



There is a bit of an email “round table” circulating amongst several of the “grey beards” of the International System Safety Society that everyone might be interested in. The general topic of discussion has to do with, “Why isn’t system safety more effective?” I hope this discussion is going to turn into a paper or presentation by someone other than myself, so I don’t want to interfere with that process. However, the topic has struck a few chords with me that might be of interest to you.

So far, there are at least three points of view or theories as to why system safety isn’t more important or desired:

- Safety is seen as “an expense” — Corporations are focused on profits. It’s a given that accidents reduce profits, and that system safety reduces accidents. Therefore, industry leaders must not understand the costs associated with uncontrolled risks, because if they did, they would put more effort toward system safety.
- The “right” people are not informed — Industries have a way of making big commitments, pledges and changes after a well-publicized event has occurred. We spend a lot of time and effort attempting to warn our customers/employers about the risks of these kinds of newsworthy events, but if we do it by talking to those in system safety, we are mostly just “preaching to the choir.”
- The concept of system safety isn’t being “sold” properly — We do not do a good enough job of selling our ability to add value to the project or team. We need to promote our profession as a value-added service, not just a risk reduction activity.

I believe there are other reasons besides these three. I once had a customer who really set me back. I was promoting the idea that they should do more system safety because it would reduce their risk exposures. This happened to be at a time when I was working for them as an expert witness because they were being sued over a

product safety claim, so I figured that they would be sensitive to the topic. Their response floored me. The company president’s point of view was something like: “If the legal award is large enough to put us out of business, so be it. We’ll shut up shop and go do something else. If not, it doesn’t matter. In the meantime, I want to maximize profits by minimizing costs.” The focus wasn’t on maximizing profits; it was on maximizing short-term profits.

During this discussion with the society’s “elders,” I found myself looking at things a little differently with regard to business, safety, government, my life and a lot of other things. My twist came about by finding that I judge all of these entities based on an idea of what I consider “success” or “not success” (maybe that is failure, maybe not). It started with my wondering what I think it takes for my business to be “successful.”

For me, being successful means that:

- I make enough money for my family to live comfortably (what that means is another topic)
- My employees make enough money to be comfortable (good housing, good education, good medical care, good hours, etc.)
- My employees make enough to be able to have a comfortable retirement
- I improve the environment more than I degrade it (minimum negative environmental footprint)
- I follow the “Burning Man” adage of “leave no trace”
- I do work that is good for society, the world, my neighbors, friends, not friends, etc.
- I will leave my children and grandchildren in as good a place, or maybe better place, than when I started

This is not a complete list, but I think you get the idea.

My company motto has always been kind of silly, but I have not been able to find a good replacement. It is, “Do good, have fun.” I believe in it. By “do good,” I mean in the global and local sense of doing things to improve a

situation, or at least not do damage. “Having fun” means doing enjoyable work, being comfortable with my peers, customers, friends, strangers and doing something that I feel is important. Having fun also means feeling that I am being “successful.” Failure is definitely not fun!

When I sit back and decide whether I am successful, I look at these kinds of criteria. I expect others to judge me based on these kinds of criteria as well. What is amazingly absent is any mention or thought about “profit” as a goal in itself; profit is only important in how it impacts these other, more important, goals.

If my employees aren’t making a good, comfortable living, I have failed. If they don’t have a solid medical plan, I have failed. If they can’t have a secure retirement, I have failed. If they are exposed to avoidable hazards, I have failed. If the public is exposed to unacceptable risks, I have failed. If my activities damage the environment, I have failed. It goes on like that.

However, discussions about companies and their management always seem to go right to the point of “making profit” as almost the only criteria for judging success. If that is actually the case, then of course this pursuit drives everything, and my goals of “doing good and having fun” go right out the window (unless of course, making a profit is “fun”).

I don’t actually think that the goal of maximizing profits is the case for anyone — including managers, business owners, workers, etc. The only people who might have the opinion that the most important goal is maximum profit are anonymous shareholders, because they do not identify with the company and are generally unaware of the activities and decisions of the enterprise. For example, I own a bunch of mutual funds as part of my retirement investment portfolio. I have only a hazy idea of what businesses fall within those mutual funds, and do not have any knowledge or thought about their business practices, except that I want them to push enough money to me. If the mutual fund meets my income goals, I am happy. If not, I switch to a different fund. If I think about safety with regard to “my” companies (as a shareholder), it is strictly from the point of view of whether or not I think there are unacceptable liability risks because of safety issues. Normally, I have no information on that topic, so I ignore it.

My bet is that almost all managers and business executives are frustrated because they are judged almost solely on profits rather than on criteria that they think are important, such as my list for determining the success of my business. They want to be judged as “successful” in the eyes of their family, their friends, their co-workers and themselves, most of whom are not concerned with “profit.”

Maybe there is a way that we can facilitate a cultural change in how people are judged. Rather than being

judged only on high profits and compliance with regulations, maybe there is a way to turn the point of view a bit so that these items are at the bottom of what it takes to be judged as successful, rather than at the top. When people discuss the success of a CEO, maybe it can be in terms of how they are doing with regard to items such as those on my list, rather than on how much the company has grown, how many billions of dollars the CEO has accumulated, how much profit they made, or how gigantic their salaries and bonuses have become.

Can we help to “humanize” the criteria for success? Profits will always be important, but my bet is that higher profits will come from a more humane decision-making process. There are many examples that show rather conclusively that happier, more personally “successful” people are more productive and creative. Doing good and having fun doesn’t necessarily mean not making profits. In fact, I contend that it can be a major driving force toward achieving higher profits.

I noticed that Chuck Feeney just gave away \$6.3 billion dollars to charity, keeping \$2 million for himself. Sounds like he gets it. However, it makes me wonder how that much money got piled up in the first place. Did he get it while meeting the other items of “success?” My bet is he didn’t; if he did, that much money wouldn’t have accumulated. My opinion has always been that when someone piles up that much wealth, it means that they have been grossly overcharging for their products and underpaying for the materials and services going into it — to the detriment of their customers, the economy and, almost certainly, the environment. They get that way because they don’t pay the true and complete costs of their activities. My guess is that something happened to switch him to a new paradigm of understanding with regard to what “success” means to him and his businesses. It would be interesting to know what changed. Maybe it was just getting older and realizing that there is nothing more he can gain from accumulating so much wealth.

These ideas are having an impact on my view of the world. Maybe they contain a grain of truth that could be used to assist us in our efforts to make the world a safer, and better, place. By my criteria, is Walmart successful? Is Costco, General Electric, or even Congress? Is your business? Are you?

Just something to think about.

By the way, I have been publishing a blog for the past few years because I need an “outlet” for my thoughts. It covers a wide variety of topics, including safety. Since it is “my” blog, I am free to select topics that are of interest to me at the moment. Currently, my blog is pretty lonely because nobody visits — perhaps because nobody knows about it. If you are interested, check it out at <http://chasmuse.blogspot.com/>