

▶ DIRECT FROM AAS



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Two Stories on the Importance of Professional Relationships



Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

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What are professional relationships? Let's first look at the two words that make up that phrase:

- 1. Professional:** What words come to mind when I say professional? I think of expert, subject matter expert, science, science based, degreed, licensed, and registered. In environmental health, I think of KSAs—knowledge, skills, and abilities. You may have your own words that come to mind.
- 2. Relationships:** What words come to mind when I say relationships? I think of interaction, conduct (that conduct could be good, bad, or indifferent), trust or lack of trust, passion, emotion, and respect. You may have other words.

Professional relationships are relationships with individuals or groups of individuals,

such as colleagues, partners, local officials, your boss, your employees, community leaders, and boards of health, as well as those we regulate and those who regulate us.

Here is my definition of professional relationships: How I, as a highly skilled individual, go about my environmental health work with those around me. I might include in my definition how I develop, maintain, improve, change, and evolve those professional relationships over time.

To illustrate my point on the importance of professional relationships I'm going to share two short, personal stories, one about ice hockey and the other about the *Food Code*. It is worth noting that I shared these stories in my President's Message column published in the October 2018 *Journal of Environmental*

Health during my tenure as president of the National Environmental Health Association. Why am I sharing these stories again? First, the topic of professional relationships is still pertinent as it was 4 year ago and should still resonate with people. Second, it is proven that we learn through repetition and hopefully a second telling of these stories will continue our growth and learning processes.

First, the hockey story: I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, in the late 1940s–1960s. Back then there were three things that occupied my time outside of school: cars, Motown music, and sports (the Detroit Tigers, Lions, Pistons, and Red Wings). My dad, grandfather, and uncle would take me down to Olympia Arena to watch the Red Wings play hockey.

At the time, Detroit was synonymous with cars and the Big Three—Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors. My grandfather, who worked at the Ford Motor Company Rouge Plant in the Detroit area would talk about the production line. How many cars would come off the line in a day and his job on the line. There was, however, another production line in Detroit that had nothing to do with cars. Production Line was the nickname of the most prolific scoring line in the history of the National Hockey League (NHL) and it belonged to the Detroit Red Wings. When that front line stepped out on the ice for a game, they were going to score a goal—guaranteed. That front line consisted of Sid Abel (center), Ted Lindsay (left wing), and Gordie Howe (right wing).

They were the best of friends as well as colleagues who respected each other. Each member of the Production Line had their strengths and weaknesses. Abel was older and slower but had the vision to see the play developing as they came down the ice. Lind-

say and Howe, being younger, had speed and agility but sometimes they could be impatient. Abel would bring the puck up the ice, size up the position of the defense, and angle the puck so only Lindsay or Howe could get to it before the opposing team could.

Wayne Gretzky, a famous hockey player in the 1980s, when asked by a reporter what made him so great, replied, “I go where the puck is going to be.” As the Production Line, Abel, Lindsay, and Howe were doing that 30 years earlier. In the 1949–1950 NHL hockey season, Able, Lindsay, and Howe would finish 1st, 2nd, and 3rd in NHL scoring, a feat that had never been done before and has never been done to this day.

In your professional relationships, are you setting up others to succeed and excel?

There were other aspects that made the Production Line great. Abel would say he knew what Howe and Lindsay were going to do before they did it. The three of them would hang together over beers after practice. Their families would get together for birthdays and special occasions.

In your professional relationships, do you sit down over coffee, tea, or a beer outside of work with your colleagues?

Howe was quoted as saying, “They used to say if you blindfolded us, we’d still be able to find one another on the ice. All of us knew where everyone else was at any given moment, maybe the closeness off the ice had something to do with it.” But there was more that made the Production Line great. They would study their opponents—their strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies.

How well do you know your opponents—those pathogens, hazardous wastes, safety hazards, etc. that we deal with every day—and just as important, what do you not know about them?

Finally, the Production Line would practice. They would practice with the rest of the team, but many times they would stay late and practice to not only improve their individual skills but also their skills and abilities as the Production Line. Abel, Lindsay, and

Howe understood in their time that the goalie would not come out from the goalie crease and they took advantage of that. Today, that aspect of hockey has changed.

To maintain your edge in professional relationships, you must study, train, and practice. You must understand how the field is changing about you. And by the way, the Detroit Red Wings would go on to win the Stanley Cup in 1950, 1952, 1954, and 1955.

Now, let’s fast forward to the 1990s and my story about the *Food Code*. At that time, I was asked by the directors of health of three Northern Virginia jurisdictions to lead a group of environmental health specialists to study and make recommendations on whether to adopt the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) model *Food Code* as the food safety regulation in the area. Having developed professional relationships over time with environmental health specialists in the three jurisdictions and serving as president of the National Capital Area Environmental Health Association, I was able to form a committee to study the existing code at the time.

As part of that committee, I knew I needed to include not only environmental health specialists but also representatives from the local restaurant industry as we needed their support if we were going to get the *Food Code* adopted into local regulation. So, I reached out to members of the local restaurant association with whom I had a few professional relationships. Some of them agreed to participate in this endeavor, but over the months of work that participation became less and less. Still, I maintained communication with them and kept them apprised of the work the committee was doing as I knew we would need their help to get the *Food Code* adopted by the local jurisdictions.

In your professional relationships, do you keep the lines of communication open even under difficult circumstances?

Early in the process, I realized that the committee would need subject matter expertise and experience to understand the science behind the *Food Code*. Who better than FDA to consult as they had worked on the *Food*

Code for one decade? We needed to understand the “why” behind the code. I had established professional relationships with several FDA colleagues and when those individuals agreed to give us a hand, it helped the committee tremendously.

In your professional relationships, do you reach out to others to provide subject matter expertise in areas that you are less familiar with?

During the entire process, I kept my local restaurant colleagues informed of our work. When the committee finished, I asked my restaurant colleagues to review the work we would put forward as regulation in our three local jurisdictions. They said they would and came back saying there were certain aspects they did not like and therefore, they would oppose adoption of the new code. Needless to say, I was not happy—indeed, I was angry.

In your professional relationships, do you work to keep your anger to a minimum?

I knew I would have to work with my local restaurant colleagues and the local restaurant association in the future. After a few days of cooling down, I went back to them and asked specifically what they did not like about the code. They mentioned two aspects they did not like, the consumer advisory and the certified food safety manager sections. We agreed that if I pulled those two sections out, they would not oppose local adoption of the code, which resulted in adoption in the three jurisdictions. We were able to add both removed sections a few years later through educational outreach with our local restaurants.

Professional relationships are key to our success as environmental health professionals and can pay dividends over time. Similar to hockey, they must be practiced and cultivated through study and training. And like my *Food Code* story, cultivating communications, reaching out for help, and having patience are important to professional relationships. 🤝

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