



## The Last Word

# You have ten minutes

**T**here is a standard concept in business that employees should always be prepared to give a short presentation on their current activity in the event of a chance encounter with a person of influence in the organization. One reference to this type of presentation is the 30-second elevator speech. When I talk to graduate students and postdocs about interviewing for industrial positions, I recommend that they have three prepared discussions of their research activity with lengths of 2, 5, and 10 minutes. If the interviewer wants more detail, the candidate can shift to a longer discussion. If the interviewer is looking for only a brief summary, the short presentation will suffice. The recommendation of having prepared discussions could apply to chemical health and safety professionals.

Recently, I participated in an ACS Program-in-a-Box Industry webinar that was designed for small chemical businesses. My presentation was focused on chemical lab safety in small businesses. The program managers suggested five topics: strong safety culture, common safety issues, understanding health and safety requirements, educating employees in safety, and OSHA help for small businesses. I was free to develop these and other relevant topics in my presentation. Then came the boundary; “you have ten minutes.”

The list of crucial topics came easily, although we might not agree on all topics. Safety information, personal protective equipment, emergency response, handling and storage of hazardous materials, hazardous waste disposal, safety as a top priority, whether the Lab Standard applies, scale up issues, sources of safety expertise, safety culture, and resources came to mind. The first draft had fifteen slides. A one-page list of references, including websites, was distributed in advance to participants; that list eliminated three slides. The text was written out in full. The first trial run was seventeen minutes. Cut back on the personal background slide. Does the audience need to know what I have done to get to this stage in life? Four long sentences on the types

of available gloves became three shorter sentences. Eliminate the discussion of appropriate circumstances when the fire alarm might be used. The second run was fifteen minutes. Remove the discussion or air-sensitive, pathogenic and radioactive materials. Drop the explanation of why I think safety culture differs in academia. The final presentation was only thirteen minutes, and the producers accepted that length. How easily could any of us summarize lab safety basics in ten minutes?

In my career, I had numerous unanticipated casual encounters with corporate or regional executives. Sometimes they would simply ask “Are we safe?” Do they want reassurance that there is no imminent danger of disaster? Or are they asking what is being done to improve our safety program? My response might be an update of current activity; international managers often want to know why someone is visiting from headquarters (especially someone from safety). If the manager has provided support for some specific project, I would extend my personal thanks and reinforce the anticipated or received benefits of that project. I usually would express appreciation for positive safety contributions from specific members of that manager’s group. I would always explain the reasons for my visit, what I was doing and why I was doing it.

How skilled are we in providing quick updates or program justifications to the top managers or administrators in our organizations? Are we ready to take advantage of chance encounters with executives, governmental officials, regulatory agents, department chairs, deans, provosts, and chancellors? Can we communicate to everyone why chemical health and safety is important? And can we do it in two or three minutes? That may be all the time we get in an elevator, before or after a business meeting, at a social gathering, or in an interview with the press. Let’s use our presentation and persuasive skills to communicate our vision and goals for chemical health and safety. Effective communication, education, and innovation on our part will help everyone be a little more careful out there.



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