



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

Forget power & control

Focus on human interactions to resolve safety conflicts

I know safety professionals who see their role from a “power and control” perspective as opposed to a “consultative” perspective. As long as safety is viewed as something someone else does, as a litany of rules and procedures that must be followed and policed, or as having power over and control of others, safety will continue to suffer from lack of employee input and isolation from the management mainstream, as it has for the past 40 years.

One of the key principles of systems thinking is the idea that the “whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” This concept is referred to as emergence. When the parts of a system come together and interact with each other, something else emerges from this interaction that is not present in any one of the parts themselves.

The classic example used by systems thinkers is the *emergent property* of an automobile. As a system, an automobile provides transportation (i.e., the emergent property) from one location to another. No single part of an automobile can provide transportation on its own.

Jamshid Gharajedaghi points out, emergent properties are “a product of their interactions, not a sum of the actions of the parts, and therefore they have to be understood on their own terms.”¹

Safety goes beyond merely being the “sum” of people’s actions. Safety is the “product” of people’s interactions.

Difficult to measure

Emergent properties do not yield to any of the five senses and cannot be measured directly. If measurement is necessary, then you can measure only their manifestations.² In the case of safety, we may



“feel” safe or even unsafe in an organizational setting; however, our ability to measure this so-called “feeling” is beyond our reach, at least for now.

Instead, we are relegated to measuring lagging and leading metrics (e.g., TRIR, LWC, workers’ compensation claims, near misses, closing of corrective actions, etc.). Unfortunately, management, in particular, has been seduced into believing that tracking these types of metrics provides them with a sense of comfort or discomfort as far as the level of safety in their organization.

As most safety professionals know, tracking safety metrics can become problematic, especially when monetary incentive rewards are attached to results.

Even though most managers are inclined to focus their attention on the actions of their people and units, what they need to focus on are the interactions of people in their organization. So what does managing the interactions mean and how does a safety professional fit into the mix?

There are primarily three types of human interactions managers face in their organiza-

tions: 1) the interactions of their units and individuals for whom they are responsible; 2) the interactions of their units with other units within the organization; and 3) the interactions of their units with relevant entities outside the organization.³ There are also the human interactions people have between the manmade and natural environment in which they work.

Corrective vs. creative management

Focusing on the interactions of units and people requires a slightly different view of managing, which many managers find uncomfortable. Dr. Lesley Kuhn describes two functional styles of management.⁴ When confronted with a safety problem (e.g., an accident with an injury), managers traditionally rely on the “management by correction” approach. Track down the apparent source, cause or person and institute a solution regardless of its negative or positive effects. Too often this approach involves identifying someone to blame.

Kuhn’s other style is “management through creation.” In this case, the manager brings together all those involved in the safety situation for a discursive exploratory conversation. Doing this allows the dynamics of the safety situation to come forward. An atmosphere of trust is built among participants. Some people have a natural affinity for, or have schooled themselves in, detecting indicators of emergence, the exploratory conversation allows such insights to be shared, debated and further developed.⁵

Safety professionals need to inject themselves into the on-going operations of the organization where the workers come face-to-face with production. You

need to learn how to spot emergent patterns from the interactive behaviors of workers.

Have these emergent patterns been going on so long that they have reached a point of acceptance?

To be a fully participating member of these interactions, you must establish a level of trust not only with the workers, but also with management.

Although “management through creation” might take longer, cost more, and involve more people, it is an effective means to systemically discover the emerging properties of the circumstances at hand. Even though “management by correction” is more economical and quicker, it can lead to unsettling effects, especially if the safety concern is not eliminated or, as systems thinkers say, “dissolved.”

Resolving conflict

Let’s imagine one unit produces raw materials for a second unit, and both are in a dispute over the interpretation of a new safety requirement handed down from the corporate safety office. One unit believes the new requirement is too onerous and will impact productivity; the other needs the first unit to follow the requirement to meet the needs of their customer. Both units are under extreme pressure to increase productivity.

The two managers could agree to disagree and bump the decision up to their

boss and let the chips fall where they may. If the boss is inclined to make the decision, there’s a good chance one or both of the managers will not be pleased.

Here’s a second approach: the two managers consult with their respective safety professionals and operations supervisors to learn why there is a conflict. Assuming the safety professionals have been interacting with operations and have a sense of why there is a conflict, this is an opportunity for them to offer their perspective on the contributing factors and provide several solutions for overcoming the conflict. Of course, each solution may have emergent properties (i.e., intended and unintended consequences), which need to be brought to the managers’ and supervisors’ attention to allow for a more robust understanding of the solutions before they decide on a corrective action.

Units’ entities outside the organization

Entities outside the organization include customers, competitors, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, communities, neighbors and private citizens. As with unit-to-unit interactions, typically attention to these interactions is not given until there is a dispute.

You have the opportunity to take the lead in cultivating positive interactions with these entities. Building trust and goodwill before a dispute surfaces can prove beneficial from a competitive advantage point of

view — having understanding neighbors when something goes wrong.

As noted earlier, emergent properties are the product of interactions among numerous phenomena (e.g., people, processes, practices, environment, etc.). As an emergent property, safety is a time-dependent dynamic state that involves interactions, which must be reproduced continuously. Safety is not a one-time proposition. If the interactions that generate safety come to an end, injuries and illnesses will ensue.

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1 Gharajedaghi, J. 1999. *Systems Thinking Managing Chaos and Complexity – A Platform for Designing Business Architecture*. Butterworth-Heinemann. Woburn, MA.

2 Ibid. pp. 45.

3 Ackoff, R.L. 1999. *Re-Creating the Corporation – A Design of Organizations for the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press. New York, NY.

4 Kuhn, L. 2009. *Adventures in Complexity – For organisations near the edge of chaos*. Triarchy Press. Devon, UK.

5 Ibid. pp. 36.



Reprinted from *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*
October 2011 ©2011 *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*