to look for opportunities to strength our program. The impact—we have minimal sick time and no lost-time injuries. The result—we have a full complement of skilled, experienced, and engaged staff. We see the benefits in our business practices and our bottom line. Business continuity with skilled staff is important to our clients. Furthermore, recruitment is costly and time-consuming. Keeping part-time replacement staff current, training them, and making sure they are kept abreast of changes in policy is very time-consuming, costly, and impacts the quality of your business.

Each year, our profit margins have increased because we have committed, knowledgeable, and productive staff who are the face of our organization. Client-relationship management is very important. Clients expect consistent service that adds value. If our staff were frequently absent through illness or injury, the associated costs would impact our bottom line, affect morale, and weaken the quality of our service.

Q.: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A.: When you adopt appropriate healthy and safe workplace practices, there will be an associated investment cost. However, once these practices are incorporated into your core business practices and budget-cycle planning, you will begin to see that the longer-term investment benefits soon outweigh these costs. We talked about the issues of retention, turnover, sick time, lost-time injury, replacement costs, and other indirect costs associated with absenteeism; and we talked about the impact on client services. The productivity, customer satisfaction, and staff loyalty benefits associated with safe workplace practices soon become financially evident.
Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: Our plan is to continue to ask ourselves, “Are we doing enough? Are there other things that we need to do that would support the culture of health and safety in the organization?” We look at our consultants as the hub, or the intelligence, of the organization. We value their input, as they are the face of the organization and they drive the business. We listen and always look for ways to address any concerns and comments.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: Make it a priority. Integrate health and safety into your core business practices. The message to staff is clear—we care about your well-being. The return in loyalty will surprise you. Keep reinforcing this message—by example, in practice, and through dialogue. Safety will become an organizational presence and journey leading to a workplace culture of safety, health, and wellness. Work–life balance, health, and wellness are key recruitment priorities for the next generation of employees.
Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: In our mission statement, we talk about being an employer of choice, not just a contractor of choice. We strive to be an employer of choice through excellence in safety. We see a direct link between our attractiveness as an employer and our ability to work safely and have a strong safety culture. Part of the solution to the challenge of attracting good people in this business is having a safety culture that will attract good people to work for you. We don’t measure the benefit in dollars. It is simply the right way to work.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: I think that in our industry—and in other industries as well—people often develop good safety programs, they implement them well, but they still have injuries. And the traditional way of thinking has been: “We’ve done a good job. It is too bad we still have people getting hurt.” This is just not acceptable any more. If you still have people getting hurt, your programs are not working.

What we did a few years ago is we just went and asked our workers—and it was a real eye-opener. We asked them what’s working and what’s not, and we got some very interesting feedback. Based on their contributions, we were able to change a few things. It wasn’t magic, but it really worked for us. It was just so simple, but traditionally it wasn’t how things were done.

I think that our vision statement is unique in that it can be owned by everyone and it can mean different things to different people. Our vision is that we want to fundamentally change how mining contracting is carried out in our industry.
Now this can mean a lot of things to different people, but what this means to me is that we want to reduce and eliminate injuries in our industry—and that’s a huge change in our business. I remember my second shaft project in 1982 where one of the old-timers told me the rule of thumb was that you would have one fatality every 1,000 feet of shaft. This project involved a 5,000-foot shaft, and therefore he predicted five fatalities. We are changing this, and a lot of progress has been made over the past 25 years.

This year we really stressed reporting everything, and what is interesting is that some of the feedback we received showed that, despite whatever culture I establish, or that senior management establishes, it is ultimately the site superintendent and the site management that establish the culture on the site. We see that very clearly where some projects report virtually everything—every incident, from the smallest thing—whereas other projects are still not reporting some things. It really is buy-in from site management that makes the difference; and, of course, the employees find out early if somebody reports something and then gets chewed out for it. And then they stop reporting. We want the culture of the company to be conducive to reporting, and we are not where we want to be yet. What’s important is to recognize reporting and not to discipline. Each day, the crews talk about conditions in confidential crew meetings and they rate each day in terms of safety conditions. There is almost a requirement to report. If the guys know they have to report something at the end of the day, they keep their eyes open. What we got through to a number of people is that the reporting of an incident can prevent future injuries. Reporting is the first step to eliminating injuries altogether.

Q. Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A. We went to our workers to ask them what works and what doesn’t, we had to do it in a way that would allow them to communicate their true feelings. We used an independent party, it was anonymous, and we visited every project, talked to everyone, and got some real eye-openers in terms of the concerns of our front-line people.

Supervision was a big concern, as was the ability to stop and correct without the stigma, and the reporting culture. As a result, we’ve implemented some very strong supervisor training programs. We realized that we had to make our management and supervisors true believers in our goal of zero injuries. I always say that they are essentially evangelists—they don’t just have to be good at what they do, they have to be passionate about safety and make our employees believers as well. That is our next big step. Until we get everyone to believe that zero is possible, we can’t get there. We are working very hard on our reporting culture and our ability to stop and correct. Whenever we have a project that goes a long time with zero, everybody hears about it. There is recognition there and it is proving to people that it is possible. It is making people believe in it.

As a result of our focus on reporting, our reported injuries have increased but our severity has decreased. In other words, our reportable injury rating has gone up for the year but our lost-time injuries and our severity (or days lost) have gone down.

Q. What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A. There are always challenges there—for example, differences of opinion between people. When you have employees voicing their concerns, supervisors may sometimes see these concerns as mere excuses. But whatever they are, you still have to commit to reacting to your employees’ recommendations. It doesn’t mean you have to implement them, but you do have to continue to communicate with people, especially if you decide not to implement their recommendations.
Another aspect is that you bring in experienced people in order to have the right training and experience base in your company. Some of those people are old-school, and that was identified by our workers in terms of supervisors. Some of those employees you can train, and with others it just won’t work. Interestingly, we’ve not had to let these employees go. They recognize on their own that they are not part of this culture—that they are out of place—and they move on.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: What we focused on last year was reporting. What we have to do now is look at trending or analyzing all the reporting that is going on and see what our next step is in terms of dealing with the less severe medicals—such as twisted ankles or concrete burns—that we get. The guys come back the next day, but we need to find out why that even happened.

We have a biannual operations safety meeting, a two-day event, where we talk about the trends we see, and we get feedback from all the projects across North America and what they see. We get a lot of feedback on how to deal with the trends that we see. It really is an interactive process with our field personnel, and you get a lot more buy-in that way.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: You have to realize that, if you are in a position of CEO or president at the top of an organization, the greatest impact that you can have is on the culture. You can’t be at the job every day. You can’t be on every job site of every project. When I get a chance to speak to my people I tell them exactly that: “I am only here for an hour and I can give you a motivating speech but the reality is you are responsible for your own safety.” And we have to set up a company that gives them the right and the ability to be responsible for their own safety.

Establishing a culture—through the vision statement and sincerely believing in it—that supports this is my job, and you look for senior people who have similar values and share your belief in this vision. This way your values and your vision are cascaded through the organization. It is within your power to establish this culture, and it is within your power to empower people to implement that culture. Depending on the size of the company, you cannot be everywhere, and it comes down to establishing that culture and having people believe in it. That’s your job as a leader.

For us, it is about being a strong company and it is about being an employer of choice. It also is about performance. We firmly believe that the fewer incidents and injuries, the better our performance. Our projects have proven that time and again. Our best projects are the ones with the best safety records. Our people recognize that shortcuts to safety do not provide better performance and ultimately end up costing the race. We have seen it and we know that safety and productivity go hand in hand.

It is about our ability to attract people and our performance—and after all is said and done, we’re all about treating our people right. The safety of our people is a key part of their quality of life. You can talk about all kinds of different reasons for doing it, but the real reason for doing it is because it is the right thing to do. It is pretty basic. You don’t have to analyze costs. You don’t have to do any of that. It is just the right way to work. We are not in it to save money or to get more projects but because it is the right way to work. I remember one of the signs on one of the sites that said, “It must become socially unacceptable to be injured at work.” I found that an interesting way to look at it. It is another way of saying that it is simply the right way to work.
How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

The answer to that is two-fold. First, it helps us recruit the best people. Safety is extremely important to the young graduates coming out of university and college these days, and if you have a health and a safety culture that sets you apart from the competition you will be able to recruit them. The second competitive advantage is related to clients. Most of our larger clients—especially in energy and the oil and gas field—have strong health and safety cultures themselves, and they require their contractors and service providers to have very solid health and safety policies and procedures and a solid culture. We have actually won quite a number of large projects in the past few years not necessarily because of price but because we’ve had the best health and safety record and culture.

What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

The single action for me is taking it home. I think in order for senior executives in any firm to really drive home a health and safety culture you have to lead by example. I’ve made it a personal commitment and I’ve even taken our safety procedures home to my kids and family. And I put health and safety front and centre at all the meetings in the company.

It is not enough to simply implement great policies and procedures. You have to create the necessary culture, and that requires leading by example.
drive the behaviour—which in turn drives the culture. We’ve implemented policies that require everyone to back into their parking spots and to stop using cell phones while driving, and I am following these policies without exception. I had personal conversations with several project managers who argued that even when using their cell phones they were still better drivers than most. So I had to say to them: “That may be true, but is it not safer for you personally when you are not using the cell phone?” And the answer to them was obviously that it is safer and that it is the right thing to do. People don’t like change and it takes some effort to change old habits.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A: We are a consulting firm—a family—that has always believed in health and safety. But 10 years ago we didn’t have the consistent policies and procedures in place that were necessary. We realized that we needed to standardize to make sure that we were using the same safe work practices across all of our offices and projects. We’ve always had the corporate value of safety for all our employees and clients, but we never had the right structure in place with the policies and the recording of incidents. We needed that, especially since we were growing. We wanted to be able to do a lot more business for larger clients. I think it is always the right thing to do, of course. But if I compare our firm with some others that don’t have that culture—that safety comes first—I can see where, in a lot of CEOs’ minds, business comes first, and if you don’t lead by example, and if you don’t truly believe that safety is an integral part of running a successful business, and if you believe that it will just get in the way of making profits, then you will be running an unsafe firm. We’ve spent a lot of time and money implementing these procedures, and from a business perspective it has increased the profitability of the company.

Having standardized ways of doing things across the company has really improved our business overall. When you have a safety culture you have a lot fewer injuries, a lot less down time. Our staff are much more cognizant, and they think of safety first when they go out and do a project. Over the duration of a project that will save time, if they are thinking about it beforehand. It makes a big difference.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: I think the biggest challenge that any firm has is change management. Implementing new health and safety policies into our business was something that staff looked at as some sort of impediment to doing our work. Changing the mindset and helping staff realize that building time for health and safety into our projects and budgets is very important. Breaking the old habits is a challenge. I worked individually with a lot of the people who had the greatest difficulty accepting the need for change or adopting the new policies and procedures, and I made sure that the senior managers reporting to me were on board so that they could work with everyone else.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: Our main focus is to learn from our incidents. Now that we have an incident reporting system in place, we need to take that data and analyze where the issues are. A couple of years ago, we identified a high number of vehicle incidents and lower back strains, and we implemented programs that addressed these issues specifically—such as driver training and a safe lifting course. With our incident reporting system, we track our near misses and total reportable incident rate and they are regularly presented to the members.
of the executive leadership team. It is important that senior executives not only see the statistics but also the details on the types of incidents. We need to identify what we can do about these incidents and make sure that the potential for recurrence of these incidents is reduced.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: The one thing is to drive a health and safety culture rather than just a health and safety program. I have seen companies that haven’t done that, and a typical project manager will just see this as onerous and unnecessary red tape. Unless you have the culture—unless you are driving it from an attitude perspective first, which drives the behaviour—then health and safety policies and procedures will just be perceived as onerous. Leading by example is the one most important thing the CEO needs to do to build that culture and to nurture the necessary attitudes.
Building Trust Through Action

*Actions speak louder than words. You can have all the great policies and procedures written up, but it won’t work unless you respond in a manner that is positive, collaborative, and that generates trust.*

**Q:** How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

**A:** We are still too early in the process to say to what degree it gives us a competitive advantage. In terms of our graduates, it gives them a competitive advantage on the job market in that our programs include a health and safety component. In terms of our own employees, I struggle with the term “competitive advantage” as they come to work at Cambrian College for a wide range of reasons. The fact that we have a strong focus on health and safety may very well be one of those reasons, but it is difficult to say if that’s what gives us the competitive advantage. However, health and safety is all part and parcel of creating a sense of collaboration. We really believe in a culture that demonstrates a sense of joint caring and joint ownership of the success of the college. We really want to create an environment where people can freely bring forward their health and safety concerns, as well as other concerns, and know that they will be responded to quickly and appropriately. To know that the organization has a priority on health and safety allows people to feel very comfortable, and it contributes to our very positive culture.

**Q:** What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

**A:** I would say there are two. First, I have made health and safety a priority in our strategic plan. The plan is divided into strategies that will move the core business forward, strategies that will move the ancillary businesses forward, and then strategies that will ensure that we maintain and continue to grow our culture and people. A prime focus area in the last couple of years has been health and safety and we are striving to become known as the top college when it comes to our
health and safety policies and practices and our responsiveness to health and safety. We want our people to not only feel comfortable and know that they are working in a healthy and safe place, but also to know that they have ownership and will be responded to.

Second, I personally sit on the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee, and that has had a tremendous impact. Our director of health and safety is on the committee as well. But in addition to that, I felt it was important that I participate in the monthly meetings. And it has had a very profound and positive impact.

**Q:** Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

**A:** I chose to attend the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee meetings because I felt that I needed to understand the issues better and that being part of the committee—sitting at the table, being part of the discussions, and hearing the concerns and issues—would really help me. I also wanted the committee to know that they not only had support through the chain of command, but they actually had the employer’s support. I felt that this would send a very strong message. I did ask the committee for permission before I attended the first meeting, and we started off with the members seeing me as a visitor but later coming to accept me as a member. They are now very comfortable with it and very appreciative. But naturally, at first they were a little hesitant. In terms of impact on the organization, it really is saying that health and safety is important to me as the employer and thus it has to be everybody’s concern and everybody needs to take more responsibility for it—and they are recognizing that and are articulating it. It has a very positive filter-down effect. It also has enabled us to be much quicker in our responses because the committee would not have to spend the time going back and forth with management. It was just slowing things down. Many things could now be dealt with right at the table. For example, I have been able to offer them some resources because I know the organization and I know where there might be some resources to help facilitate some of their processes electronically—their record keeping, their inspections, and other things. We’ve moved to a different level, which makes their job a little easier. And in that sense, they are now taking more ownership and making sure they are being diligent in their roles.

**Q:** What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

**A:** One of the challenges was around building trust. There was a real sense of suspicion and concern that I would just whitewash things, not really listen, and that there would be one less recourse to the employer. But through actions rather than words, through follow-up, and through me assuming a support role for my director of health and safety, because she had to continue to be the prime person representing the organization, we worked things out. At first, the committee started to blur those lines, thinking they could go through the president directly on everything. We’ve worked all those processes out now and they have a great deal of trust. They understand why I am there, and they certainly appreciate the fact that I can be supportive of them and that I have a better understanding now. I also enjoy the fact that there are times when I can sit down and ask them for their support in order to have some things happen. It is working very well now, but the challenges around blurring of the lines still arise from time to time. When that happens I make sure that I stay in my role and I let my director of health and safety take that leadership role of refocusing the committee, and that has really worked. For example, sometimes people would have difficulty keeping their union hats off. Going back to the actions and the priorities of the committee that we have set has really helped as well. It keeps everyone moving forward and keeps the energy going in one direction.
Q. What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A. Our biggest focus right now is on enhancing the awareness of our employees as to their role and responsibilities. We go through all the usual training, and new employees in particular get inundated with information and health and safety training processes and steps and they come out with all this absolutely whirling in their heads. But we don’t really touch back on it as frequently as we should. We are engaging in various approaches for continuing to have health and safety at the forefront of everyone’s mind. We have tools that are being provided to administrators, and every monthly department meeting has health and safety as an agenda item. We provide the departments with support and materials they can use in their meetings to illustrate certain aspects of health and safety.

We are also planning our second all-staff meeting. Last year, we did a whole awareness campaign around our emergency preparedness plan and what everyone’s roles and responsibilities are. For our upcoming all-staff, we will focus on health and safety, taking an active rather than a passive approach by involving people directly in a very fun way—through skits and other humorous ways. Coincidentally, during our emergency preparedness campaign, we realized that better health and safety will also lead to fewer situations where we would have to evacuate.

Q. If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A. Actions speak louder than words. You can have all the great policies and procedures written up, have all the appropriate materials and follow rules and regulations, but it won’t work unless you respond in a manner that is positive, collaborative, and that generates trust. We need to respect the fact that every worker has part of the responsibility for health and safety. And the only way that you are going to get people to take on that responsibility is if you create the environment that will make them feel comfortable in bringing forward issues. You have to build that trust. The way you build it is by listening, taking the time to understand each concern, taking the concerns seriously, and by following through. If you are not receptive, you may not get the information when it really counts. You can’t have eyes everywhere. You depend on information from your employees, and you have to make sure they know that your door is always open.
**The Tone at the Top**

*Setting the tone at the top is my job.*

In every conversation I have with my employees, safety is the first thing I talk about.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: In the nuclear industry, safety is a key reputational issue. Being able to demonstrate an accident frequency rate of zero is a very important factor in discussions with our regulator and the community at large. A key part of our growth and development initiatives is getting public support for our programs and being able to stand up and give presentations that show our accident and industrial safety performance. Health and safety performance is a very important enabler for our growth.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: The tone at the top is fundamental to any health and safety initiative. I have been seen as a champion of health and safety, not least because of the CEO Health and Safety Leadership Charter, which I helped to initiate. Setting the tone at the top is my job. In every conversation I have with my employees, safety is the first thing I talk about. In addition, I hold quarterly all-employee meetings, and I mention our health and safety performance as the first business metric—every time. It is very important that you demonstrate that you take the organization’s safety motto seriously.

We have a lot of safety metrics in our industry, as you might imagine. We have, of course, the obvious one which is the industrial accident frequency rate (IAFR). Right now our IAFR is zero. That’s a pretty good number. We constantly look for errors in the field and record how long we have gone without human performance events on our event-free clock. Just by the nature of our industry we also have what we call “station condition reports” that employees use to record near misses and field deficiencies. A lot
of these metrics are very visible to our employees. For example, if you drove around our site you would see placards that talk about how many days we have gone without lost-time injuries. We also have a gain-sharing system with our employees, and safety performance is a moderator on the pay-out.

And again, our site is quite unique as we are running a refurbishment project right now with 2,500 extra contractors on site, and we have now reached 12 million hours without a lost-time incident. As we understand it, there hasn’t been a similar construction project anywhere with a similar safety record. We seem to have found a safety formula that works not only with our own staff but also with the contractors that come to work on our site. For example, each contractor received a personal letter from me explaining what we expect in terms of health and safety. This is an important part of ensuring the consistency of our health and safety messages.

As I said, some of that is just a mainstay of our industry. We have some very effective human performance tools (e.g., conservative decision making; stop, think, act, and review; three-way communication) and anyone who comes to work on our site is taught the use of these tools. In our industry, we push people very hard on procedure use and adherence, conservative decision-making, and three-way communication. These are the tools that we expect our employees to use each day.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A: I think the rationale here is that in the nuclear power business, safety and commercial performance are entirely complementary. If we can engage employees in safety, then we can also engage them in other business initiatives, such as those related to productivity. Health and safety is a means of engaging employees in the overall performance of the business. As far as the nuclear power industry is concerned, we know and we can demonstrate that without a strong safety record you don’t have a viable business. It is not an option for us to focus on safety—it is a mandatory part of our business.

Obviously, we are a regulated business. But as far as I am concerned, regulation drives compliance, whereas management focus and employee engagement drive excellence. That’s how I see it. Of course, it is important to meet regulatory requirements. But regulation does not deliver excellence, and our initiatives are all about zero accidents by choice—not by chance and not by regulation. Also, most of the regulations concern nuclear safety, not industrial safety. Industrial safety is of interest to the regulator, but it takes second place to nuclear safety. I don’t believe there’ll ever be a book written that is called “Regulate Your Way to Excellence.” I just don’t believe that is how you get to the higher standard. We are aiming for a high standard, and if we are doing that, regulation doesn’t get in our way.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: We have a large site with close to 4,000 employees of which 95 per cent are unionized. So, right out of the gate we engaged our union in the initiatives and signed a charter between ourselves called Target Zero. It was a tripartite initiative. We saw health and safety as a common issue, and we felt that this was a way in which we could all be pulling in the same direction. It was a celebration for all when the charter was signed. The reality is that sometimes joint health and safety committees can become a venue for labour relations issues, and discussions are not really about health and safety. With the charter we wanted to make sure that the two agendas do not become confused, and it underlined that there is no need for us to be divided on health and safety.
**Q.** What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

**A.** We are spending a lot of time on proactive risk assessments, including task reviews and risk analysis. A particular focus is placed on pre-job briefings, which allow people to talk about risks associated with tasks before they do them. Another key area is field observation and coaching. In order to be more proactive, we now send monitors into the field who observe tasks. We need to do more than just manage indicators.

In terms of operational performance sharing, our industry has a very good network. We get what we call “operational experience feedback” (OEF) from all the nuclear plants, and we share the information in a common database. We are now bringing this information to the point of use—i.e., to the stage of the pre-job briefing. For example, if someone is doing a pre-job briefing on a future task, they would be able to go on their computer and find out if there have been adverse experiences associated with this task either at our site or elsewhere.

The other issue, which we probably have in common with others, is knowledge management. We have a lot of people retiring, and when they leave they take away good experience. We have to ensure that new people are properly trained and available. That is a key focus for us as well.

**Q.** If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

**A.** What matters to the chief executive officer matters to everyone else. The key is the tone that you set from your office. Remind yourself to set that tone in every conversation, dialogue, and exchange you have. Something that is important to the CEO is important to everyone. The first thing I ask my managers about in the morning is safety, and then the first thing they ask their reports about is safety. It is all about the tone at the top.
Health and Safety
On and Off Campus

What’s really striking to me is the fact that it is young people—students—who are at the highest risk in the workplace. Every year we hear about far too many tragic accidents involving students.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: It is kind of on two fronts—students and staff—because we are a post-secondary institution. On the student side, it is starting to give us a competitive advantage. We are the largest co-operative education college in Canada. We have around 4,000 students in co-op programs, and all our other programs have work elements as well, such as field placements or apprenticeships. So work experience is very much part of their learning experience. Some of the things we have done with the students have given us a competitive advantage in terms of helping them with health and safety when they are out on their work placements. We require our teachers to have work experience in the field as well as academic credentials, and we believe that they must be role models in health and safety for our students. On the staff side, we are now taking a systematic approach to health and safety, and we are starting to see the dividends in terms of our attractiveness as an employer, and in terms of our public image in general.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: If I have to pick one, I’d say it was moving the health and safety function out of our physical resources area and into human resources. We are really trying to put a “people face” on it. Responsibility for health and safety is now under our Vice-President of Student and Organizational Success. Everything flows from this decision, as I believe that your structure should support your strategy. When you talk about health and safety, you are talking about people. We are always striving to be the best employer that we can be,
the best post-secondary institution in the province for our students, and to have safe campuses for the public to visit. So it’s all about people, and I really believe that this new structure better supports our strategy.

In terms of implementing the strategy, I hand off to the vice-president. My role is to try to make sure that I can get the necessary resources, and to support her and the other vice-presidents as we are trying to implement changes. Sometimes there is resistance to change, and I have a key role in explaining the importance of these changes to our staff and why this is where we are going. Getting the resources and providing the direction to staff is what I see my role being.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A: We moved the function because we wanted to make it clear that health and safety is all about people. In terms of impact so far, we’ve been able to implement online health and safety training for our students, and for our staff. We’ve also implemented a complete “code red” lockdown procedure in the event of a crisis, and we now have technology in place to support that. I joined The Conference Board of Canada’s CEO Health and Safety Leadership Charter. We are also just now implementing defibrillators at all of our campuses as part of a comprehensive wellness program for staff. And again, we could have spent the money on something else, but because improving health and safety is an important strategy for us, we have allocated our limited resources accordingly. The change has already had an impact on our students, and it is starting to have an impact on our staff.

What’s really striking to me is the fact that it is young people—students—who are at the highest risk in the workplace. I’m in my 27th year in the college system, and every year we hear about far too many tragic accidents involving students, whether they are from secondary schools, colleges, or universities. We need to do whatever we can as educators to prepare our students for safety in the workplace, and that includes supporting employers’ separate initiatives.

Q: Overcoming resistance to change is often simply a matter of making sure that people have the necessary resources, and providing the education that is required for people to understand the importance of health and safety. We are starting to use an evidence-based approach with staff—for example, by providing the numbers on lost-time incidents, tracking slips and falls, and even how many staff are using our fitness centres. How can we get accidents down to zero? Some of it is education on safe work practices, and some is a matter of actively changing our work processes.

A: On the student side, I have already alluded to the three-hour health and safety online module we developed, actually on behalf of Ontario’s Ministry of Labour. It was designed for supervisors, but we have also already built it into our technology programs. We are now looking at how we can incorporate it into all our programs. One of the challenges we face is how to fit it into the curriculum, and how to ensure that our teachers are familiar with it. From a student perspective, our technology programs have some of the highest-risk work placements. But there are risks in other areas as well—even on our own campuses, if you think of the machines and equipment that we have in technology and design arts, or the kitchens in the hospitality area, or in our health sciences labs. Funding and resourcing is a prerequisite, and initiatives such as the purchase of defibrillators at our college are a good example of how something very obvious can still be challenging to implement. There is no dedicated funding for this type of purchase, and each
institution has to find ways on its own, amidst competing priorities, to make health and safety purchases. And this is where a president plays an important role.

I see health and safety as a win–win. It is a win for management and it is a win for staff. In our case, it is also a win for our students and their work-placement employers. I have not seen any real resistance to our initiatives. People just have a lot of demands competing for their attention, and resources can be a challenge.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: A big part of what we have done in training is to develop the online curriculum for the Ministry of Labour. Our students actually take this training now, and we are trying to get other post-secondary institutions to introduce this training as well. In addition to our joint health and safety committees, which exist for each campus of the college, we are working on creating a college-wide health and safety advisory committee. It is not established under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. It is something broader than that, and it will be composed of representatives of staff, students, and management. The group will look at health and safety across all of our locations and give advice on what our priorities should be in the future.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about yielding the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: Stick with it. In Ontario, certainly, we are all going through a challenging time economically, and it will be tempting in some situations to cut back on optional health and safety initiatives. That goes to the sustainability of your health and safety program—there are many ways you can cut corners if you aren’t totally committed to the program. Make health and safety part of your values as an individual and as an organization. It is not always easy, but you have to personally own it. As much as I am concerned about our staff and the public that come on campus, we are very safe compared with many other work environments. But I am very concerned about our students and making sure that they are prepared to work safely, because there are some very high-risk workplaces out there—and students are the highest at-risk group in our society.
Ron Gagnon  President and CEO, Sault Area Hospital

Making Health and Safety Everyone’s Responsibility

It used to be the case that health and safety was just seen as a manager’s job. But now every employee at every level understands their role in health and safety.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: Being a hospital, we don’t typically think of it in terms of dollars and cents, but we do think of it in terms of being able to attract and retain great people. The way our efforts have helped us is by people knowing that when they come here they are going to work in a safe environment. That encourages people. By focusing on health and safety, and by having brought down our lost-time injuries by 60 per cent since we embarked on this journey, we also reduce our NEER [New Experimental Experience Rating program] surcharges and other costs associated with lost-time injuries and safety infractions.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: If I had to pick a single one, it would be making [health and safety] a priority for the organization. Back in May 2006, the organization was actually charged under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. I became the interim CEO in July 2006. In January 2007, the organization was convicted—and as a reminder for myself, I actually have the newspaper plate from that day on the wall right across from the door to my office. It is the first thing I see when I come into the office every morning, and it is a constant reminder for me that we have to make health and safety our number one priority. I reinforce that by being an active member of the Joint Health and Safety Committee. I sit as an active member and I participate in the safety tours of the organization. One of the things we do at all levels of the organizations is what we refer to as “manager rounding.” Looking at and talking about health and safety is one of the key factors
in that “rounding.” The key thing is to make it a priority for yourself and the organization.

We have five corporate priorities this year—and health and safety is one of these priorities. It is part of my performance objectives, and every leader in the organization has health and safety as part of their performance objectives. Every year we bring back to our Board our corporate joint health and safety policy, it is reviewed by the Board—after it has been reviewed and endorsed by our senior management team. Both the chair and I sign off on it, and it is posted throughout the organization. Health and safety is also part of our standards of performance. Safety is one of the key performance expectations. I report to the Board on our safety performance on a regular basis—usually around the rate of lost-time injuries as the key indicator. Our senior management team also reviews every joint health and safety committee agenda and package.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? What impact has this had in your organization?

A: The main reason for me is that if our employees felt that they were not healthy and safe at work, they would be unable to deliver excellent care to our patients. Our organization consists of 1,900 individuals. If they don’t feel safe, or if they are not at work, then we can’t deliver excellent care. We have to focus on their safety and our ability to keep them safe and to keep them at work in an industry where the rate of lost-time injuries is actually quite high. This was somewhat surprising to me. We deliver health care, we care for people, and meanwhile our lost-time injury rate is quite high compared to major industrial organizations. This is why we started on this journey. We really needed to make this a priority.

Our lost-time injuries are now down by 60 per cent, and the awareness of safety is up throughout the organization. It used to be the case that health and safety was just seen as a manager’s job. But now every employee at every level understands their role in health and safety, and we have health and safety representatives in virtually all the departments. Safety is part of the senior management team’s agenda. It is part of the board’s agenda. It is part of regular departmental meetings. And it is a part of “rounding.” I don’t believe we are all the way there, because I believe this is a journey. But we are engraining safety in the mindset of our people. And, in my opinion, that’s really how you become a safer organization.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: One of the key challenges is dealing with competing priorities. One of the things we did was to increase investment in our health and safety department—where we had only very minimal investment before. We brought in people who had a lot of knowledge, skill, and experience, and who helped our staff implement some of the tools pertaining to health and safety.

Another challenge is the provision of resources. Instead of looking at the resource question by saying, “Well, we just can’t afford it,” we changed the paradigm on this by asking “Can we afford not to [provide the resources]?” Because by having people always sick, by incurring large NEER surcharges, it is actually costing you much more than an investment in health and safety to support the organization would cost.

A key part of culture change for us is related to accountability. We made everybody understand that health and safety is not only a manager’s job or the CEO’s job, it is everyone’s job. Always! We’re making significant headway around that.

The other challenge for us was the need for a new approach, but we didn’t want to reinvent the wheel. When I did some of my own reading, and when we spoke with our new manager of occupational health and safety, we saw that there were many organizations inside and outside of
our own industry that have had great success when it comes to occupational health and safety. So we did things like joining the CEO Health and Safety Leadership Charter, which includes a number of organizations from across the country. And we are learning from our fellow members. We are also a member of the Ontario Hospitals Association Safety Group which focuses on a number of key priorities every year that we want to act upon as we move toward improvement as an association. We are also looking at benchmarking, comparing ourselves with other organizations, and identifying those organizations that we can learn from.

We’ve also strengthened our joint health and safety committee, not only in terms of power, but also in terms of education—giving every member the opportunity to go through the education process for certification. Even though this is not a requirement, we made this available to everybody. Another improvement that our new occupational health and safety manager has brought is a really enhanced wellness program, including exercise programs, a smoking-cessation program, yoga programs, and programs that help people to manage stress and improve their own health. This is not directly related to safety, but it is about employee wellness. I really believe that well-feeling and well employees make for a much more productive and a much happier organization.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: It starts at the top. We—as boards and CEOs—have to set the tone at the top. That’s what will drive improvement throughout your organization. If people don’t believe that the leader is committed, then nobody else will be committed either.

Don’t look for a silver bullet. There are no quick fixes. This is something that is a journey, you have to be committed to it; there are going to be ups and downs, and you have to stay committed to it. You need to make it part of the fabric of the organization. Safety has to be everywhere, always, for everyone.

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Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: The area that the data tell us we have to focus on is related to patient aggression.

We have seen that increasing, and we are already starting to address this. It is a challenging area because we are here to treat patients. We have to make sure we are able to find that right balance.

The other area is getting to zero injuries. We have reached a 60 per cent decrease, but where we want to be is zero. That’s our ultimate goal. We are going to do that by continuing to do what needs to be done in the areas where the data tell us we need to be improving—and continuing to drive that culture of safety everywhere and always. That’s not something that I believe is a one-shot deal. You have to continually reinforce that and continually be on top of that. In a day and age in which the worldwide economy is really struggling, many people will look to places like occupational health and safety and say, “Let’s cut that.” To me that is absolutely the wrong move. You need to make sure those investments are the right ones, and you need to be committed to them, because by keeping your staff safe, you are actually going to improve your bottom line and you are going to help your operations.
A Culture of Distributed Responsibility

With all the turmoil associated with the current economic downturn, a keen focus on health and safety promotes a positive attitude within a company.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: From our point of view, health and safety forms the foundation of a successful company. Everything else revolves around a culture in which health and safety is paramount. We have been able to put in place a very progressive health and safety program, and that’s led to a culture that we can build upon for better results, efficiency, and productivity. You get more buy-in from a workforce when you have the kind of culture that promotes health and safety and caring for each other in terms of watching out for each other in daily activities.

We’ve also just been named one of the top 75 employers in Greater Toronto. This is part of an overall strategy that gives us a great foundation within the company, and then we build on it and support activities that promote our strong health and safety program. These initiatives and achievements give us the competitive advantage of being able to attract and retain employees in the future, especially in the areas of skilled trades and skilled technical staff where there will be fierce competition in the coming years. That’s a fundamental piece of our business. You can have the absence of a number of things, but if you have a very bad health and safety culture and performance, part of the organization’s time, effort, and energy is associated with negative things. If you can eliminate that and channel that focus instead on positive things in terms of being proactive—such as training and investigating incidents—then this creates positive energy around activities like these, and this positive energy contributes to the corporation and enhances the business.

The monetary side is important as well. If you can invest proactively, you will not have to deal with the negative fallout from having a very bad
health and safety record. It’s all about focus. Investments of time and money in promoting and maintaining a healthy and safe workforce will have a large payback. With all the turmoil associated with the current economic downturn, the focus on health and safety helps to keep the attitude positive within the company.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: My role is to set the tone and the expectation for the organization that all accidents are preventable, that it is important to be concerned, not only about your own health and safety, but also the health and safety of those you work with. It is really about regular reinforcement. I ensure regular reinforcement of the program through the celebration of milestones and through talking about health and safety at every meeting I attend. That’s the key—communication and the regular interaction with management and the employees. It is very easy to become complacent and neglect the fact that one of your major focuses should be on health and safety.

We believe in a culture of distributed responsibility for health and safety. It is not just the responsibility of the health and safety manager or any one person alone. Ultimately, everybody is responsible for everybody else’s safety. We encourage this kind of approach and thinking within the company. As a CEO, you try to walk the talk, reinforce it wherever you go, and involve people in a number of different ways. The key here is that there is not just one thing you need to do. There are a number of different channels and venues, and you must take advantage of as many opportunities to influence as you can. Encouraging the joint health and safety committees and having a supportive relationship with the union are very important as well. Both of these groups have played a large role in creating a safe workplace at Veridian.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A: There is much more discussion about health and safety throughout the organization now. There is more responsibility. There are more people proactively working to prevent accidents. There is a better response to incidents when they do happen, and we are gaining a better understanding on why incidents happen.

It is clear that I have a big responsibility to my staff to form an environment that creates a safe workplace. That’s really why I have done what I’ve done. I know it is important, not only for the company, but also for the employees. It’s great to have a no-lost-time-injuries record of over seven years and to have a successful company. But ultimately, it’s all about our employees returning home at the end of the day to be with their families.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: I think there is always the risk of complacency. We operate in a busy environment and there are always a number of things going on, such as increased activity by the regulator. So you get concerned about complacency and you have to keep the reminders and touch points with various parts of the organization at a strong and frequent enough level to keep the focus on health and safety very high. No matter what else might happen in the organization, we can’t take our eyes off the ball of health and safety.

Regular meetings with everyone involved and keeping my door open for any issues that concern health and safety have helped me to keep the overall emphasis on working safely. It’s almost become a habit. And that’s what you want it to be—a habit. It means that health and safety is reinforced at all times. People come to work, and part of what they do is make sure that their work is done safely.
Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: We are working on improving our post-incident learning process and sharing the lessons that we learn from these incidents. We make sure that all our employees participate in this learning process. It is about sharing information on what the trends are and what employees can do to take better care of themselves and each other. Once we have identified a [negative] trend, we need to identify what it is we can do to stop that trend and share the information with all employees.

Also, to take this to the next level—and we are already doing some of this—we are working toward the whole idea of employee wellness. It requires proactive thinking. We have done some good work in creating a positive health and safety environment and culture. But how can we put more tools in the employees’ hands to help them work even more safely and take better care of their work environment and themselves? If people are healthy, and if you have a proactive program—including wellness sessions—that addresses this at work and ultimately translates to when your employees are at home, you not only improve your safety performance, but you also benefit from lower costs in health and benefit packages. You have to look at it on a holistic basis across the company and then on an employee-by-employee basis and see what kinds of programs you can put in place that will help a large part of your employee population. It’s an investment in your company. It’s an investment in your employees. But it is an investment that is going to pay off because you are having fewer accidents and sick days.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: You have to tell them why your organization is committed to health and safety and the benefits derived from a proactive health and safety program. People want to be involved in something successful. You have to make them understand that it is not just about them. It is about their colleagues, about their division, about the company, . . . and it’s about success—shared success.

We try to do this by having regular safety meetings, and we pick topics that are really of interest to our employees. Each meeting has a different theme, and the meetings tell the whole story over time. We have people come in from other organizations who have been injured, and we make it personal for them. It’s about making people think and take the right decisions. What you really want at the end of the day is, when the decision comes up for an employee to make a choice during the day and they have the choice between taking a shortcut or not, you need a story and images to pop up in their head so that they’ll make the right choice. You can’t look over the employee’s shoulder all the time. It is really up to them to work safely, and it is up to me and the organization to make sure that they have as good an environment around them as possible—and the tools—to help them make the right choices. It is about the choices people make every minute of every day and trying to put an environment in place that will help those choices be the right ones. It is not rocket science, but it is certainly not easy to do. At the same time, it is very important to do.

Not having an excellent health and safety program in place can have a far-reaching impact, not only on your safety performance or the dollars you spend on reactive measures after an incident, but also to other parts of your company, the employees and their families, and the competitiveness of your company as a whole.
Getting Everyone to Buy In

The organization has to absolutely believe that you, as a CEO, are sincere and committed. You can’t just talk about it; the employees have to see action.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: I am not certain that I can definitively say it has given us a competitive advantage, given the nature of our business as a regulated utility industry. Having said that, I would say that we have seen a significant increase in employee engagement that has led to better health and safety business performance—and, of course, that does translate into lower operating costs. But what is far more important for us is that our staff are working more safely, identifying and eliminating potential hazards and losses, and they are going home at night to their families in the same condition they left home in the morning.

The issue is so important that it really transcends a cost-benefit analysis. For us it is a moral issue. It is absolutely the right way to manage the business, particularly in a high-risk environment like the one that we are operating in. If working safely in a particular situation means that it takes a little more time, so be it. We don’t necessarily go out and promote what we do in terms of safety, but the public does notice when we secure our worksites in terms of traffic control or when our crews carry out one of their tailboard conferences on the side of the road. [Tailboard conferences are used to identify the task, how it will be carried out, what risks are involved, and how they will be dealt with.] It certainly can be a reputational issue as well.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: When I moved from the COO [chief operating officer] position to the CEO [chief executive officer] role, I kept health and safety reporting to me. I then secured the approval of the Board of
Directors to make health and safety my first performance objective, which altered the traditional order of the CEO’s performance objectives.

I also made health and safety the number one performance objective for all my direct reports and everybody in management, whether they were in a supervisory role or not. Ultimately, we tied health and safety into our non-management performance assessment system as well. I made health and safety my number one priority. I told everyone that it was my number one priority. It is on every management meeting agenda, and it goes to the top of the priority list of the things we focus on and talk about. I talk about health and safety with our Board of Directors every month.

They always say that it starts at the top. And it’s true. It really is. You have to demonstrate your personal commitment to health and safety. My employees see my commitment when we hold town hall meetings. The number one agenda item is health and safety performance, and I go through our dashboard of indicators. I am knowledgeable about what is in that data, and I can speak about it. They also see my commitment when I authorize investments in response to their recommendations. I remember that in our all-staff meetings we used to use a projector with cords that ran across the floor—a tripping hazard—and a recommendation came forward to use a wireless projector that could be mounted to the ceiling. We did it. It was a small thing. It sounds so elementary but it was very noticeable, and it sent a message to the organization that things are being done. Somebody identified that as a hazard, we budgeted for it, and put it in place. The employees also see the organization’s commitment when we are going to purchase a new truck and we involve our field staff to bring their health and safety perspective to the table. The old saying “What gets measured gets managed, and what gets rewarded, gets repeated!” describes how we’ve made the transformation. We simply try to walk the talk as it relates to health and safety.

Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has it had in your organization?

A: About a year after I came in [as COO], we had a very serious electrical contact accident. I think before that incident we treated health and safety as a sort of bolt-on to how we did things. The company was taking more the compliance-oriented view. This serious accident was the wake-up call that we needed to embed health and safety in our culture, and that we needed to create a safety-first cultural orientation. That’s when we changed gears, and that’s when these actions started to happen. I did that in my role as COO. And then when I moved into the CEO role, we really accelerated it and drove it through the organization. As a result, we have seen a full-scale embracing of health and safety, not just by the traditional high-risk areas but by the entire organization. We now have buy-in from all elements of the corporation.

I can’t tell you how many employees have come to me and said it is amazing how the health and safety culture established at work spills over into your personal life. You know, you’re driving around town and you see something, you see a roofing contractor working on top of a roof without any fall arrest protection, and you can’t help but notice these things. All of a sudden, when you are working around home you pay attention to these things. And we talk to our employees about this because we don’t want our employees just to be safe at work, but also at home.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: The biggest challenge has been to get buy-in from the non-high-risk areas. On the administrative side there often is a perception that there are no—or very few—risks. However, through our potential-loss-and-hazard reporting we have been able to identify a number of risks and we’ve had tremendous take-up from the office group on that.
Another is that there can be a certain amount of complacency on the high-risk side. When your employees have been doing their work for a very long time—regardless of the business—there is potential for complacency to develop. We overcame these challenges by educating our people, by persistently talking about health and safety, and by making health and safety part of the performance assessment process for management and non-management.

We put all of our management staff through a health, safety, and loss training program that was provided to us by the IAPA [Industrial Accident Prevention Association]. It was a 16-week course. Over the last two years, we’ve had all our staff participate in level one health and safety certification training. We have made investments to provide the training and education for our people to really understand the depth and breadth of what it means to be a health-and-safety-focused organization. We have also invested heavily in training our joint health and safety committee members and our health and safety officer, and they have done a tremendous job being ambassadors for health and safety in our organization.

We have been following the E&USA [Electrical and Utilities Safety Association] awards process, and we have achieved the silver effort level there. We have done a lot of things, including education, training, and the potential-loss-and-hazard-reporting data capture system that we built. These are the things—talking about it, talking about our performance—that help to culturally embed health and safety. We capture the data and then we take the actions necessary to eliminate the sources of hazards or potential losses.

When the Grade 9 students in Ontario are given the opportunity to participate in “Take Your Children to Work Day,” I kick that off every year. I talk to them [employees’ children] about why they are going to spend the morning talking with our health and safety officer, and I explain to them why health and safety is so important to us. We take every opportunity to demonstrate to our employees that we are serious about this, and talking to their children is a great way to do that. The other thing we have done is to make the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board’s Passport to Safety training available to all the children of our employees. Again, we are trying to demonstrate to them that we take this seriously and that we want to keep their children safe as well.

Most importantly, we act on the recommendations that come from our employees themselves. Employees not only have to hear that health and safety is important, they have to see it as well. Talk is cheap. We have to show them that we are serious about health and safety by making the necessary investments.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: We worked with IAPA to complete a gap assessment of where our performance falls relative to the criteria of the Canadian Standard Association’s Occupational Health and Safety Management Standard Z1000. Now we are working toward closing the identified gaps. We believe that there is some work left to do for us in building a closed-loop health and safety management system. We are trying to technologically enable our hazard identification and risk assessment database, and that is a big piece of what we are trying to do right now.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: Make it important to yourself—and demonstrate that. I go back to the two well-known adages. They are somewhat trite, but they are so true. “What gets measured gets done” and “what gets rewarded gets repeated.” It is very simple advice, but the organization has to absolutely believe that you, as a CEO, are sincere and committed. You can’t just talk about it; the employees have to see consistent action.
Getting Commitment

I needed to shift the mindset of people—tradespeople, foremen, and front line and middle management—who had been out there for 20 to 30 years and get them to reorient their thinking around how we operate.

Q: How have your efforts in health and safety given your organization a competitive advantage?

A: We are a power line contractor that provides services to local power distributors, such as Hydro Ottawa, and we found that our customers are prepared to pay for total value as opposed to strictly rates per service. For more and more of our traditional customers, and for our newer customer base as well, health and safety has become a major factor in the selection of service providers. In the renewable energy business, companies like Suncor won’t even consider a service provider if it doesn’t have a proven track record around managed safety. On the utility side of the business—and utility companies are virtually all of the same nature—we partnered with Barrie Hydro and together we raised the bar as to what should be expected from a service provider. We see more and more of this all the time.

We have been successful in winning some major projects over the last two years because our customers value our approach to health and safety. The fact that we are able to operate with a fairly sophisticated health and safety system has increased their comfort level for using us as opposed to a traditional contractor. We are getting a proper return for the services that we provide, and we are doing it with a much better-managed safety approach than we might have done historically. There may be some low-cost service providers out there that can operate at significantly lower costs, but they usually won’t make it past the pre-qualification stage in the bidding process because they don’t have the proven track record in safety to give the customer the comfort level that they are not exposing themselves to liability.
Companies participating in the Electrical & Utilities Safety Association’s ZeroQuest program (and a lot of those are also members of the CEO Health and Safety Leadership Charter) have committed themselves to raising the bar around health and safety. Service providers who aren’t participating in that program are largely not even entertained anymore by local distribution companies.

There are other benefits, such as much lower WSIB-type [Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario] costs. Our last lost-time incident was in 2003, and prior to that there was one in 1998. We find our operating costs around that to be significantly lower; and if you don’t have injuries, you don’t have to enter into the process of modified work duties where people at a higher skill level have to do a lesser task because of a workplace injury.

Q: What single action have you personally taken that has made the greatest difference to achieving this goal?

A: When I took over this role in 2000, our company operated with some good values around managed health and safety, and the founder of this company already operated with the concept of “I am not going to get wealthy on the backs of my people.” But it was very informal.

I recognized that I needed to formalize our managed safety program and to introduce a true cultural shift. I needed to shift the mindset of people—tradespeople, foremen, and front line and middle management—who had been out there for 20 to 30 years, and get them to reorient their thinking around how we operate. In most organizations, this won’t work if the person with the most responsibility isn’t driving that shift. This is the biggest thing.

Also, I needed to help people overcome those perceived barriers—such as that it takes too long or costs too much. I call them perceived barriers because these arguments are really wrong. There are two key elements to health and safety that can make you more effective. One is good planning and the other is good communication. If you get this right, you have a better-run organization. Driving that change and shifting that mindset was really important.

It all started with a number of small meetings with our front-line leadership. These leaders have since come back to me and said, “We thought you were crazy.” They had this reaction because I actually told them “We are going to have customers who will hire us over our competitors because we are more effective running our managed safety programs and because we have a proven track record in health and safety.” But at the time, they didn’t believe our customers would pay for that. I just said “Watch me!” and continued to drive that thinking to the point where they became believers. I sometimes worked with them one-on-one to get the concept in their minds and to help them recognize the benefits and the value of having a managed safety program and subscribing to the “quest for zero.”

It was essential that I understood whatever barrier each of them independently was struggling with and helped them to overcome those barriers. I believe that engagement causes involvement, which causes commitment—and that is what you need from your management. You have to engage your front-line leadership, particularly your foremen. The big buy-in for them came when they realized that they would be able to rest at night knowing that they were not going to have people get injured. No one wants to get one of those phone calls from a job site saying that somebody got injured and needs to go to the hospital—or worse. I got them to understand that by operating in a different way, they could be much more comfortable in their positions.
Q: Why did you initiate this action? And what impact has this had in your organization?

A: The main reason for initiating this cultural shift was the moral issue. You just don’t want to have people injured in the course of doing business. I rose through the ranks myself and I saw practices where I thought that this was not something I wanted to participate in; and today I am in a position to change some of those practices.

If you watch the model that existed in other industries, for example oil and gas prior to the Imperial Oil–Exxon Valdez oil spill, you then had an event that just shifted the whole organization and that swung the pendulum of health and safety almost too far in the other direction toward what I call the ultimate safety program: “No one moves, no one gets hurt.” Obviously you have to get the balance right. Large oil and gas companies started to impose a great number of health and safety requirements on their service providers, and I could see that this would eventually trickle down into our industry as well. It was just a matter of time, and we knew that it would happen. The Electrical & Utilities Safety Association [E&USA] formulated a goal of zero injuries by 2011, and for the members it was really a matter of getting ahead of the curve.

The other thing is that it just makes good business sense. We are now recognized as one of the industry leaders, not only among the service providers but even among our customer base, and we are recognized as such in organizations like E&USA. It gave us the foundation to grow our business much more effectively, and from there it allowed us to get better returns while minimizing our competition.

In the end, it is really about knowing that we are doing what we said we were going to do—keeping people from getting injured, providing the best service out there, and minimizing the liabilities of our customers. Nothing sells better than minimizing the liabilities of your customers as long as they can understand that the dollar value equates with what they are getting in terms of service.

Q: What challenges have you experienced as you have taken these actions? And how did you overcome these challenges?

A: I guess I’d compare it to the seatbelt culture in the automotive world and how it has developed since the 1950s. At first nobody believed in it; but today, new drivers don’t even think twice about putting their seatbelt on. When I started in the trade, nobody was wearing a belt when climbing a utility pole. If you wore a belt back then, you’d be laughed out of the business. It was totally wrong, but this was the “macho” culture that prevailed throughout the industry at the time. If you asked anyone today to climb a pole without any of the fall-restricting devices that are now in use, employees would simply refuse. You have to help veterans of the trade overcome these traditional barriers and overcome the mindset that these safety measures make them less effective or less profitable.

If you talk to an apprentice versus a veteran who has been around for 20 to 30 years, you’ll see a big difference in their mindsets. The veterans had been instilled with a productivity-only mindset—“Gotta get the job done, gotta get it done as quickly as possible, gotta make money.” These are the kind of perceived barriers that have to be deconstructed in order to make the culture shift toward more safety.

I basically illustrate to those guys that we can get the same results with safety as a priority because safety incidents slow you down and cost you money. One of the things you have to be able to do in order to convince your workforce is stand in their shoes. I have been out there, I have been involved in every aspect of the business, and I can stand in their shoes. If you put a bunch of paperwork in front of a tradesperson, it won’t work. You have to make it user-friendly, and you have to ask them to put something together from their perspective. And guess what? Through their involvement you get commitment and the all-important buy-in. After some of our new safety policies—augmented by their
suggestions—had been implemented, our guys started to see some wins. They started to see us achieving some partnerships, winning some bids on contracts where we weren’t necessarily the lowest price bidder, and being recognized in the industry through awards.

We will continue to raise the bar, and those companies that decided to be lower-cost service providers will have to do the same thing if they want to meet the mark.

Q: What areas do you and your organization plan to focus on next to build on your existing work?

A: The most important thing is to get to sustainability of “zero injuries.” I think any organization can get to “zero injuries” but the trick is to be able to sustain that. And that’s the challenge that we face as we are trying to get to zero injuries as a whole industry.

In my organization, we’ve started to focus on near-miss reporting. And we define near misses as incidents that had potential to inflict injury, or damage to tools and property, but didn’t. Getting our employees to recognize these incidents and the need to document and analyze these events is a priority for us.

The other thing is to continue to raise the bar in terms of our goals. Our next focus in terms of goals is to reduce our number of medical aids. Even though they are mainly minor in nature, they are still injuries we shouldn’t be having. The next step toward achieving this is trending. What are the trends? Who’s having the injuries? How do they happen? What are the recurring incidents? How are we going to stop them from occurring in the first place? What other things can we put in place?

Another area we are focusing on is helping people to understand risk. As a first step, we have put a risk-rating program in place where every employee will assess the tasks for the day and assign a risk rating from one to five to each task. We have noticed that people become a lot more aware by having to do this before they go out on a job. This is what we call a “tailboard conference” that addresses all the details they need to know about a job in a formal process. The foreman conducts the tailboard and makes sure everyone understands the job and realizes the risks that are involved. Our foremen have to be better with people now and be able to read the signals that people send when they are not fully concentrated—which may cause them to miss important information. We have done some things to help our foremen become better communicators and interpreters of non-verbal communication. Essentially, we need to teach our employees how to measure risk and how to manage it.

Q: If you had one piece of advice to share with your peers about achieving the full benefits from health and safety, what would it be?

A: The biggest thing that CEOs can walk away with is that their organizations are operating in a way that can give them total peace of mind and pride. I encourage everyone to raise the bar, to be the leader, to demonstrate the best, and to make this the only acceptable way of doing business. But the biggest thing is peace of mind. That is the greatest satisfaction for a CEO who operates at the 30,000-foot level and who cannot be everywhere all the time. The larger the organization, the more difficult it is to be in tune with everything that is going on in the organization, and the more important it will be to integrate health and safety fully into everything the company does.

Sometimes your employees are their own worst enemies because their perception is that they must go faster and work harder, and they figure the CEO should be expecting that. CEOs need to take every opportunity to drive home the message that safety takes precedence and that employees have the right—and the duty—to stop and find out if they are unsure about the health and safety implications of a particular task. Your message to them must be: “Don’t take that chance.”
APPENDIX

Related Products and Services

CEO Health and Safety Roundtable
The CEO Health and Safety Roundtable (CHSR) is an exclusive network of leading Canadian CEOs focused on and dedicated to improving health and safety for their organization and community. Roundtable members realize the vital link between safety and a successful organization and are united in their vision and support for a safer, more prosperous Canada.

From Commitment to Action: How CEOs Can Transform Health and Safety
This executive briefing outlines several actions that CEOs need to consider in order to transform their organization’s health and safety culture.

Council on Emergency Management
The Council on Emergency Management (CEMT) is a national forum that focuses on effective operational practices and key strategic issues related to emergency management. The Council provides valuable networking, learning, and leadership development opportunities for individuals responsible for emergency management and operational continuity who are focused on maximizing resilience within their organizations.

The New Coordinated, Confident, and Competitive Mindset for Security and Safety in Canada
There is an evolution underway that’s reshaping the security and safety mindset, from protection to resilience to competitiveness. This change is transforming how organizations perceive their own security, emergency management, and business continuity risks and opportunities. Drawing on research conducted by The Conference Board of Canada, Trefor Munn-Venn describes how these changes are emerging, and the implications they have for all public and private sector organizations. This presentation was a part of the 2008 Intergovernmental Forum on Risk Management and is available as a Conference e-Proceeding.

The Centre for National Security
The Centre for National Security (CNS) brings together executives from public and private sector organizations to help improve Canada’s ability to address national security and public safety challenges.

Council for Security Executives
The Council for Security Executives (CFSE) is a national forum that provides valuable networking, learning, and leadership development opportunities for senior security executives focused on maximizing resilience within their organizations. The Council enables members to broaden their understanding of risk factors and to exchange insights.

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