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ASSURANCE SERVICES

10 mistakes
Safety Advisers make and how you can avoid them

Health & Safety Advisors like yourself are often expected to be the pinnacle of knowledge for all things health and safety-related in an organisation

You are the 'go-to' person when things go wrong and often in the firing line (literally) when health & safety incidents occur.

What organisations don't factor into there operations, and what a lot of safety advisors don't realise, is the human element.

And humans do make mistakes (yes even health & safety advisors).

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10 mistakes that Safety Advisor make

10 When they think they always know best

Nothing isolates a safety advisor more than an inability to engage the workforce. Talking down to people who actually know more about their business than you do creates bad feelings and undermines your credibility. It is also less likely that people will trust you on those occasions when they really should.

People are much more comfortable sharing their issues and concerns with an empathetic safety advisor, and you can lose a rich source of information if people aren't talking to you.

Good safety people develop allies, not enemies.

9 They are never seen without their clipboard and a frown

People seem to disappear whenever they see you coming. Animated conversations stop in cold silence when you approach. It's probably not your mouthwash so much as your appearance.

Try to find a reason to give positive feedback when you're doing your daily inspections. In fact, don't call them "inspections" and do encourage others to walk along with you. It's easier and it's lazy to find fault, but a switched on safety advisor is also switched onto the great things that are happening right in front of them, and is not shy when it comes to letting workers know about their successes.

Feedback can be positive as well as negative, and if the only thing that the workforce experiences when you front up is abuse, well, no one but a masochist would want to share your company.

8 They are only seen on-site when there has been an incident

This ties in with #9. If you want to develop effective relationships with your workers, and managers, make the effort to find out what they do. Try this simple trick.

Listen. Pay attention to what you are being told, follow up on your commitments and work on making your contribution to the workplace choc-full of preventative actions rather than corrective ones.

Being pro-active means taking action based on present risk, not past events.

7 They refuse to integrate their safety system with other business imperatives

Lists of "Golden Rules of Safety" that stand apart from other organisational goals can make it appear that safety is separate from the rest of the business. Health and Safety cannot be a "silo" that isn't fully integrated into ALL functions of the organisation. A corporate culture that separates "work" from "safety" is doomed to perpetuate unsafe work.

Build safety into all aspects of the work and the workplace, not as some kind of optional add-on.

6 When in doubt, they quote the Act Regs, or a Code of Practice

If you are dealing with the inexperienced or the gullible you might just get away with this one, but not for long. Most people in the workforce know that a WorkCover inspector isn't just around the corner waiting to pounce on every breach of Regulation X, subsection Y paragraph Z. Threats of jail and fines make you sound like my little brother, actually like everyone's little brother, when they stamp their foot and scream "I'm telling Mum".

If your sound reasoning and impeccable logic are inexplicably failing to change someone's unsafe behaviour, try asking yourself "why?".

- Is there a boss somewhere who is insisting that a task is done a certain, unsafe, way?
- Is there time pressure from their mates to get this job done in time for smoko?
- Is it a real pain to follow the book when a shortcut saves time, effort, discomfort, mental anguish etc?
- Is there an engineering solution that you can validly suggest to overcome all of the above?
- And lastly, could they be right? Is their way of operating better, safer and more efficient than the book and could you take on their case to improve the documented system of work?

5 They try to fix everything

The Safety team can become the department of everyone's every problem.

A few years back on a rail construction project in suburban Sydney, one of my team fielded a call from a distant bridge crew asking us to come down and sort out a situation. A lady who was dancing naked just outside their worksite and "taunting" them. My blokes seemed keen to form a posse and all five of them head down there to see what they could do to help, and some of them seemed a bit miffed that I suggested the crew leader on site could manage the situation himself.

Good safety people time their entry into issues that are not safety specific, and they know the difference between supporting their managers and doing the work for them.

4 They fail to develop safety champions in the workforce

The safety team on site can't be the only people committed to a healthy and safe workplace.

The safety manager who chairs all safety committees, writes all toolbox talks and completes all the safety inspections is probably ensuring their long term employment, but how does this develop a safety culture in their workplace?

Remember "Give a man a fish and he eats today; teach him to fish and he'll eat for a lifetime".

3 They accept a job with companies that are not fair dinkum about safety

Before you embark upon a terrific new career opportunity with a big salary and all the fruit, make sure the people hiring you are truly committed to improving health and safety in their workplace. Maybe you are being hired so they can simply tick a box in their certification audits. Maybe they tortured their previous safety person until they broke down and quit, and you are being brought in the clean up the mess or just to cop the blame for all safety system failures.

You might back yourself to make a difference in any workplace, but beware of taking on a position without explicit and credible support from management.

2 They fail to follow through

Your credibility can be destroyed by not following up on promises.

I once witnessed a safety adviser implore a large group of workers to get in the habit of reporting all incidents so that "we can investigate and learn from them". The meeting became a little embarrassing after that, in a Monty Python sort of way, when a first, then a second, then a third worker put up their hand to ask what had been done with the incidents that they had already reported and subsequently heard nothing about.

The lesson; if you are going to ask for more involvement from your workers, make sure they see equal effort from you.

1 ## Creating more work and failing to build a safe organisation by "getting caught up in the weeds".

Safety Management Systems should be, ideally, SELF-sustaining. If you find yourself developing more reports and creating more forms that add nothing to safety performance.

Look carefully at the benefit of the type of work that you are doing.

- Can it be streamlined?
- Does it achieve any meaningful result?

If you take an Occam's Razor approach to your daily activities you may find that you have more time and are better able to manage Health and Safety across the workplace.

Ideally, you will spend less time on corrective actions and more time creating and implementing safer systems of work in ways that harness the energies of those people with the greatest stake in workplace health and safety, the workforce.

One of the best ways to avoid some of these pitfalls is to invest in training and development. SAI Global has a specialised range of face-to-face, online and in-house training solutions for Safety Advisors and Auditors. These courses teach you how to understand, implement, audit, improve and maintain a health & safety management system. Visit www.saiglobal.com/ohs to view the full range.

This is my top ten, based on what I've seen and, unfortunately, some of what I've done in various safety adviser roles.

What are yours?

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For Health & Safety training, visit **www.saiglobal.com/ohs** or email **training@saiglobal.com**

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