

Integrating Managers into Environmental Management Systems

In 2000, I attended a conference on environmental management systems (EMSs) sponsored by a major industry association. The conference featured case studies and presentations about ongoing EMS implementation programs. An interesting and unexpected thread ran through the presentations: The most challenging members of an organization to integrate into a new management system are the organization's managers.

Most of the participating EMS teams had had this experience, and all agreed it was imperative that managers be fully integrated and able to effectively carry out their designated EMS roles.

About This Article

This article discusses the role that managers play in implementing effective environmental management systems. In it I describe some factors that can make it difficult to integrate managers into the EMS program, and suggest a few approaches for overcoming these challenges.

This article is part of an occasional series that addresses aspects of EMS design and implementation. It follows my prior article, "EMS Improvement Through Effective Delegation of Environmental Responsibilities," which appeared in the

Sometimes managers can be the biggest obstacle to environmental management

Winter 2004 issue of this journal.¹

As used in this article, the term *manager* refers to every member of an organization who has supervisory authority. The terms *executive* and *vice president* (VP) describe senior managers who report to the organization's owners or stakeholders.

Why an EMS Needs Managers

In the sections that follow, I explain the roles that managers play, and discuss why managers are crucial to effective EMS implementation.

Providing Leadership

Improvements don't happen spontaneously. Changing an organization's behavior takes energy, attention, and motivation. Every change needs a champion. And in many organizations, that champion needs to be on the management team for the change to succeed.

Let's look at some of the reasons why this is so. For starters, managers control the resources needed to get things done within the organiza-

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tion. But the need for leadership goes well beyond the mechanics of administration.

Managers are an organization's designated leaders. Leaders have a huge influence over many aspects of their organizations that they do not directly control. People have a natural tendency to align their priorities with those of their leaders. Members of an organization tend to use the same language their leaders use. Even the "rebels" within an organization respond to leadership, albeit in a negative way. For all these reasons, leadership influence is necessary for an organization to effect positive change.

The Importance of Permission

An interesting way to see the importance of leadership influence on EMS implementation is to consider the need for organizational "permission." Every organization has procedures for granting formal permission to carry out projects.

And, of course, every EMS team should be sure to have formal permission to implement its system.

However, merely having your EMS implementation budget approved does not guarantee that shop-floor workers will have "permission" to do all the things that can make or break the system in practice—such as spending time reviewing draft EMS materials, suggesting improvements, explaining how things really work, and carrying out the hundred other activities that create a truly effective environmental management system.

Manager May I?

Permission to do the right thing is granted or denied by what an organization's leaders say and do, day after day. To understand this point, consider the following examples:

- If your boss frowns and changes the subject when you ask her about working on the EMS, how many times do you ask?
- You identify a problem that you fear will create a negative environmental impact for your company, and put in a work order to correct it. If the work order is rejected, do you spend time looking for other problems to fix?

I have seen—and had to work around—situations where plant workers clearly did not even have permission to speak with their EMS implementation team. In these cases, there was no formal policy prohibiting communication. In fact, the workers' managers protested vigorously that they were fully behind the EMS effort. Nevertheless, the workers, though apologetic, did not return the EMS team's phone calls or provide needed data. It was clear that, in their minds, they did not have permission to do so.

The bottom line is that when implementing an EMS, you need the organization's leaders on your side. If EMS implementation is to be successful, these leaders must use their influence—through daily conversations, business decisions, and even body language—to give their people encouragement and permission to actively participate in the EMS and improve environmental results.

Ensuring Accountability

Managers play a key role in communicating the priorities of an organization. Often, they do this simply by asking about certain things but not about others.

The clear message they send is that the subjects and results they ask about, review, measure, or respond to are urgent—and that others (no matter how prominently they appear on the company Website or in the mission statement) are not high priorities. As the old adage says, what gets measured gets done.

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This is an especially important factor in situations where people have more tasks to do than they can comfortably accomplish. When your plate is too full, what do you leave off? Certainly not the items your boss asked about this week. On the other hand, things that you hear about only in the quarterly information meeting can probably wait.

In order to implement a sustainable environmental management system, managers in positions of responsibility must ask about the EMS at regular intervals, with a frequency that communicates its importance relative to other business priorities.

As will be discussed in more detail, it is likely that the more effective and higher-placed the people working on the EMS, the stronger this effect will be.

In many organizations, there are formal accountability processes through which managers receive reports or updates dealing with important business results and initiatives. These processes can be used to help managers ask about the EMS and about environmental, health, and safety (EHS) performance in effective ways.

The time and energy required to get EMS implementation issues onto the monthly scorecard or into the quarterly performance report will generate handsome payoffs as implementation proceeds.

Putting Accountability Procedures in Place

If the organization does not already have formal processes aimed at ensuring accountability, implementing such processes as part of the EMS may be worth considering.

Keep in mind that, in addition to the environmental department, other parts of the organization—such as finance, human resources, or safety—may be very interested in working with the EMS team to develop a joint system for presenting and reviewing key business results. Such

a system could take a number of forms, including regular meetings, metrics reporting, or scheduled interviews.

EMS Sustainability

Organizations that have well-integrated environmental management systems tend to describe their EMSs as “simply a part of the way we do business.” Fully integrated EMSs grow with the rest of the business and can be sustained over the long term.

Unfortunately, however, in many organizations, the EMS exists mostly as a set of binders in the office of someone in the EHS department. These “binder-only” EMSs may be relatively cheap and easy to implement, and may even earn the organization an impressive-looking certificate for the reception room wall. But they probably will do very little to improve EHS performance. And because they are not properly integrated into organizational operations, they will not be able to adapt and remain relevant as the business changes.

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There are many things an organization can do to sustain an environmental management system over the long term, but the most important is to take it out of the binders and put it into the hands of the managers who run the business day to day.

Don't confine your efforts to environmental, health, and safety managers, or to EMS implementation team members. If the EMS “belongs” to the EHS manager, it will really only work in the EHS department. Even worse, if the system is the implementation team's baby, it will become an orphan when the implementation project is done.

By contrast, if the facility manager knows that EHS performance and the environmental management system are an important part of his job, the EMS will continue to pay off long after implementation is complete.

Creating and implementing a successful environmental management system is a significant, long-term effort. Few organizations are able to sustain an EMS that is not integrated into its core business and sustained by line managers.

Why Do Managers Resist EMSs?

Since it is clear that an environmental management system can improve key business results, and that managers' efforts are crucial to successful EMS implementation, why would a manager resist an EMS?

In the sections that follow, I discuss three reasons that are common to the majority of managers. I then mention a few "bad habits" that can also get in the way.

"It's Crunch Time"

In many organizations, managers are among the busiest people. They often take on many assignments and put in long hours. Willingness to do so may in fact be a key reason why they were selected as managers in the first place.

Given the large amount of information managers are presented with, attention may be an even more limited resource than time. The more highly placed a manager is, the more scarce a resource that manager's time and attention will be. This means that, in order to be effective, the environmental management system must be designed to make very efficient use of managers' time and attention.

The EMS should allow managers to focus on leadership, accountability, and decision-making tasks that cannot be performed by other members of the organization. Examples of effective managerial tasks include:

- promoting the organization's EMS vision,
- reviewing performance metrics and progress reports,
- recognizing milestone accomplishments, and
- holding regular one-on-one performance interviews with subordinate managers and key staff.

"If It's Not Broke, Don't Fix It"

Not surprisingly, managers often consider themselves to be among the most successful people in an organization. They have achieved status and recognition and tend to feel that they've earned it.

Having attained success using their own familiar approach, managers often are not very interested in changing how they do things. This can present a problem with regard to EMS implementation since managers generally will need to adopt new behaviors and take on new tasks in order to make the EMS effective.

The EMS team must be able to demonstrate that the changes they are asking managers to make to their practices are critical to the success of the environmental management system.

The EMS team should fit managers' EMS tasks into the existing managerial culture as far as possible. This entails using language that is familiar to managers and tailoring the EMS design to coordinate with existing corporate governance programs.

Another key is to focus managers on the desired EMS outcome, giving them room and initiative to take their own individualized approaches as long as these approaches work.

Looking Good from the Top

In addition to being busy and feeling satisfied with their own tried-and-true methods, man-

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agers tend to be very sensitive to the desires and interests of people above them in the organizational hierarchy.

Again, this is natural: An ability to please executives and investors is a key manager-selection criterion in most organizations. Effective managers are adept at matching their personal priorities to the performance metrics set for them, and at allocating time to cover the particular issues they are asked to report on.

Thus, communicating the business importance of EMS implementation is particularly crucial within the management hierarchy. Managers will put their energy into other priorities if they do not get clear and consistent “promotional” messages about the EMS from the organization’s executives.

The Several Habits of Highly Refractory Managers

The three challenges just described are more or less inherent to the way managers function and are selected in most organizations.

Some additional unconstructive behaviors can be observed in particularly resistant managers. These habits include the following.

- ***Standing Against the Waves of Change***

Some long-time managers have adopted a strategy of resisting all change. Over the years, they may have experienced a series of re-engineering projects, information technology rollouts, mergers, upper management shake-ups, or other events that caused a lot of stress in the short term, but that did not seem to them to have much long-term effect. And some managers may just be stubborn.

Whatever the reason, these folks often view EMS implementation as something to just wait out. Because managers who do this often are old-timers, they may have a formidable set of tools and delaying tactics to use in pursuit of that goal.

- ***Total Personal Control***

No one likes to have mistakes happen on their watch. Some managers try to ensure that no mistakes occur by taking personal control of all activities under their direction.

Unfortunately, once these managers decide that the key to their continued success is flawlessness (or at least the appearance of flawlessness), they may be tempted to take control of all information flow as well, in order to prevent negative information from becoming public.

Managers who take this approach may try to stop “outsiders” from finding out how things really get done in their departments, or insist on carrying out implementation and EMS tasks personally. Managers who adopt this approach make themselves the “limiting factor” in everything their organizations try to do, including implementing the EMS.

- ***Turf Defense***

Some managers view themselves as being in competition with others for authority, privileges, and resources. As a result, these managers may resist any change to the existing distribution of responsibilities within the organization.

This can lead them to insist on maintaining their separate data systems, procedures, and work practices, rather than integrating them into the overall environmental management system.

Turning Managers into EMS Champions

Active participation and support from line managers is critical to implementing an effective environmental management system. However, the typical EMS implementation team has neither sufficient authority to compel management

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participation nor high enough rank in the organizational hierarchy to gain automatic deference. This means that managers have to be persuaded by more indirect means.

In the sections that follow, I discuss some approaches to influencing managerial behavior. I start with the most high-minded and work down to the level where the rubber meets the road.

Demonstrate That the System Means Improved Performance

One of the most powerful ways to get a manager on board with EMS implementation is to demonstrate that the system will help the manager improve results. Most managers take great satisfaction in delivering good results, and most organizations have procedures in place that recognize and reward managers who do so.

The challenge here is to sell the environmental management system as a tool to help the manager deliver results. This means first showing that the EMS is designed to be effective. It also means showing that the implementation team knows how to get the system running at a reasonable cost.

You may be able to make the sale by providing information on successful EMS implementations at comparable businesses. A more effective, but more time-consuming, approach is to pilot the EMS implementation at a business subunit or sister facility.

Ideally, the site or process chosen for the pilot project will have some clearly measurable environmental impacts or issues that can be used to demonstrate improved performance. In addition, the pilot project should be led by a manager who buys into the value of the EMS. Good choices for

pilot projects include maintenance shops, wastewater treatment plants, painting lines, and vehicle yards.

Demonstrating success through an in-house pilot will go a long way toward getting the attention and cooperation of company managers. One caveat: The pilot had better work.

Show That the EMS Will Make the Manager's Job Easier

Effective management systems make a manager's job more manageable, in several ways. Organized information is easier to understand and remember. Predictability reduces stress. And having a regular pattern of tasks in place helps make clear when something has been overlooked.

The key to realizing these EMS benefits is to convince managers that the payoff is worth the effort it will take to get the system into place.

Fortunately, every organization has some managers who are either inherently systems-oriented or have had experience with effective management systems. These managers understand that systems can work, and will be more likely to support EMS implementation.

They can also be a great resource in helping convince colleagues that the environmental management system will make managers' jobs easier and the organization's performance more reliable.

In addition, identifying and working with systems-oriented managers can be very valuable when launching a pilot project.

Encourage Friendly Competition

In many organizations, members of the management team become friends over time and can be motivated by friendly competition. If you develop a set of easy-to-follow implementation metrics (perhaps in the form of a large chart) and arrange for a regular presentation time with the

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management team, competition may develop spontaneously.

Symbolic prizes do not hurt either. In addition, the organization's chief executive can help to promote the competition.

This approach may not be appropriate in every corporate culture. But where it fits, it may also help promote a less adversarial relationship between managers and the EMS implementation team.

Enlist a Word from on High

In some cultures, and with some managers, nothing can take the place of an executive saying that the EMS job has to get done.

For an undertaking as large and potentially challenging as implementation of an environmental management system, it is crucial to have the active support of the organization's chief executive or senior vice president, or some other high-ranking official who can provide leadership and ensure accountability.

In an "empowered" organization with a good management culture, shop-floor workers may spontaneously participate in implementing the EMS once they are convinced that it really will help the environment. All they need is permission.

Managers, on the other hand, may need assurance that their superiors place a high priority on the EMS. Executive-level managers must make clear that implementation of the EMS is critical to the organization's success, and that lower-level managers will be held accountable for implementation in their departments.

Nothing the implementation team can say or do really takes the place of managers' hearing this message from the top of the organization on a regular basis. Moreover, an interview with the boss can be the sure cure for a refractory manager.

It is critical that the EMS team take the steps necessary to get the EMS message into the mouth

of the relevant executives, and ensure that these executives properly communicate their expectations regarding the EMS to lower-level managers.

Most high-ranking executives recognize their role in communicating priorities and holding the organization accountable. But the EMS team needs to make sure that executives are receiving pertinent information on the EMS and that they understand how to present it to lower-level managers.

In many organizations, particular individuals or committees may be in charge of setting executives' schedules and crafting the presentations they make. Understanding and using these channels is a key way to ensure that EMS policies are communicated from the EMS team to line managers. These communication channels should be documented as part of the EMS.

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In Conclusion

A strong team of managers is one of the greatest resources any organization can have. It is critical to harness their acumen, energy, and authority if you want to ensure that your EMS implementation succeeds.

Not all of the issues and approaches discussed in this article will apply to every manager. In addition, some approaches may work better than others, depending on the organization.

When launching an EMS implementation, it is always valuable to spend some time learning how the organization motivates its managers, sets their priorities, and allocates their time.

Remember that, like all valuable resources, management support does not come free. Selling an EMS to managers depends first and foremost on demonstrating that the EMS works. This in-

cludes showing that the system will not diminish any manager's comparative advantage, and that it will lead to superior results.

An environmental management system will have the greatest chance of delivering value for an organization if you start with a sound system design, integrate it with existing functional sys-

tems, and invest the time and energy needed to convince managers of the system's value in a way they understand.

Note

1. Giles, F. (2004, Winter). EMS improvement through effective delegation of environmental responsibilities. *Environmental Quality Management*, 14(2), 29-37.

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