

# Vision Alignment: Seeing Eye to Eye with Business Management

by Richard MacLean, *Competitive Environment, Inc.*

*In several columns over the past year, I have stressed the importance of gaining closure with management, with their true objectives and goals. They may say they support “environmental excellence,” but then act like they want basic compliance at minimum cost. Others may be frustrated that greater progress isn’t forthcoming. Such disconnects can be a tremendous source of confusion and frustration among EH&S professionals.*

*This month’s EH&S Advisor takes a closer look at the issue and offers suggestions on gaining closure with management. The advice is primarily directed at mid-size to large corporations, where access to upper management is at a premium. The underlying principles hold true, however, for small companies and individual manufacturing sites.*

**E**H&S professionals rarely work directly for the CEO. Indeed, interactions with executive managers are usually infrequent, highly structured, and narrowly focused (see Table 1). For example, at one time in my career I reported to a technology department manager who always made the pitch to the chief executive of the business group when there was good news to report. Guess who talked about the spills and fines?

The very nature of interactions with executives creates a “green wall” between EH&S professionals and business executives.<sup>1</sup> For the EH&S professional, this separation is particularly difficult to overcome. Executive staffs and CEOs rarely have backgrounds in EH&S management. Conversely, EH&S managers generally do not have business experience with profit and loss responsibilities. Senior managers’ concepts of EH&S are most often expressed in general terms, such as the importance of managing external EH&S perceptions of the organization, regulatory compliance assurance, and employee morale.

An open, two-way dialogue is needed to both educate and inform one another of the elements critical to a broader understanding of how EH&S adds value. This two-way exchange is essential. In the EH&S business, as with any area involving ethics, “just following orders” is an unacceptable justification for carrying out fundamentally flawed instructions. It is our responsibility to ensure that informed and candid directions are coming from the top.

There are other obstacles to establishing open, two-way communications. Many senior managers have learned the hard way that EH&S issues can be sensitive public relations

issues. Sometimes politically correct rhetoric can cloud what began as clear and explicit corporate direction. Sorting out the rhetoric from the true business objectives is absolutely essential.

For example, many companies have talked about their vision for sustainable development. In 1993, Ontario Hydro began a far-reaching program to incorporate this principle, called sustainable energy development (SED), as a core business objective. This was a program largely driven from above, and specifically by Maurice Strong, the CEO. This ambitious program began to falter and by 1997 the commitment to sustainable development was abandoned.


A recent journal article describes the rise and fall of the program, stating, “[A] variety of hidden beliefs about SED continuously operated within Hydro and were never aired or resolved. This ambiguity and lack of vision, together with an absence of process, contributed to a vacuum within which SED practice came to be regarded as a sub-strategic component of the corporation’s new ‘competitiveness’ orientation.”<sup>2</sup>

Programs fail when there are conflicts or misunderstandings over goals and objectives. If the key players are on different wavelengths, communications suffer. In the above example, both the EH&S department and the CEO were tuned into one another, but the middle managers, who ultimately were to determine success or failure, were not. To challenge orders and raise questions is always hard when the directives are coming from the CEO. But if the directives involve sensitive subjects such as EH&S, it can be extremely difficult to find out where the CEO may stand on the issues. A common vision is necessary as the most basic step for program support (see Figure 1).



Table 1. Executive interaction. *Do EH&S managers ever play golf with the CEO?*

<b>Issue-driven</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Crisis du jour</li><li>• Current events/trends</li></ul>
<b>Process-driven</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reporting outcomes</li><li>• Performance numbers</li><li>• Program status</li><li>• Compliance status</li><li>• Receiving instructions and direction</li></ul>



## EH&S ADVISOR CHECKLIST



### Internal Stakeholder Dialogues

1. Obtain at least 30 minutes for each dialogue, but schedule time slots for a full hour. You are unlikely to realize the most essential, open dialogue in anything less than 30 minutes.
2. Two interviewers are essential:
  - One person cannot (1) take notes; (2) pay careful attention to not only the words spoken, but also the body language; and (3) formulate the follow-up questions. A single individual may also read into the response his or her personal biases and opinions.
  - Three people are too many, since it sets the stage for the executive to “perform to an audience” and move into scripted discussion.
  - Two people can trade off asking questions, formulating follow-up questions, and taking notes while the other is speaking. After the interview they can compare notes and messages heard.
  - At least one of the interviewers needs to be a senior EH&S professional who can explore the environmental nuances and implications with the manager in his or her language, not EH&S jargon.
3. Ask *all* executives certain key questions, particularly the ones that can be statistically evaluated. These can be used to “calibrate” across the group and can more easily and succinctly describe disconnects or strong preferences.
4. The discussion often becomes free-flowing as executives begin to talk about what is on their minds. Do not force the discussion to cover all the questions, only a few key ones (previous point). This is where skill and experience are essential.
5. *Every* executive and key manager does not have to be interviewed, but the individuals who may represent the most vital positions in the company should be covered. A sufficient number of executives need to be interviewed to provide a clear understanding of management’s overall perspective on these issues.
6. The CEO can facilitate the discussions by sending a note or an e-mail requesting support for the interviews. This needs to be orchestrated carefully. For example, the message should not contain any scripted language.
7. Past or ongoing business relationships between the interviewers and executives can either add to or distort the interviews. Executives may be reluctant to bring up certain subjects in front of some people they know, may avoid perceived conflicts (e.g., criticize or point out failings), may seek approval (yes, even CEOs are human), and may be influenced by a host of other issues. Outside, neutral facilitators help avoid these problems.
8. Companies have used a combination of internal and external interviewers in some interviews and external reviewers only in others. These do not have to be conducted by the same people in every case, but the process, summary, and integration of the messages need to be uniform, rigorous, and systematic.
9. Approach this process from an integrated EH&S perspective. Executives often frame these issues together under the broad banner of public and employee social responsibility.
10. Managers may ask if they will be identified and quoted in summary documents. Assure them during the opening comments that direct quotes will not be attributed to individuals and handwritten notes will be destroyed. This can be a sensitive issue; top executives may demand to know “Who said that?” Managers know this can happen; outside interviewers provide a buffer layer to avoid potential internal conflicts and breaches in trust.

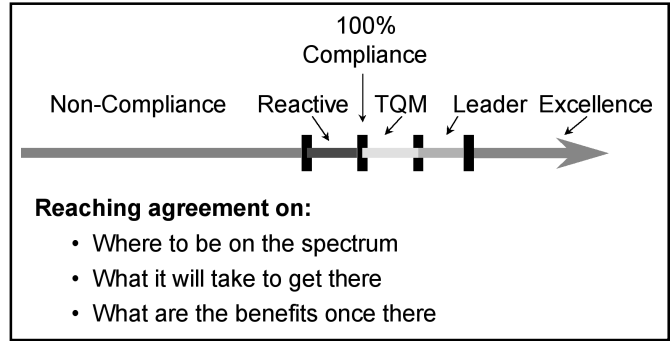


Figure 1. Vision alignment.

### PLAYING IN THE MAJOR LEAGUES

I have often sat across from EH&S managers who state that they are receiving mixed signals from various business executives. I respond by asking, “Well, did you ever directly ask them?” The reaction to this question is revealing. It is as if this consultant said something very profound. All too often, EH&S managers are so used to the highly structured interface with business executives that the thought never occurs to them to simply ask.

The reasons that EH&S managers do not go eye to eye with executives are both obvious and not so obvious. It is difficult to get on their schedule. The “role model” for interaction (read: comfortable format) is a presentation-oriented exchange. It can be intimidating to interact with someone who can terminate your job in an instant. Maybe it is best to keep a low profile . . . or is it? It can also be a challenge to get past all the gatekeepers who surround these individuals. Not surprisingly, my manager who stole the credit also threw up barricade after barricade as I pressed to have frank discussions with the executive office.

### BEST PRACTICES

Successful exchanges with executives are both a probe for information and an educational exercise. Despite my previous statement, a frontal attack may not be the best approach. To bluntly ask, “What do you think?” or “What should we do?” may lead to disaster. The CEO may give an answer, all right, but it could be ill informed and misdirected and you could be left with the consequences.

Interfacing with executive management is both science and an art. The *EH&S Advisor Checklist* contains a few recommended steps, based on decades of interfacing with executives. I have even been able to successfully get around the overly protective manager in the chain of command. These techniques are especially geared to very large companies, but the basics apply even to a small manufacturing site where it may be relatively easy to informally discuss any topic.

The key to success is to establish a neutral, non-judgmental atmosphere in these talks where the participants feel that they can throw away the script and rhetoric. “It is OK to only want minimum compliance for the company.” If this is what they believe, this is how they will act toward EH&S programs.

Usually it takes at least 20 minutes of interaction before you can begin to gain insight into where they are coming from.

These steps are particularly useful to determine business management's key priorities, sensitivities, and performance metrics. They are also worthwhile to determine if there are any major disconnects among executives over the vision, goals, timing, and objectives. Another useful purpose is to both deliver key messages about the EH&S group (e.g., major successes and goals) and also probe for concerns about how the EH&S organization is currently performing (e.g., What should it be doing better? More of? Less of?).

### CONCLUSIONS

Ironically, it may take a formal approach to get informal, direct feedback. As the *EH&S Advisor Checklist* indicates, the most information comes from highly structured and professionally supported discussions conducted in an informal style. This strategy is especially useful for an initial assessment of possible disconnects and key business priorities. A carefully worded set of questions, a style that does not provoke policy or directives on the spot, and experienced interviewers are needed. Follow-up action to close gaps or provide critical information would be the logical outcome of these meetings. Setting up "internal stakeholder dialogues" will be viewed by business executives as

a value-adding effort to ensure that their objectives are being followed with precision. Try it. ☺

### PLEASE ASK, PLEASE TELL

Is there an EH&S topic you would like to address in the *EH&S Advisor*? Do you have information to share with your colleagues, and are you interested in possibly co-authoring a column on the subject? *EM* is very interested in your ideas. Please contact Richard MacLean at phone: (480) 922-1620 or e-mail: [maclean@competitive-e.com](mailto:maclean@competitive-e.com).

### REFERENCES

1. Shelton, R. Hitting the Green Wall: Why Corporate Programs Get Stalled; Chapter 2, The Role of Upper Management; *Environmental Management and Business Strategy: Leadership Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*; Piasecki, B., et al., Eds.; John Wiley & Sons: New York, 1998.
2. Roome, B.; Bergin, R. The Challenges of Sustainable Development—Lessons from Ontario Hydro; *Corporate Environmental Strategy* **2000**, 7 (1), 18.

### About the Author

Richard MacLean is president of Competitive Environment Inc., Scottsdale, AZ, and director of the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI). He can be contacted at phone: (480) 922-1620; e-mail: [maclean@competitive-e.com](mailto:maclean@competitive-e.com); and at [www.Competitive-E.com](http://www.Competitive-E.com).

