



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

Is there safety in sustainability?

Part II: Pros must promote the true cost of risk avoidance

Currently, CEOs and corporate leaders do not think safety or health when they are thinking sustainability — they think sales and marketing. Beyond presenting lagging safety metrics, company sustainability reports spend 98 percent or more of their glossy pages pitching environmental, economic, governance and social topics.

Safety is treated in this new world order of sustainability mostly as a social topic that would be an obvious omission if ignored. Occupational health and industrial hygiene are virtually void of discussion.

This is understandable when one reads the Global Reporting Initiative's *Labor Practices and Decent Work Performance Indicators – Occupational Health and Safety Aspects*¹. The core aspects address injury rates, lost workdays, fatalities, absenteeism, occupational diseases and training, education and control programs regarding serious disease. Additional aspects include providing the percentage of workers represented on management-employee safety and health committees and safety and health topics covered in formal union labor agreements.

Although transparency is encouraged, companies are not required to report on all, or any, of these *Labor Aspects*. Plus, the Compliance portion of these GRI *Labor Aspects* instructs the user on how to generate the data versus detailing the effects (positive or negative) these *Labor Aspects* have had or are having on workers.

Even the safest company in the world, DuPont, doesn't consider the safety and health of its employees to be sustainability issues. Because safety and health are



so critically integral to the DuPont culture, they are revered as unique elements for success and are NOT necessarily discussed in sustainability conversations at senior management levels. For instance, “safety” is treated in DuPont’s 2008 sustainability report as the number of products or services (1,000) to be developed to make people safer globally by 2015, not as a series of lagging statistics².

Can professionals “Ride the Green Wave”?

To play in the sustainability game, we need to break away from the impression that all we do is inspect, monitor, police or react. An excellent reference on the IH profession’s value is AIHA’s 2008 report on the Value of the Industrial Hygiene Profession study³.

As DuPont’s Global Product Steward Leader for the Clean and Disinfect Businesses, Aaron Chen, CIH, focused on managing DuPont’s internal risks to

its employees and the external risks to its businesses, products and services through the lenses of safety and health. Chen applied his risk management skills from being an industrial hygienist and then used them as a product steward (i.e., business risk manager). This led to a more sustainable business while enhancing the value of the safety, health and industrial hygiene professions within the business.

What does the future hold?

As long as *sustainability* is defined by non-government organizations for which corporations are allowed to pick the sustainability metrics to suit their needs, sustainability will continue to be a vehicle from which corporations can pitch a positive public image.

As far as what the future holds for S, H & IH pros in the new world order of sustainability priorities, they need to spend less time spinning sustainability yarns and spend more time learning how

to use sustainability as a competitive weapon in the marketplace.

Excellent books on implementing sustainability initiatives include “The Necessary Revolution”⁴, “The Sustainable Enterprise Fieldbook”⁵ and “The Sustainability Handbook”⁶. Wendy Stubbs and Chris Cocklin offer a new business model based on an “ecological modernization” perspective of sustainability.⁷ With the exception of “The Sustainable Enterprise Fieldbook,” none of these references discuss safety or occupational health in the context of sustainability. However, the approaches presented in these references can be utilized to accomplish safety and occu-

pational health endeavors.

As sustainability has become increasingly fashionable, safety and occupational health have become more marginalized, drifting to the periphery of decision makers’ mindsets. Professionals desperately need to break out of the technocratic management model⁸ we have been using for the past 30+ years. If we are going to force our work into some “sustainability model,” we need to promote our work in a systemic fashion that is integrated with the business’ value chain. We need to understand and advance the true cost avoidance for reducing risks and preventing accidents, injuries and illnesses. No organization’s sustainability goals will

ever be achieved, or even make any difference, if we fail to embed the value of S, H & IH to sustain a safe and healthy workforce that actually comes to work every day to produce products and services customers can safely use and value.

James E. Leemann, Ph.D., is clinical assistant professor in Tulane University’s Center for Applied Environmental Public Health and president of The Leemann Group LLC, Scottsdale, AZ. For more information, visit www.LeemannGroup.com or email jim@leemanngroup.com.

1 Global Reporting Initiative. *Sustainability Reporting Guidelines*. V. 3.0. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. 2006:31.

2 The DuPont Company. *2008 Sustainability Progress Report*. 2008. P. 7.

3 AIHA, ORC Worldwide and EG&G. Demonstrating the Business Value of Industrial Hygiene. May 22, 2008. At www.ihvalue.org.

4 Senge, P., B. Smith, N. Kruschwitz, J. Laur, and S. Schley. “The Necessary Revolution – How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World.” New York: Doubleday. 2008.

5 Wirtenberg, J., W.G. Russell, and D. Lipsky. “The Sustainable Enterprise Fieldbook – When It All Comes Together.” New York: AMACOM Books. 2009.

6 Blackburn, W.R. “The Sustainability Handbook – The Complete Management Guide to Achieving Social, Economic and Environmental Responsibility.” Environmental Law Institute: Island Press. Washington, D.C. 2007.

7 Stubbs, W. and C. Cocklin. “Conceptualizing a ‘Sustainability Business Model’.” *Organization & Environment*. 21.2 (June 2008): 103-127.

8 Tombs, S. “Green For Danger? Environmental Protection and Safety Management in the UK Chemicals Industries.” *Industrial & Environmental Crisis Quarterly*. 8.3 (1994): 257-273.



Reprinted from *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*
July 2009 ©2009 Industrial Safety & Hygiene News