

CHRISTINE SULLIVAN Incoming 2022-23 ASSP President

Christine M. Sullivan, CSP, ARM, approaches safety leadership with a true respect for the past and understands the importance of building relationships. Throughout her 30 years of industry experience, mentorship has strongly influenced her place in the safety profession.



Christine Sullivan

Christine M. Sullivan, CSP, ARM, is senior vice president and risk control director at Somp International. An ASSP member since 1996, Sullivan has more than 30 years of safety and health experience. Her Society honors include the Charles V. Culbertson Outstanding Volunteer Service Award, the Risk Management and Insurance Practice Specialty Safety Professional of the Year Award, and the Council on Practices and Standards Safety Professional of the Year Award. She will become ASSP president on July 1, 2022.

After joining ASSP in 1996, Sullivan first became actively involved in chapter activities, and was eventually asked to join the Professional Development Conference Planning Committee for the 2002 conference in Denver, CO. This experience sparked her passion for the organization and for volunteerism, which is reflected in the various leadership roles she has held since then.

Sullivan was elected senior vice president on ASSP's Board of Directors in 2020 after concluding two terms as vice president, finance. She also has served as vice president of the Council on Professional Development, chair of the Professional Development Conference Planning Committee and member of ASSP's 100th Anniversary Task Force in 2011. In addition, she was president of our Colorado Chapter.

What drives this commitment to ASSP? "It's about giving back," she explains. "I have gotten a lot from my involvement as a volunteer with the Society. From my perspective, everything I've done in the Society has helped me in my professional role."

She credits these experiences with learning how to manage people and understand the importance of supporting young professionals in their careers. She also developed connections that helped her become senior vice president, risk control director, at Somp International, a global specialty provider of property and casualty insurance and reinsurance.

The benefits she has gained from her volunteer service drive Sullivan to continue giving back.

"I feel I owe the Society my time because people in the organization gave me their time," she says. "I believe part of my career success is attributable to ASSP—from the time I've spent involved in different committees, to learning and building relationships with different people."

And that's why she continues to find ways to mentor emerging professionals.

"From my perspective, it is important to give back and encourage young professionals, to give them that lift I got from others," she says, noting this continuous cycle of volunteerism is critical to the growth of the OSH profession.

The Gift of Mentorship

Sullivan knows that mentorship for future safety leaders takes many forms. "We need to help them when they have questions, ask to share ideas or need to talk about a situation at work," she says. "Making sure they have that network is so important."

Sullivan has always had a passion for mentorship. While completing her degree in human factors engineering at Tufts University, she had an internship in the insurance industry.

"I was looking at all the ergonomic issues on a bakery's manufacturing line," she says. "That was when I realized I truly enjoyed working with people and in the insurance industry."

While in that role, Sullivan made a lifelong connection with a mentor. "Interestingly, my current boss, Victor Sordillo, was also my boss when I was an intern," she says.

After graduating, she moved on but never abandoned the mentor-mentee relationship they had forged. "Through the years, we kept that connection

and he called me when my current role opened up," she says. "How small the world is that I could come back and work for my former boss!"

Sullivan's personal experience confirms that mentoring connections can lead to new opportunities. "Taking the time to seek out mentors and talk to and learn from people can be extremely helpful," she says.

Her work recently experienced multinational expansion, and she used her connections to learn more about the safety trends in different countries. "I was able to reach out to some contacts I've made through ASSP to learn more about the standards and other aspects we need to be aware of in the region," she says.

Her advice to emerging professionals: "Seek mentors. Seek people who have expertise."

Sullivan emphasizes that although the industry is competitive, safety professionals need to ask for help. "Many people are afraid to admit that they don't know something," she says, which can lead to negative consequences.

Developing a supportive professional network often begins with cultivating mentoring relationships.

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When Sullivan first became involved with ASSP, she had no thoughts on one day becoming its president. That was suggested by others. “I received a lot of encouragement from Fay Feeney and others in the Society,” Sullivan says. “Getting that feedback was really important.”

On Managing Risk

Sullivan finds the insurance industry rewarding because each day brings a different challenge and opportunities to learn something new.

“I may look at a manufacturing client today and a technology client tomorrow. I may deal with an issue of human trafficking for a hotel client later the next day,” she says. “Everything is different. You’re constantly challenged, constantly learning new things.”

“Our goal from an insurance perspective is to talk about the total cost of risk,” Sullivan says. “We want to reduce their loss frequency, which also impacts their severity. Then their cost of risk goes down because they’re not spending as much money on claims. That’s a big part of what we do.”

The insurance industry may sound different from the work of other OSH professionals, but Sullivan says the goals are the same.

“To me, a good day is when I don’t have a client that has somebody killed or seriously injured,” she says. “It is part of why we do what we do—so people can go home safe at the end of the day.”

Sullivan believes technology plays a significant role in managing risk. “We look at the people, property, environment—all those aspects are viewed from a risk and safety standpoint,” she says. “For example, many people think that the most common cause of damage to a building is fire. That’s not true, at least not in our world and not in our history. It’s water. Technology can help us manage that risk.”

Climate change is another concern. “Environmental, social and corporate governance criteria will play a role going forward with issues such as climate change,” Sullivan says. “That is having a huge impact on workers. We are seeing workers who were never exposed to heat stress or cold stress before who are now experiencing those issues.”

Pandemic Brings Change

The pandemic has changed every company, prompting many to reevaluate their continuity plans to prepare for large-scale disasters. These actions could lead to safer workplaces in the future.

“I think a lot of companies got a wake-up call with COVID-19,” she says. “Most have written plans in place that say what the company will do, for example, if the building shuts down, which employees will work from home, and so forth. But they never tested the plan.”

Most companies did not anticipate sending thousands of workers home, so they had not considered issues such as overloaded networks, worker capabilities and supply chain disruptions, Sullivan explains, noting the pandemic brought to light the importance of planning.



“A lot of companies are paying more attention to it now and are getting involved with testing and refining the plan and looking at what lessons they’ve learned over the past two years,” she says.

While work in settings like manufacturing plants or construction sites may not change much, Sullivan believes the hybrid workplace is here to stay. “Many workers are talking about the benefits of the hybrid workplace when having a family,” she says. “I’m here when my daughter gets off the school bus. I’m home versus her having to go to after-school care.”

Sullivan acknowledges the hybrid environment presents challenges. “As a manager of a large department, I’ve hired people in the middle of the pandemic,” she says. “It’s difficult to build relationships with people when you don’t get that time to meet and talk about their family and what’s important to them.”

Conversely, the fact that people have become accustomed to attending virtual meetings may present more opportunities for remote training or safety

Top: The Sullivan family—Christine, Hunter, Joe, Emily and Connor—during a family game night.

Bottom: Hunter, Christine, Joe and Emily enjoy a hiking adventure.



Christmas with the Sullivans: Hunter, Connor, Christine, Emily and Joe.

committee meetings. “While there will always be a purpose for in-person events and face-to-face meetings, it’s not going to be the be-all and end-all anymore,” Sullivan says.

Advice for Safety Professionals

Improving your safety industry skills hinges on communication skills. “The best safety professionals in the insurance world have the skills and the ability to talk to not only the C-suite but also people on the shop floor,” she says. “Soft skills are important—developing those skills and really understanding how to communicate your message. You need to understand the finances and understand the impact of not only the total cost of risk, but also the impacts of your programs on the success of the organization.”

During COVID-19, the term “PPE” entered the vocabulary of the public, spurring a sea change in how organizations evaluate safety. “As safety professionals, we have an opportunity to show our value to our organizations and to elevate our status in an organization,” she says. “The public knows safety matters, so it’s our time to show them how it matters in other ways.”

While communicating with executives is crucial, Sullivan knows talking to workers is equally important. “We have to know how to build relationships, because if you’re just going to go in and be a dictator and tell people ‘wear your hard hat, wear your safety glasses,’ you’re not going to get the ownership and the buy-in of the people you’re trying to work with—line-level workers, supervisors, managers and executives,” she says.

Sullivan believes a central factor is understanding what matters to each worker. “What’s important to you as a safety person may not be what’s important to them, but you can tie them together,” she says. “As a plant manager, what’s important is getting production out on time. As a safety person, if I can

show them how, if they do things this way, they will improve their production and their quality and can have greater impact.”

And, while Sullivan advocates for mentorship, she believes OSH professionals need to be responsible for their own careers and career goals.

“Set your goals. Decide where you want to be and figure out who can help you get there,” she says. For example, when considering running for senior vice president, Sullivan talked with Kathy Seabrook and Trish Ennis, two Society leaders who preceded her. “They helped me understand how things work and offered different perspectives,” she says.

When it comes to volunteering, Sullivan views getting involved as a choice. “We can make time for anything,” she says.

Board Games, Exploring & Travel

Sullivan moved to Glastonbury, CT, in July 2020 after living in Colorado for 28 years. She and her family have looked to hiking to get more familiar with the area. The hiking party often includes Joe, her husband; Lucy, their faithful Labrador; and their three children: Connor (22), a graduate student in Liverpool, U.K.; Hunter (20), a sophomore at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA; and Emily (11), a fifth grader who loves playing solitaire during breakfast. Another furry family member stays home. “My family would bring the cat, Leo, on the hikes too if they could,” she laughs.

Sullivan’s family bonds while playing board games, especially those that appeal to her kids’ wide age range. Top choice now is *The Haunted Mansion—Call of the Spirits*. “Anybody who knows me will know that Disney World is one of my favorite places in the world to go,” she says. “We go there a few times a year.”

The Sullivans are avid travelers. “When the kids were younger, we tried to get them to as many places as we could, then outside the country,” Sullivan says. She has visited every state in the U.S. except North Dakota, which she says may be a future destination. The family has also visited Europe, Mexico, Canada, the Caribbean and China, where Emily was born before being adopted.

To help Emily connect with her cultural origins, Sullivan has been working with a tutor twice a week to learn Mandarin. Emily is fluent, and together they hold conversations. “Seeing the cultural pieces has been really interesting and eye-opening,” Sullivan shares. The family plans to visit China again in the next few years.

Sullivan hopes that her journey to becoming ASSP president helps others see a possible path for themselves.

“As a working mom, a lot of people say, ‘You can’t do this,’” she says. “People seeing that you can do this, be successful and still have a family and a career—I think that is really important.” **PSJ**

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