

ERM's Phoenix + 5 event: EHS & Sustainability Leaders' Workshop



New faces, new
places, new spaces

“Learning without
convergence”

Executives with EHS and related responsibilities never had easy jobs. After a global recession, drifting carbon policy, increased transparency, incessant cost-cutting and accelerating corporate mergers and break-ups, those roles are now harder than ever.

From 1999 to 2007, ERM gave EHS+ leaders valuable opportunities to share experiences and work with colleagues from a wide range of business sectors through ERM's Business Integration Forums. These were often referred to as the Phoenix Forums (where most of the North American Forums were held), though Asian and European Forums were held in multiple locations including Florence, Beijing, Prague and Versailles.

Five years after the last Forum, ERM held an experimental “Phoenix + 5” event in November 2012 in the Chicago area for EHS, Risk and Sustainability leaders. Eight VP or Director-level colleagues gathered (including two who had never attended ERM Forums).

- The participants had undergone changes over the five years: all were in new roles, half in new companies, and half effectively commuting 1000 miles or more between their families and their formal job locations.
- The event was also different from the old Forums: The session was smaller and shorter, an intimate day-long session (starting with dinner the night before).

What stayed the same was ERM's “learning without convergence” approach. Participants learned and shared with their colleagues. They applied focused business and management tools to their unique corporate challenges. There was no one right outcome. Each participant took away the lessons that were most appropriate for his or her own company, role and career.

The Phoenix + 5 event covered a wide range of topics, driven by the participants' priorities. A "leadership thread" ran through the session, including issues of strategy, vision, organization, management and communication. Several topics were discussed in more detail including:

What's your definition of success?

Participants shared their personal journeys over the last (roughly) 5 years. Each person talked about their greatest challenges and how they had navigated through to where they are today. Some key themes emerged from the discussion: the importance of alignment, leadership and courage in the face of organizational change, and managing the difference between expectations and reality.

The discussion pivoted from the past to the future. Participants were asked: "If we were to look back on New Year's Eve, Dec. 31 2014, and say 'that went really well, we did good', what do you need to have done to make that happen and how do you need to be positioned for the future?" Each participant developed his or her own unique answers to this question. The rest of the session was driven by issues raised by those answers.

Matching roles to goals: How can your team help you be successful?

Success for the participants included both managing traditional day-to-day responsibilities and driving new initiatives or developing new ways of doing things. Having the right team to support this may require a different mix of technical and organizational skills than was needed 5 or 10 years ago.

Is the team you have (whether you built it or inherited it) "fit for purpose" with your definition of success? Can the people you have on the team achieve the objectives you have or need to set? And what can you do about it, given organizational realities and persona responsibilities?

The participants explored different ways of mapping and understanding the mix of skills on their teams. They considered different ways to assess strengths and weaknesses. This opened up new ways to assign and mix roles within a team to better match the team's capabilities to the leader's direction.

How do you prevent situations where process is great for decades – until it isn't and people die?

One participant candidly shared a painful case study with good facilities, good processes, good people, good history – and a tragic accident. This set the stage for an honest discussion of safety culture. (Participants saw similar challenges for environment and sustainability performance as well.) The discussion points included:

- Hearts *and* Minds – How to get people to want to do the right thing? Intellectual understanding does not translate into behavior change or the right habits
- What's the role of management? What do they really believe, say and do every day when you're not there? How do you fix that?

The practical challenge remains: How do you ensure that people do the right thing even when someone's having a bad day?

A lot of us have "the Sustainability word" after our title. What does that mean?

The meaning of the term is still evolving. For some, sustainability is additional to and different from the traditional EHS purview. For others, sustainability seemed essentially synonymous with EHS. Common challenges included:

- Moving away from a 'box-checking' exercise, defining sustainability in the corporate strategy and culture;
- Engaging employees in small-scale implementation;
- Managing expectations, ensuring that your external reporting effort "doesn't write checks your performance can't cash"; and
- Creating alignment internally around what this word after the title should really mean in practice.

Practicing 360 degree Leadership

Participants looked at their overall leadership profile. They looked at the messages they send to and receive from every direction: up, down, horizontally within their company, horizontally externally. While patterns of success and frustration varied, they shared the challenge of making sure people are following where they lead. As was noted: "Look over your shoulder. If no one is following, you're not leading – you're just wandering."