President's Message

by Warren Naylor

Leadership, communication and funding are the three legs of the system safety stool, regardless of industry or environment. Failure of any of the three legs renders the system safety stool ineffective. Over the next few issues, I will address each of the three legs in order, beginning here with leadership.

A "leader," as defined by my 35-year-old office dictionary, is:

1. A person who leads others along a way, a guide.
2. One in charge of or in command of others.

Most people believe the second definition is the only definition of a leader, which naturally disqualifies the system safety engineer (SSE) from ever being considered a leader; he or she is simply not in command. I would also argue that if you believe in this definition, you are probably not as effective as you should be as an SSE.

In reality, a SSE is continually leading the program team toward the development, understanding and management of system risk, with a focus on safety of personnel, equipment and the environment. In reality, if a proper system safety program is implemented with you as the leader, you should also be influencing other risk areas as well, like funding, quality, reliability, maintainability, life cycle recurrent costs, etc. You will only be successful in making these valuable system contributions through your ability to lead. There will be occasions where your message, recommendations and/or mitigations will be unpopular with management and even the design team; however, you are bound by your duties as a system safety professional to make these decisions.

To survive these occurrences requires you to have a proven track record and the credibility that allows others to know that you are making this recommendation solely for the development of a safer and more effective system. Sometimes, these decisions are hard to make, but leaders make the hard decisions, stand by their decisions, do not develop excuses and possess the courage to sometimes say, "I was wrong!" The final tenet I use is to never exaggerate or downplay risk. I give my leaders the bottom line and then they must put on their leadership hats to make the tough decisions. Regardless of those decisions, I can sleep peacefully because I gave them a chance at an intelligent decision.

I was once told by an extremely successful leader that whenever he walks into a room, he assumes he is in charge until told otherwise — and believe me, he was rarely told otherwise. I respected and admired this man, and I have taken his advice and used it throughout my career. I hope you take this message as I took his — as lessons learned from a long and somewhat successful career.

— Warren Naylor
President
System Safety Society