



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

## Marching to your own drummer

### How to inject contrary thinking into the old “safety crowd” mindset

*If you don't think things through, you're through thinking.<sup>1</sup> Humphrey B. Neill*

**H**ow often have you found yourself going along with the “crowd?” Say, for example, when you last ruminated with a group of safety colleagues and you found yourself agreeing with someone saying, “what we need is more OSHA regulations and company-wide policies and procedures to improve our safety,” or “senior management needs to lead safety,” or “training, that's it, we need more training,” or “behavior-based safety will solve our safety problems,” or “safety incentives will do the trick.”

Taking a little liberty with Gustave le Bon's definition of a “crowd” that he published in his seminal 1895 work *The Crowd – A Study of the Popular Mind*<sup>2</sup>, Le Bon would likely describe a “safety crowd” as a group of safety professionals that under certain given circumstances, and only under those circumstances, an agglomeration of men [women] presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed...

Have you ever been a participant in this kind of “safety crowd” thinking? Have you found that when you injected a contrary opinion it was often not welcomed?

#### The safety nonconformist

So what exactly is “contrary thinking?” Neill writes, “Thrust your thoughts out



of the rut. In a word, be a nonconformist when using your mind.”<sup>3</sup> Further Neill writes, “The art of contrary thinking consists in training your mind to ruminate in directions opposite to general public opinions; but weigh your conclusions in the light of current events and current manifestations of human behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

Looking at all sides of a safety mess will significantly increase the likelihood that you will ultimately draw the correct conclusions for dissolving the mess, even though this may be uncomfortable for some in the organization. To be a systems thinker, you have to, on most occasions, be a contrary thinker.

Over the years, safety and health professionals have complained vociferously about management's bipolar behavior when it comes to safety and health. On the one hand, management proclaims “safety is number one” or “safety first;” but, on the other hand, management fails

to provide the necessary financial or human resources to create a safety culture that promotes safety as a way of life versus just another program. One area safety and health professionals might consider applying contrary thinking is in the construct of their organization's corporate social responsibility reports.

#### Contrary CSR thinking

On a recent cross-country flight, I found the airline's 2008 – 2009 corporate responsibility report. Have you noticed how many companies are moving away from the term corporate “social” responsibility report? Anyway, I was curious as to how this major airline addressed safety and health in the context of its corporate responsibility. Although the report spent an entire page presenting the company's “Safety First” mindset, nowhere could I find any mention of quantifiable metrics to support this mindset, even though the company boasted the tracking of daily safety performance. In fact, virtually everything the company said about safety could be attributed to standard industry practices and regulatory requirements. As far as any discussion regarding occupational health, there was none.

I have written here before on the treatment of safety and health topics in sustainability efforts.<sup>5</sup> In summary, little can be learned about a company's safety and health commitment from their corporate responsibility propaganda. Remember, corporate propaganda is always produced to sway opinion makers whether they are stockbrokers, shareholders, regulators, or neighbors.

As we close out the first decade of the

21st Century, 40 years after the creation of OSHA, maybe, just maybe, safety and health professionals can begin to think in a more systemic and contrary fashion. It is time to stop promoting safety and health merely as some moralistic obligation and start advocating safety and health in the framework of the value safety and health brings to the enterprise, its employees, its communities and its employees' families.

## Get real with CSR

One way to inject your contrary opinion is to promote safety and health metrics for your company's corporate responsibility report for this and subsequent years that are more reflective of safety and health's contribution to the success of the business, rather than the age-old TRIR, LWC, fatalities, etc. metrics. As we all know, these metrics answer the question, "What went wrong last year compared to previous years?" Instead, we need to answer the question, "What went right this year that needs to continue next year?" Consider developing metrics for the following topics from a safety and health perspective for your upcoming corporate responsibility report:

- 👍 Productivity levels
- 👍 Management site tours strictly devoted to safety and health
- 👍 Absenteeism levels due to sickness or injury
- 👍 Job satisfaction levels
- 👍 Employee harassment levels
- 👍 Safety and health governance and management system

👍 Financial losses due to safety and health

👍 Top 5 lessons learned from work-related incidents and near-misses

👍 Preventative health measures – Wellness

👍 Customer satisfaction, both internal and external

Obviously, developing metrics along these lines will require you to explore areas of safety and health you may have overlooked before. Indeed, conversations, contrary as they may be, will likely occur with individuals in your organization you traditionally have not conversed with in the past.

It is incumbent upon safety and health professionals to change the conversation when it comes to the value of safety and health because no one else will change the conversation for us. We have fallen prey to accepting the "crowd" mentality of management who believes if my TRIR is going down, my safety program must be doing great.

Practicing contrary thinking is difficult, no doubt, but it does have its benefits if used in an appropriate fashion. Take for instance the conventional managerial belief on declining TRIR rates stated above. Now, as a safety professional, what if you had witnessed on a number of occasions that employees were going home with bloody hands in their pockets to avoid creating a reportable incident. How would you confront your manager with a contrary opinion to his firm belief in declining TRIR rates and his "great" safety program?

One contrarian approach would have you showing interest in your manager's firm belief in declining TRIR rates and asking him or her, "What brings you to that conclusion?" After your manager gives you his or her reasons, then considerately and thoughtfully begin deconstructing his or her reasons. Look for the point in the conversation where you can introduce your contrary ideas taking into consideration your manager's perspectives. This way, you can have fun being a contrarian without all the collateral damage.<sup>6</sup>

**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](http://www.leemanngroup.com) or email [jim@leemanngroup.com](mailto:jim@leemanngroup.com)

1 Neill, Humphrey B. *The Art of Contrary Thinking*. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Press, 2007.

2 Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd – A Study of the Popular Mind*. West Valley City, UT: Waking Lion Press, 2006.

3 Neill, pp.1.

4 Neill, pp.5.

5 Leemann, J.E. Is there safety in sustainability? Part I and II. ISHN 43, 6 and 7 (2009): 20-21 and 18-19.

6 Early To Rise. Michael Masterson. 2009. *How to Enjoy the Benefits of Contrary Thinking... Without Turning Into a Grumpy Old Bastard*. 29 November 2009. <http://www.easytorise.com>



Reprinted from *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*  
February 2010 ©2010 *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*