

A “list” article from an environmental-technology publication.

Making the Environmental Department Part of the Business: How to Get Involved Up Front

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An experienced, knowledgeable environmental staff—or, in small companies, the environmental person—can make a tremendous difference when it comes to instilling an environmental awareness in all employees. But another challenge is for the environmental group to become involved in all facets of the business—design, production, shipping—right up front. Getting to that point isn’t easy.

The environmental department at the South Carolina plants of the KEMET Electronics Corporation has “climbed that mountain,” and its staff members have worked hard to make the company the environmental leader it is today.

KEMET is a global leader in the production of tantalum and ceramic capacitors. The company has manufacturing plants in South Carolina (Mauldin, Simpsonville, Fountain Inn, and Greenwood), North Carolina, and Mexico. It also has distribution centers and sales offices around the world.

In general, the nature of electronics manufacturing poses many environmental challenges to the industry: ozone-depleting chemicals, chlorinated solvents, hazardous waste streams, and other potential problems. Such challenges underscore the importance of having an environmental team on board, one that’s not only experienced but also effective. KEMET recognized that need years ago; its environmental team has proved its effectiveness, but becoming “part of the business” has been a tough road to travel.

At a lively roundtable discussion held in March, five members of the KEMET environmental team (identified in this article) shared their experiences in traveling that road. Using the lessons they have learned, we offer suggestions for getting your environmental group fully involved in the business.

Know what you need to do

To be effective, of course, your environmental group must know its proper role and its objectives. Beyond obtaining the correct permits, maintaining compliance, and keeping essential records, what should the group aim for? Is it pollution prevention and waste minimization? Is it training? Is it involvement in the actual production effort? And once those objectives have been identified, you and your staff must create a plan on how to reach them.

Get involved at the beginning

Most production and process personnel are focused on bottom-line manufacturing results. They often lack the background training and knowledge base necessary to properly assess the environmental implications associated with many of their key projects and related decisions. Whether installing new equipment, using new chemicals, or introducing new waste streams,

production and process personnel need guidance and direction to ensure environmental compliance. This is where the plant environmental staff plays a key role; it is why you must get involved at the beginning of the change process.

KEMET relies on something called the Quality Operating Document or QOD, part of which deals with the environmental aspects of a proposed project. “Before production can move forward on a project, they have to get environmental buy-in, and we have to be part of it,” says Lewis Mayfield, safety and environmental coordinator at the Mauldin plant.

The QOD provides a “heads-up” that some kind of change—major or minor—is being considered or about to take place. The environmental group has the authority and the responsibility to stop the project if it carries compliance implications. The form also allows the group to consider and recommend better, more environmentally sound options for a particular project, such as using water-based rather than chlorinated solvents, for example.

The QOD is a simple questionnaire that includes an environmental assessment and a safety assessment. Each coordinator sees, on average, one or two of these forms every day. Someone contemplating a change to the plant has to complete the form and submit it. The environmental coordinator for that plant reviews the assessment and either approves it, disapproves it, or sends it back for more information.

“It does put some responsibility back on us,” says Mike Sizemore, environmental coordinator at the Simpsonville plant. “If this guy needs an air permit or a water permit or he’s going to generate hazardous waste, everything has to be ready for his project or it can’t take place.” And if the answers on the QOD don’t seem quite right—if, for example, it maintains that the project won’t generate any waste, but then indicates that it will require 55-gallon drums—the environmental coordinator has to find out what the realistic environmental impact will be.

The form’s simplicity is crucial to its effectiveness: the person filling it out should be able to understand the questions easily and answer them quickly, without the need to go into much technical detail. The environmental coordinator then reviews the document carefully to determine the environmental ramifications of the proposed change or project. [See the accompanying sidebar, Environmental Assessment Questions.]

Recognize the bottom line

Any environmental program or decision should contribute to the company’s bottom line as much as possible. “Basic economics says you’ve got to look at the business aspects,” says Randy Jones, environmental coordinator at the Fountain Inn plant. “If the economics aren’t there, it’s hard to force a lot of the idealistic environmental things.” Other than meeting regulations and staying in compliance, manufacturers cannot base their production plans solely on environmental considerations.

Some of KEMET’s products, for example, still rely on highly regulated materials; right now those substances are essential to the manufacture of specific types of capacitors. The company has teams working on eliminating those substances, but eliminating their use immediately would result in substantial business repercussions.

Nevertheless, the company has been successful at eliminating other potentially hazardous substances, such as ozone-depleting chemicals and chlorinated solvents, and has received the South Carolina Governor's Pollution Prevention Award for its efforts. [The company was a runner-up for the Governor's Award in 1993, and the winner in the "large business or industrial facility" category in 1996.] KEMET's experience demonstrates the oft-repeated lesson that environmental considerations and sound business decisions do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Earn trust

Trust serves as an essential ingredient for an environmental group's success. If the general perception of your environmental people is that they are only an obstacle to getting a product manufactured, the environmental excellence effort is doomed. If, on the other hand, your group is viewed as a resource, that "mountain" becomes an easier one to climb.

Establishing trust, says Jonathan "J.T." Tingen, environmental services coordinator at the Fountain Inn plant, is a matter of nurturing a relationship over time. But how does the group establish trust? The KEMET crew says you've got to earn it. They offer several suggestions:

Bring experience. Lewis Mayfield, for example, served as a manufacturing supervisor for ten years, so he brings a lot of relevant industry experience to his position in the environmental group. As a result, he has a good rapport with all of the plant supervisors. They respect his knowledge, and they'll talk to him first when considering a new project. Everyone on KEMET's environmental staff has at least ten years of experience—much of it in manufacturing and production—and that experience builds trust.

Maintain credibility. Credibility comes with experience. Know what you're talking about. If you tell the plant manager or supervisor that he or she can't make a certain change or carry out a new project, only to find out later you were wrong, you've severely damaged your credibility—and your trust.

Offer to help. Give the perception that you're always trying to stop the plant personnel at every turn and thereby saving the world, and they'll stop talking to you. Instead, present yourself as a reliable, objective resource, and you'll earn their trust. Offer to help solve problems. If they can turn to you for answers without having to run down to headquarters every time they have a question, you stand a much better chance of winning them over.

Production people and other plant personnel are not the enemy. Be helpful, no matter how frustrated you may be at their proposed projects or changes; smile and say, "Let me see what I can do and I'll get back to you." "Whether they realize it or not," says Tingen, "they look to us for solutions. It's part of our job to say, 'Here are your options.'"

Respond quickly. When a QOD gathers dust on the environmental coordinator's desk for a couple of weeks, the person who submitted it may not bother with filling out another one the next time a project comes up. Each QOD, or each request for an answer, needs a quick turnaround. If the issue is a complex one that needs time to investigate, you still have the obligation of responding quickly to the person who submitted the form or made the request: let him or her know that you're working on the issue, but that you'll need more time to resolve it.

Spend time on the production floor. Let the production people see that you're not someone who remains cooped up in the office all day. Walk around and make yourself available for questions, and see for yourself what's happening in the plant. Know what the production team is doing and how it's doing it. Similarly, know what it wants to do and when it wants to do it. Help keep production going smoothly.

Don't sit at your desk all day; go out and see what's actually taking place. Management theorist Tom Peters conveyed the same approach in the concept he called "Management by Walking Around" (MBWA).

Have access to regulatory agencies

Ron DeHollander, corporate environmental protection manager for KEMET, encourages his staff to pick up the phone and call the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) or the Western Carolina Regional Sewer Authority. He tells them to ask questions ahead of time rather than second-guess what the agency might do. Each member of his team has the authority to place such a call. The information they gather is shared, not only with the other members of the environmental team, but also with the production and engineering people.

Stand your ground

When you know you're correct on an environmental issue, stand your ground. If someone in the plant proposes to do something that you know will compromise your regulatory compliance—or will pose a serious hazard—do not allow it to happen. That person may get vocal about your seeming interference, but you cannot give in.

Similarly, an environmental staff member must be assured of his or her manager's full support in such instances. If the environmental manager doesn't back up the team, credibility suffers. Remember, however, that you owe a full explanation for your rejection of a project or change. Show the relevant regulations. Offer to help by proposing alternative approaches to the problem.

Train and educate

The first bullet item on KEMET's list of core values is "Best trained and motivated people." It's a maxim that carries over into the environmental arena: every employee has an environmental responsibility, and must be made aware of that responsibility. But instilling that awareness can prove difficult.

"How we got to where we are," says Sizemore, "is formal training—continuous training." That training applies to the environmental staff as well as to the rest of the plant personnel. KEMET fully supports such training and budgets for it, and the company even invites DHEC people to help with the training.

"That was a big step for industry to say to DHEC, 'Come on down and help us in our training,'" says Tingen. "They didn't know when they had been asked into a plant before to help with training." Such agency involvement can have a significant influence on plant personnel. "It gets your employees more directly connected to what their actions are, to knowing that they are accountable not just to their supervisors, but also to the regulatory agencies," adds Jones.

[Note: Before inviting your regulatory agency, you should ensure, of course, that your plant is already in full compliance with all applicable environmental regulations. Once you're in compliance, you can take full advantage of the experience and expertise those agency people can offer.]

Share information

“What’s happened in our company that puts us out front is that we don’t try to reinvent the wheel,” says Sizemore. If one plant discovers a good approach, that environmental person shares the information with his or her colleagues at the other plants. “When we started talking to each other and sharing information,” continues Sizemore, “environmental costs went down.”

At KEMET, this exchange of information and ideas takes place through phone calls, e-mail messages, or meetings. Until a few years ago, the environmental group met formally once a quarter; today, however, the considerable level of experience of each member and the fact that they communicate frequently on an as-needed basis have eliminated the need for a formal, regularly scheduled meeting.

Strive for continuous improvement

This advice, of course, has become standard in industry. Don’t become complacent: always try to improve on what you’ve already done. This approach feeds the group’s credibility.

Get management buy-in

Without full support from upper management, an environmental group has little clout and makes little progress. The trust factor, by the way, applies here just as it does on the production floor: Tell management what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear. And invite managers to some of your training sessions.

Conclusion

DeHollander’s staff has had to persevere to integrate its role into the overall business, but the hard work has paid off. The company has made remarkable, award-winning progress in the environmental arena. Part of the credit goes to an underlying philosophy: According to Larry Sheppard, vice president of Human Resources, “Doing it right the first time is the least expensive approach in the long run.” For your own environmental department, doing it right the first time means getting your foot in the door before changes take place.