



The Ideal Safety Career Path

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Don't be too busy to plan for your future. Doing a good job is not enough to move you up the career ladder.

Safety professionals are so busy they don't always think about their own future. Those who do often describe a desire to move from the position of site safety manager to a regional, and then a corporate, level. When I ask them how they plan to do so, the usual response is: "By doing a really good job!"

I would like to suggest that safety professionals plan their own career path strategically and follow their plan meticulously. This plan will work both for those moving up the corporate ladder and for those happy to stay where they are but who want to maximize their current position. It will increase effectiveness and efficiency, as well as job satisfaction.

Rather than trying to plan a career that climbs the corporate ladder or expands a current position, plan how to expand your value to the organization. You can do this in stages and each stage will make you more valuable, whether you are moving up or staying put. Here are the three stages through which a safety professional should move in the course of a successful career:

Stage 1: Grunt – Almost every career begins with grunt work. Paperwork, daily routine, busywork and common tasks dominate your time and challenge your endurance. This work isn't given to beginners because it is easy; it's given because it is basic. It still requires skill, organization and an eye for detail to get it done in a timely and efficient manner. You will become more accurate and more cognizant of the value of such work as you do it and use the data you produce. As you begin to master this type of activity, you can look to the future. Your true calling is not to stay busy, but to make a difference. Begin to automate, hand off or minimize the daily grunt work and start to take care of your work force.

Stage 2: Guardian – In this stage, you begin to move beyond the daily chores to the oversight of safety. You begin to see the big picture and take care of issues before they get out of hand. You quit trying to do everything for everyone and just make sure it gets done. If you have help, you learn the crucial skills of delegation and oversight. You realize that safety is not so much what you do as much as what workers and leaders do. You help them do it instead of trying to do it yourself. They begin to view you as a resource rather than a workhorse, and your sphere of influence grows.

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If you become an effective guardian, you will find yourself overseeing more efforts than you could possibly do alone. You are helping the whole organization effectively manage safety and are serving as their guide and resource person. These efforts significantly are more valuable to the organization than your grunt work. You now can make more of a difference in safety than before. You can lead safety efforts and give them direction and meaning. Your example and expertise inspire the entire organization to pursue

excellence in safety.

Stage 3: Guru – It takes a lot of climbing to see safety from 30,000 feet. That is why all your grunt work and guardianship pays off, because that is what helps you clearly see the big picture. At this level, you work on strategy rather than tactics or implementation. You help your organizational leaders develop and deploy effective strategies for safety excellence. You truly are the expert who can map the path forward and solve the problems along the way. You have seen how other efforts got derailed or delayed and you build safeguards against such problems into your strategies. You warn others of potential pitfalls and help them avoid common problems. You become the critical thinker whose insight and point of view have stand-alone value to your organization.

You now can develop others into safety grunts and guardians and help them along the progression to your level. You have become the ultimate safety resource. You can work at any level and help others to do so. You can help leaders more effectively lead safety and turn supervisors into effective safety coaches. You can paint the big picture to new employees and start them on careers that include excellent safety performance. When new approaches to safety come along, you can evaluate their effectiveness and potential fit into your organization's safety strategy.

At the guru level, you will need to continually feed on new ideas and methods. You will need to belong to safety organizations, attend conferences and read the latest safety publications. You will need to become a reader of books; not just safety books, but also business books. You will quit seeing safety as a separate part of the business and envision how it belongs to a unified whole. You will help leaders position safety as a part of producing goods or services, rather than a conflicting priority. You will help them realize that managing safety is the ultimate indicator of how they manage the business.



Your organization will reach a level of safety performance that will qualify it to do business with the very best in your industry. Your continued guidance and strategic development of safety processes and metrics will become an integral part of the overall excellence of the organization's performance. You and other organizational leaders will find synergies in your efforts and will borrow ideas to improve other aspects of business. You will take your place with the other organizational leaders and provide the highest level of value possible.

Look at your career strategically and begin to take steps toward the next stage. Get into the habit of continuous, lifetime learning. Network with those in safety at the next level and make contacts with good mentors when you attend conferences or visit other sites. Form a support network of like-minded individuals in your field who also can see and value these three stages of growth and development and begin your journey. Climb the ladder of personal worth and the corporate ladder will take care of itself.



Terry L. Mathis, the coauthor of STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence and founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, was named one of The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS in 2010, 2011 and 2013 by EHS Today. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC and ASSE SeminarFest. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.

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