



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

Is there safety in sustainability?

Global reporting barely gives you a clue

This month we welcome our newest columnist, Dr. James Leemann, who will focus most of his writing on the need for greater systems thinking in safety and health.

With all the talk of “green” jobs, I thought it might be worthwhile to explore how safety, health and industrial hygiene work is viewed through the lens of sustainability, sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, and so on.

First and foremost, safety, health and industrial hygiene professionals are responsible for ensuring employees in their organization are afforded the best opportunity to be injury- and illness-free at work and safe at home. The challenge to make it happen can be overwhelming. Gaining management’s attention in today’s hectic economic environment is more difficult than ever, so if hooking safety and health initiatives to the company’s “Green Wave Bandwagon” gains attention and financial support — why not?

The following is the first in a two-part article on the safety and health professions and the sustainability or “green” movement. Part I provides a bit of background and Part II will address some ideas on aligning with the movement to improve safety and health performance.

Current status

Curious as to whether or not safety and health are addressed in corporate sustainability reports, I visited some of the most notable websites promoting sustainability guidelines and metrics, which



Does anyone have a new metric for reporting safety performance?

included the Global Reporting Initiative, Global Environmental Management Initiative (GEMI), Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

Next, I reviewed 30 company social responsibility reports found at the Global Reporting Initiative, Sustainability-Reports, CSRwire and GEMI, which point to company sustainable development/ social responsibility portals. Another excellent site I visited was the Roberts Environmental Center, which publishes an evaluation index of sustainable reports by industry sector.

Essentially, all 30 reports followed, in some measure, the “Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability” format or the G3 Guidelines (v. 3.0) of the Global Reporting Initiative. Even so, Goldman Sachs JBWere, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and Innovest, to name a few, are promoting their own forms of definitions, metrics and ratings. An excellent site that has compiled the lion’s share of reporting guidelines is The International Corporate

Sustainability Reporting Site, where 24 such guidelines are currently listed.

Virtually none of these guidelines are available online and almost all organizations charge to gain access to their guidelines. Indeed, sustainable development reporting has become a “cottage industry.”

Old school metrics

In general, when it comes to safety, occupational health and industrial hygiene topics, virtually all of these reporting methods ask for traditional, decades-old safety statistics — recordable injury rates, loss workday rates, fatality numbers, employee vehicle accident rates, etc. As far as providing information on occupational health and industrial hygiene, these reports, with very few exceptions (I found one), are sparse at best and most do not even mention these topics at all.

Even though guideline-producing organizations, such as GRI, have no doubt spent countless hours wordsmithing their reporting guidance documents, there is essentially no control or requirement over which topics any company must report.

The treatment of safety and health reporting is mentioned as an example in GRI's Reporting Practice guidance document entitled "Reaching Investors – Communicating Value through ESG Reporting." The guidance assumes a company reporting routinely-gathered safety and health statistics and maintaining a high standard of performance would not present an investor with any degree of risk for his or her investment in the company, unless the company sustained a major workplace accident. A quick review of several past major industrial accidents with multiple fatalities and injuries and their impact on the company's stock prices reveals virtually no deterioration in stock prices following the accident.

Obviously, to sell the public reporting idea inside companies, one of the stipulations had to allow a company to pick and choose which topics it wants to pitch to the public. By only asking for traditional safety data, one might conclude the guidance writers view safety in the context of driving into the future

looking into the rearview mirror.

Low participation

What is truly disconcerting is the total number of industrial manufacturing companies in the United States who submitted corporate sustainability reports in 2008 to the sustainability guidance websites. Many of the submitted 2008 reports only cover years prior to 2008. As of April 2009, a review of the GRI list of submitted 2008 sustainability reports reveals a worldwide, repeat WORLDWIDE, total of 942 companies and subsidiaries submitting a report, of which only 97 are U.S.-based companies and 58 of these are industrial manufacturing companies. There are more than 500,000 U.S.-headquartered manufacturing firms with literally millions of manufacturing sites located here and abroad.

After reviewing 30 corporate social responsibility reports, all I can conclude is the G3 Guidelines provide a collection of topics from which companies can selectively choose to publicly report data in a prescribed format, which they have, for the

most part, been compiling and reporting, as required by law, for decades. These reports present reams of data, stories about what has been and is going to be, and a few offer goals for sometime in the future. Many of the sample sustainable projects focus on reducing or eliminating non-sustainable activities as opposed to presenting truly sustainable projects — it is all in how one defines the word "sustainable."

In total, these reports are understandably outwardly focused with essentially no discussion on the impacts their sustainability projects are having or will have on worker safety and health, the general public or the environment. The presumption is anything "green" must be good for you and the environment, right?

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