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The Space in Between

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Illustrations of effective public-private partnerships may be found adjacent to the retail food safety sector. I share with you a reflective vignette which braids and blends insights from the industrial hygiene community, with a focus on occupational health and safety. The story begins in Washington D.C. at a time when I was employed as Associate Executive Director of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO).

“The action is in the space in between”. Those sentiments were shared by me as I hosted a programs staff meeting at NACCHO. My aim was to dissolve the age-old conundrum of employees working in silos. To be clear, strong vertical programs are to be admired. Our infectious disease team was superb. Our quality improvement team was spectacular. Our informatics program was bubbling with potential. Our preparedness group was routinely interviewed on the BBC. Each program had their own set of deliverables and were deeply committed to creating and delivering value. But getting them to work across departments to achieve a greater good was proving difficult.

Long before I worked at NACCHO I spent considerable time employed as an industrial hygienist. It was during that time that I became familiar with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP), a federal government program designed to promote effective worksite-based safety and health. This was no ordinary government program. It was a unique public-private partnership designed to give official recognition to the outstanding efforts of employers who have achieved exemplary progress in providing workers world class working conditions. The legislative underpinning for VPP is Section (2)(b)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, declared Congress’s intent “to assure so far as possible every working man and woman in the Nation safe and healthful working conditions and to preserve our human capital”.

The VPP process requires that participating employers regulated by OSHA undergo a voluntary inspection by a team of OSHA specialists. The company will not be cited for identified health and safety infractions that are discovered by the audit, given that they commit to correcting those deficiencies in a specified time. Once the corrections are verified, OSHA will remove the company from future regularly scheduled inspections. In summary: 1) No fines or citations are given. 2) The company is no longer subject to regular inspections. 3) Exemplary working conditions are provided to workers. Everyone wins.

The essence of program lies in the alchemy of most successful partnerships: trust, a common mission, and the sharing of power. The common mission is the creation of a healthy and safe workplace. The company trusts OSHA will not fine them for identified infractions or take other legal action. For OSHA, they share their regulatory power.

I contributed to a VPP audit at a Wisconsin paper mill some years ago. My role was a sworn special government employee – or a voluntary auditor. As opposed to regulatory inspections I had been involved in over the years, this one was different. There was no tension in the air. No hostility. No worry from either side. There was complete transparency and openness. Employees were encouraged to speak with us. This is as magical as industrial hygiene gets.

The VPP program achieves amazing results such as increased employee morale, decreased workers' compensation costs, reduced injury rates, and development of a positive attitude toward OSHA. These benefits are extended to management, employees, and OSHA. Statistical evidence for VPP's success is impressive. The average VPP worksite has a Days Away Restricted or Transferred (DART) case rate of 52% below the average for its industry. These sites typically do not start out with such low rates. Reductions in injuries and illnesses begin when the site commits to the VPP approach to safety and health management and the challenging VPP application process.

Indeed, performance improvement is possible even for the most recalcitrant challenges. The secret sauce is cooperation and collaboration in the space in between.