

Flocking Behaviors Can Help Improve Safety Effectiveness

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Arie de Geus told the following story in his article “The Living Company” (1):

In the late nineteenth century, milkmen left open bottles of milk outside people’s doors. A rich cream would rise to the tops of the bottles. Two garden birds common in Great Britain, titmice and red robins, began to eat the cream. In the 1930s, after the birds had been enjoying the cream for about 50 years, the British put aluminum seals on the milk bottles. What happened? By the early 1950s, the entire estimated population of one million titmice in Great Britain... had learned to pierce the seals. The robins never acquired that skill.

What explains this result? And what can it suggest about safety effectiveness?

While titmice are social birds, red robins are territorial and lack a robust social system. As described in the article, Prof. Allan Wilson proposed that organizational learning must include, among other things, a social system for propagating innovation and learning. A lesson, therefore, is that developing and maintaining safety knowledge and effectiveness can be improved by promoting “flocking behaviors,” *i.e.*, extensive interaction, engagement, and collaboration.

It takes time, training, and lots of experience to become knowledgeable in process safety. Many companies have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of diverse safety-related requirements, especially when regulations, industry guidance, and recognized and generally accepted good engineering practices (RAGAGEPs) are also considered. It is very difficult for an individual to be an expert in everything. Forming a strong network of safety experts and other resources can help fill gaps in your knowledge and contribute to faster and better actions when issues occur.

“Networking, more than any other skill... can have dramatic impact on the speed, quality, and quantity of your output. Without a high-quality network, you are unlikely to become a star performer. With one securely in place, you can leverage your knowledge base and give it a tremendous boost,” writes Robert E. Kelley in his book *How to be a Star at Work* (2). “Star performers proactively build and participate in networks before they need them.”

If you work in a large company, a network of experienced safety professionals is already available to you, and help is likely a call or email away. If a site is large enough, a process safety team with different element leaders may be available to consult. An in-company network can be invaluable if you are unsure of a requirement or if you are dealing with unusual circumstances and you want to get

some different perspectives and opinions from experienced resources. Since the barriers to participate in this type of network are low, the time it takes to get a response should be short and the quality of the response should be high.

In smaller companies or for more specialized problems, this may be more difficult. Given the importance of networking and especially the value of becoming involved in high-quality networks, consider if internal networks should be developed or improved and if participation in external networks is possible.

Consider taking the following steps to expand your network of safety-related professionals:

- Use LinkedIn, the Center for Chemical Process Safety (CCPS), or other specialized networks to ask questions, respond to questions, and/or read to help gain knowledge.

- Actively participate in internal company networks. What have you or your site been doing that could be shared in one of these network meetings? Create new networks if needed.

- Consider participating in hazard reviews, audits, incident investigations, training, and other safety-related activities at other sites in your company, if there are opportunities, to help meet people at these other sites.

- Attend external training where you meet experts and participants from other companies.

- Participate in CCPS or other industry/association teams that develop new books or other tools for improving process safety, consensus standards, etc., which usually involve highly knowledgeable participants from many companies.

- Attend conferences, such as the Global Congress on Process Safety (GCPs), to meet people and learn from the many presentations. Better yet, become involved by presenting papers or helping to organize the conference.

- Read and contribute to safety-related publications such as *Process Safety Progress*, *Professional Safety*, etc.

Process safety professionals should try to mimic the flocking behaviors of the titmouse and should strive to be less like the more unsocial robin. Networking and collaboration will help individuals and organizations learn and maintain new knowledge more effectively and leverage it for increased safety program effectiveness.

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1. **de Geus, A.**, “The Living Company,” *Harvard Business Review*, (Mar.-Apr. 1997).

2. **Kelley, R. E.**, “How to Be a Star at Work: 9 Breakthrough Strategies You Need to Succeed,” Three Rivers Press, New York, NY (1999).