



THE SOVEREIGN
report
News and Ideas for Insurance
Brokers and their Clients

Vol. 21 • No. 2

Peer-Discussion Groups for Leaders

A great poverty of our contemporary culture is that there is no rite of passage to help us find our life's work or true purpose. We move from one thing to another mostly by process of elimination. We have no concept of opening ourselves up to whatever might be our calling.

Leslie Gray

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Sarah, an entrepreneur, was frustrated. She believed her employees were not motivated, the employees believed they were underpaid, and, they passed the buck whenever there was trouble.

Fortunately, she's a member of Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO), a peer-discussion group. Through it, she found help. And, in turn, she helps other entrepreneurs. You need not be a member of EO, which has more than 600 members in Canada, to take part in a group. Nor do you need to be an entrepreneur, since any shared role can be the basis of a group. You can join an existing organization or start one of your own. If it's the latter, EO's experience offers three keys to effectiveness.

Confidentiality is the first, and allows members to speak freely. The second is personal responsibility, meaning you're expected to both contribute and act on what you've learned. The third is trickier: It's called Gestalt language protocol and means participants may not give direct advice (as in, "Do this or do that."); instead they must share relevant personal experiences.

EO members meet monthly in groups of eight. One member outlines a problem in 20 minutes or less. Other members then share what they've done in similar circumstances, or what they've learned. In keeping with the Gestalt language rule, no one tells anyone else what to do.

But, each member gets to ask clarifying questions, and in many cases, they're pivotal. Good questions force presenters to reconsider their assumptions and how they've framed their problems.

After her presentation, Sarah heard from a veteran entrepreneur, who said many employees overestimate how much he makes, and underestimate how much it costs to run the business. Another got her thinking about how often she does performance reviews, while a third prompted her to reconsider the cultural values of her company. She took the feedback she received, made changes, and successfully moved ahead. (**The ultimate problem solver**, *Profit magazine*, November 2009)

Ace Your Trade Show

A trade show will cost you plenty, so start early and make the most of it. Determine your objectives months in advance, and work toward them. What's more, you'll want to pick your shows well in advance – select a strategic few and forget the rest. What will count is the quality of your booth and your service, not the sheer quantity of shows you attend.

Preparation includes inviting prospects and training your staff. In addition, both the booth and the people in it should look their best; prospects will judge you in just a few seconds. Use design to attract those you want; you can do that with signs that offer explicit benefits. One more note: follow up afterward, with prospects who gave you their names, and in terms of tracking your results. (**How to Make the Most of Trade Shows, Inc.**, November 1, 2009)

No Cards, No Problem

Be a contrarian: Leave your business cards at home. Sales consultant and author Michael Port suggests that you develop sharing habits instead. Share your connections; every day, introduce two people in your network who don't know each other. Share your knowledge by passing along useful information. And, share your compassion – send congratulations, sympathy, even messages of friendship.

But, don't share your business card (unless you're asked). Instead, take their card, and ask permission to call or email at an agreed time. By contacting them when you said you would, you'll develop a reputation for reliability. In turn, that leads to trust, which provides a solid foundation for sales connections.

In all of these cases, you'll be living by the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you – it's as valid in your work life as in your personal life. Port says, "It's about being the kind of person and professional you appreciate having in your own life." (**Keep Your Cards to Yourself, Entrepreneur**, December 2009)

Your Gizmos & Your New You

Do you blame new technology when you get a call on your smartphone during a big family dinner or other inappropriate times? Well, it's not the new technology – it's your lack of priorities. Perhaps we can put this into perspective; when you're at a movie and a cellphone rings just two rows away, do you blame the phone or its owner?

On the positive side, new smartphones such as the Blackberry and iPhone allow us to have our cake and eat it too. We can go to the hockey game, and, be available to our best client at the same time. But, we need to set priorities when we're at the game, at a family dinner, or meeting with a client. The secret is to adapt your priorities to the different situations in which you find yourself each day; otherwise you'll feel overloaded and faced with difficult decisions every time your phone rings. And as we all know, if a phone can ring at the wrong time it will, so set your priorities in advance and we'll all be better off. (**Stop Blaming Gadgets for Your Lack of Self-discipline, California Job Journal**, November 29, 2009)



Crafting a Good Non-Compete Agreement

It's Friday afternoon and one of your key employees has just advised you she's quitting. After several years in your office, she's capable of taking much of your business with her. So, do you spend the weekend worried sick, or do you carry on as usual, knowing you're protected with a good non-compete agreement?

Whether you're a brokerage owner or a manager of any kind at any corporation, non-compete agreements provide good insurance against loss of clients or proprietary knowledge. And when crafted well, they serve the interests of both the company and the exiting employee. Here are some tips on developing good agreements, from *Agency & Broker* magazine:

- 👑 Non-compete agreements do work and do have legal validity when properly drafted.
- 👑 Start by determining whether or not an exiting employee could really hurt your business. In most cases, that means before hiring or before making promotions.
- 👑 Work with a highly competent lawyer when drafting the agreement, a lawyer who knows labour laws very well.
- 👑 Consider paying for a non-compete. For example, in the case of a sales person, you might offer 35% on renewals if there is a non-compete, and 25% if there is not. Alternatively, you might offer to let the sales person take accounts with them if they pay a certain multiple of the annual commission.
- 👑 Avoid agreements that would have the effect of taking away a former employee's ability to earn a living – that's a recipe for problems.
- 👑 Ask yourself if you might use some other vehicle for protection. For example, a non-disclosure or non-piracy agreement might protect your proprietary business information more effectively. For exiting employees, they place no restrictions on finding new employment.
- 👑 Think beyond employees; do you need the protection of a non-compete or non-disclosure with suppliers. For example, an insurance brokerage might want to ensure its leads are not forwarded to a competitor. Think about IT vendors who control your electronic data.
- 👑 Ask your lawyer about potential complications if the business is sold, or a partner is bought out.
- 👑 Can you use non-competes as a competitive advantage? On the face of it, the immediate answer may be No. But if your firm and a competitor are after the same potential hiree, a thoughtful non-compete might win the day for you.

Ultimately, it's all about protecting your assets and protecting the ongoing viability, even survival, of your organization. (**Protect your assets with non-compete agreements**, *Agent & Broker*, October 8, 2009)

Dear Friends:

Against a backdrop of a global recession, significant market volatility and deteriorating profitability in our industry, 2009 was a year of significant successes at The Sovereign.

For the year, we turned in a pre-tax profit of \$15.5M and a combined ratio of just under 101%. Our combined ratio was negatively impacted by a \$2.9M claims discounting hit that resulted from the drastic reduction in bond market yields during the year and a \$1.4M claims reserve increase required as a result of the introduction of the HST in Ontario and B.C. These two factors increased our combined ratio by 2.3 percentage points.

Our sustained profitability coupled with a prudent approach to investments has allowed us to increase our MCT score by nine percentage points to 225% and increase our shareholders equity by \$25M to \$148M. As a result, we enter 2010 in a very strong capital position.

Building on a substantial investment in the acquisition and internal development of technical specialists, a major goal for us in 2009 was to increase our market share in specialty and complex commercial markets. For the year, we grew our business by 7% with the vast majority of this growth coming from our commercial automobile, specialty lines and complex commercial portfolios. Considering the softness of the commercial market in Canada throughout 2009, we are very pleased with this result.

This growth in specialty and complex commercial lines bodes well for our future profitability as well, since these portfolios have consistently delivered underwriting profit over the long term.

Looking ahead to 2010, The Sovereign is poised for continued growth in both earnings and revenue.

Best regards,



Rob Wesseling
Chief Operating Officer

PUBLISHED BY
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The following safety information is reprinted from *Living Safety*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Summer 2009, a Canada Safety Council publication, with permission of The Canada Safety Council, of which Sovereign is a supporter.

Effects of Lead on Human Health

Lead occurs naturally in the environment and has many industrial uses. However, even small amounts of lead can be hazardous to your health.

Everyone is exposed to trace amounts of lead through air, soil, household dust, food, drinking water and various consumer products. The amount of lead in the environment increased during the industrial revolution, and again significantly in the 1920s with the introduction of leaded gasoline.

However, since the early 1970s, lead exposure in Canada has decreased substantially, mainly because leaded gasoline and lead-based paint were phased out and the use of lead solder in food cans was virtually eliminated.

Health Risks of Lead Exposure

Short-term exposure to high levels of lead can cause vomiting, diarrhea, convulsions, coma or even death. Severe cases of lead poisoning are rare in Canada.

However, ongoing exposure to even very small amounts of lead can be harmful, especially to infants and young children. Lead taken in by pregnant women can also pose a danger to the health of unborn children. You may not notice the symptoms of long-term lead exposure but they are still serious. Anaemia is common and lead can also damage the brain and nervous system. Other symptoms are:

- appetite loss
- abdominal pain

- constipation
- fatigue
- sleeplessness
- irritability
- headache.

If you are continually exposed to lead, as in an industrial setting, it can affect your kidneys.

Lead exposure is most serious for young children because their growing bodies absorb lead more easily than adults and they are more susceptible to its harmful effects. Even low-level lead exposure may harm the intellectual development, behaviour, size and hearing of infants. During pregnancy, especially in the last trimester, lead can cross the placenta and affect the unborn child. Female workers exposed to high levels of lead have more miscarriages and stillbirths.

If you are concerned about lead exposure, your doctor can conduct a simple blood test to measure your blood lead level. Your doctor will recommend corrective action if the amount is over 10 micrograms per decilitre.

Sources of Lead Exposure

Food

Traces of lead are found in almost all food. Airborne lead falls onto crops or soil and is absorbed by plants. Lead solder used in making cans can also contaminate food. However, in Canada food manufacturers have eliminated the use of lead-soldered cans. Infants can also absorb lead from their mothers' bodies through breast milk.



Air

Lead is released into air through industrial emissions, smelters and refineries. With the introduction of unleaded gasoline in Canada in 1975, lead concentrations in the air have declined significantly, falling 76 per cent between 1973 and 1985. Leaded gasoline in cars was banned in Canada in 1990. Since then levels of lead in the air of most Canadian cities have dropped below detectable limits.

Dust and Soil

Dust and soil can be significant lead exposure sources, especially for young children. Lead in soil can come from the air or from erosion of lead-bearing rocks, and may be carried indoors as dust. Lead dust can also come from within the home, especially older homes that used lead-based paints or lead solder. Lead dust is especially dangerous for babies and young children, because they tend to put things in their mouths and their breathing zone is closer to floor level where lead dust tends to collect.

Drinking Water

In most of Canada, the amount of lead in natural water supplies is very low. However, lead can enter the water supply from lead solder in plumbing, lead service connections or lead pipes in your home. Homes built before 1950 often have leaded distribution lines and service connections.

In newer homes, lead may leach from solder for several years until the pipes form a protective oxide layer. Lead is more likely to be found in soft or very acidic water and in very old or very new homes.

The National Plumbing Code of Canada does not permit the use of lead solder in new drinking water plumbing or in repairs to existing drinking water systems. Several provinces also limit the amount of lead solder in drinking water supply lines.

Lead levels in tap water increase as water stands in pipes. Drinking fountains may have higher levels of lead than water from nearby taps, because the water usually sits for a longer time. They may also have more soldered joints.

Paint

In 1976, the amount of lead that could be added to interior paints was limited by law, but exterior paints could still contain higher amounts of lead, provided they carried a warning label. Under the Surface Coating Materials Regulations, which came into effect in 2005, the lead limit was further reduced. Paint manufacturers could no longer add lead to their paint. Canadian manufacturers of interior and exterior consumer paints had already been voluntarily keeping to this limit since 1991. Some specialty coatings, such as artists' paints and metal touch-up coatings can contain higher levels of lead, but if they do, they must be labelled to warn against applying the paint to surfaces that children and pregnant women might come in contact with.

Most indoor and outdoor paints produced before 1950 contained substantial amounts of lead. If you strip or sand old paint that contains lead, you could breathe in lead particles.

Other Sources of Lead

- Inexpensive, horizontal PVC (plastic) mini-blinds made in Asia or Mexico may contain lead. Health Canada recommends that if you have children six years of age or under, you should remove these blinds from your home. They should also be removed from schools and child care centres.
- Workers in smelters, refineries and other industries may be exposed to high levels of lead. Lead dust may be breathed in. It can also cling to skin, hair, clothing and vehicles and be carried to the home, exposing workers' families. Most provincial governments require that lead exposed workers be monitored for blood lead levels.
- Lead can enter food, especially acidic food such as fruit juice, from lead-based glazes on glassware and ceramics. Canadian regulations limit the amount of lead that can leach from glazes on glass and ceramic products sold in Canada, if they are intended for use in preparing, serving or storing food. However, glazed ceramic or

glass dishes bought in other countries may contain enough lead to be a hazard to your health.

- Leaded crystal is widely used for serving beverages. When the crystal comes in contact with beverages, especially acidic beverages such as port, wine, fruit juices and soft drinks, some lead dissolves into the liquid. The amount of lead that dissolves depends on the lead content of the crystal, the type of beverage and the length of time they are in contact with each other.
- Lead fumes can be released when waste oil, coloured newsprint, battery casings or wood covered with lead paint are burned. Candles that contain lead in their wicks may also release harmful levels of lead vapour when burned. Using lead solder in a hobby, such as in making stained glass, lead shot or lead fishing weights, may expose you or your family to harmful lead vapours. The vapours may settle on nearby surfaces as lead dust.

Minimizing Your Risk

Here are some steps you can take to reduce you and your family's exposure to lead.

- Run the cold water tap first thing in the morning or any other time the system hasn't been used for a number of hours. This is especially true if you have soft water. Use only cold tap water for drinking, cooking and making baby formula, since hot water is likely to contain more lead.
- If you have an older home and suspect that it might contain lead-based paint, do not use sanders, heat guns or blowlamps to remove it. They create dust and fumes that contain lead. Use a chemical paint stripper, preferably one with a paste that can be applied with a brush. Chemical strippers

contain potentially harmful substances themselves, so use them carefully. Keep children and pregnant women away from the work area and always wear goggles, gloves and a good quality breathing mask. For more on lead-based paint, see the link in the Need More Info? Section.

- Clean your house regularly to remove dust and particles that may contain lead. This is especially important for surfaces that young children might be in contact with.
- Do not put food or beverages in lead crystal containers for any length of time. Do not serve pregnant women or children drinks in crystal glasses. Babies should never drink from lead crystal baby bottles. For more on lead crystal, see the link in the Need More Info? Section.
- If you own glazed glass or ceramic dishes you bought outside Canada, do not use them for serving food or beverages, as they may contain higher levels of lead than are allowed in Canada.
- If you have children six years of age or under, you should remove any horizontal PVC (plastic) mini-blinds made in Asia or Mexico from your home.
- If you work in a smelter, refinery or any other industry where you are exposed to high levels of lead, shower and change your clothing before going home, to minimize the amount of lead your family is exposed to. Make sure you have your blood lead level checked regularly.
- Never burn waste oil, coloured newsprint, battery casings or wood covered with lead paint in or near your home, as lead fumes may be released. Dispose of them as part of your municipality's Hazardous Waste program.



- If you use lead solder in a hobby, such as stained glass-making, use a good quality breathing mask, keep surfaces clean and keep children and pregnant women out of the area.
- If you are concerned about your exposure to lead, talk to your doctor, who can order a test to measure the amount of lead in your blood.

Government of Canada's Role

The Government of Canada continues to work to reduce the risks to Canadians of lead exposure from all sources.

In Canada, drinking water quality is a responsibility shared among various levels of government. Health Canada works closely with the provinces and territories, through the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Committee on Drinking Water, to establish the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality. Each jurisdiction is responsible for setting its own enforceable guidelines or regulations, based on the Canadian guidelines. The guidelines limit the lead content of drinking water to a maximum acceptable concentration of 0.010 milligrams per litre of water.

Health Canada is also developing a Lead Risk Reduction Strategy to control lead levels in consumer products that children are most likely to be exposed to. It proposes to regulate, under the Hazardous Products Act, the lead content of four categories of consumer products that children are likely to come into contact with, such as:

- **Group 1** – Products whose normal pattern of use requires that the product be brought to the mouth, including all toys intended for children under three years of age and all children's crayons, paints and chalks.
- **Group 2** – All children's products other than those included in Group 1.

- **Group 3** – Products intended for use in preparing, serving, or storing food or beverages, such as cutlery, tableware and cooking utensils.
- **Group 4** – Consumer products intended to be or likely to be melted or burned in enclosed spaces, such as candles and fuel for indoor lanterns.

The strategy will serve as the foundation for new lead regulations under the Hazardous Products Act.

Need More Info?

For additional information on lead go to:

Health Canada's Lead information package at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/contaminants/lead-plomb/asked_questions-questions_posees-eng.php.

Health Canada's warning about potential children's lead exposure at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/media/advisories-avis/2003/2003_82-eng.php.

Health Canada's Water Talk article Minimizing Exposure to Lead from Drinking Water Distribution Systems at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/pubs/water-eau/lead-plomb-eng.php.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), About Your House series at: www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/co/co_001.cfm.

For more information on Lead see the following It's Your Health fact sheets:\

Lead-based Paint at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/prod/paint-peinture-eng.php.

Lead Crystal at: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/prod/crystal-cristal-eng.php.