

Twenty-five years of Responsible Care® : The Silver Anniversary of the Gold Standard in Sustainable Chemistry



By Sarah Mayes

Twenty-five years ago, Canadian chemistry companies behaved a lot differently than they do today. They set up plants in communities, built fences around them and kept tight-lipped about what went on behind the chain-link.

But by the early 1980s, company executives became concerned that they might lose their licences to operate in Canada. Pressures to regulate the industry were growing, galvanized by the 1979 derailment of a hazardous-materials train in Mississauga that caused the evacuation of Canada's fifth-largest city.

"The leaders of the chemistry industry found themselves at a difficult crossroads," says Jean Bélanger, former president of the Chemistry Industry Association of Canada (then known as the Canadian Chemical Producers' Association).

"The normal way forward would have been for the industry's CEOs to engage



Jean Bélanger – The Godfather

Jean Bélanger was President of the association (then known as the CCPA) from 1979 to 1996, and is often referred to as "The Godfather" of

Responsible Care®.

While others philosophized about the initiative and drafted its principles and

codes, Bélanger worked to translate the concept of Responsible Care into something that association members would buy into.

"Jean would often talk about Responsible Care in railway terms," says Brian Wastle, who assumed the position of Vice-President of Responsible Care while Bélanger was President.

"He'd say: 'Your job is to make sure the

train gets to the next station. My job is to make sure there are still passengers on the train.' If it weren't for Jean's care, wisdom and political savvy, I doubt Responsible Care would have had the industry support that it needed to work." Bélanger is credited with guiding Responsible Care to international acceptance; it's now practised in more than 50 countries around the world.

with regulators on a case-by-case basis. But in the end, that would have totally sapped the industry's ability to develop its economic potential.”

Fortunately for the industry, its leaders chose a different path. They zeroed in on the root of their problem: the public did not trust the chemistry industry.

“The public believed that we were more concerned about profits and secrecy than about our employees, neighbours and customers,” says Brian Wastle, who worked as a plant manager in the 1980s and is now the association's Vice-President of Responsible Care®. “Incidents happened that got away from us. The government was threatening to regulate us. So ultimately, the industry was looking for a way to move from that victim complex to becoming a master of its own destiny.”

A culture shift

Over the years, the industry had, for the most part, lived up to the expectations of existing laws and regulations; but it had also worked to prevent new ones from being created. However, by the early 1980s, it was clear that building public trust would require something above and beyond the law: *a commit-*

ment to doing the right thing. Moreover, *being seen to be doing the right thing* would be essential to building and maintaining that trust. Committing to this principle would radically change the way the chemistry industry operated – from companies that focused on regulatory compliance, to ones that were ethically oriented.

“Initially there was a lot of grumbling,” says Bélanger. “I remember one board meeting where one of our CEOs asked why we needed an environmental and safety initiative like Responsible Care in the first place. He said, ‘How much is this going to cost? Why should we take on more responsibility than we have to? We’re already meeting the law.’”

“I remember David Buzzelli – who was president of Dow at the time – piped up and said, ‘What you’ve just said is totally irrelevant. We expect you to meet the law – that’s the minimum. The real question is: *are you doing the right thing?*’ And I think that’s when it became crystal-clear in everyone’s minds what Responsible Care was about.”

By 1983, the concept of “doing the right thing” was put on paper; the association published its *Statement of Guiding Principles*, outlining how companies should manage

their safety, health and environmental obligations. After receiving full endorsement by the board of directors, all association members signed the policy statement, which became a condition of membership.

Between 1985 and 1988 the first Responsible Care codes were developed – their writing accelerated by the industrial disaster in Bhopal, India, which underlined the need for stringent guidelines on the safe and environmentally sound management of chemicals. The Community Awareness and Emergency Response code was the first to be drafted.

“Before it went to the board for final approval, we had it reviewed by a group of environmentalists and other stakeholders,” Bélanger recalls.

“The response we got was pretty interesting. They said, ‘You’ve got so many weasel words in here. This is pretty meaningless.’ So needless to say, we revised it.”

Feedback from environmentalists also informed the writing of the next five codes: Research and Development, Manufacturing, Transportation, Distribution, and Hazardous Waste Management. In total, the association spelled out 150 requirements,



Bob Boldt – The Safety Guru

Responsible Care as it's known today has at least some underpinnings in the work of Bob Boldt, former Vice-President of Dow Chemical Canada

and chair of the association's Technical Management Committee. In 1981, Boldt spearheaded his own project at Dow called *Responsible Care/Product Stewardship*, which encouraged Dow employees to, in his words, “discipline [themselves] to operate the

plants the way they were supposed to be operated.”

“Bob had an incredible passion for safety,” says Brian Wastle, Vice-President of Responsible Care, who worked at Dow Chemical with Boldt in the 1980s. “If there was an ungrounded cord on the kettle in our plant's lunch-room, that concerned Bob as much as our process safety did.”

As the idea of Responsible Care germinated within the association's membership, Boldt was tasked with being the first to pitch it to the association's board

of directors in 1981. It did not go well. “Either they didn't understand it or I didn't describe it well, but [it] was not approved...Probably because it meant a change in the way management had historically managed,” he said in an interview in 1997.

Still, Boldt's presentation served as the foundation for the more detailed set of Responsible Care codes eventually approved by the board some four years later.

controlling each step in a chemical's life cycle – “from the cradle to the grave”, as Bélanger was known to say.

The plant gates are opened

Initially, the fact that the industry's CEOs had pledged to meet the Responsible Care ethic and codes meant little to the public and the industry's critics. From the outset, those groups had chalked Responsible Care up to a public relations exercise. For that reason, the association took a critical step towards greater transparency: establishing a National Advisory Panel, composed of activists and others outside the chemistry industry, to challenge its companies to improve their performance.

In 1993, the association went a step further by introducing the Responsible Care public verification process; teams of public advocates, neighbours and industry experts ventured behind plant gates to verify that member-companies were living up to their promises. In addition, Responsible Care emissions reporting began in 1992, with companies publicly reporting their emissions of hundreds of substances. These initiatives had the effect of both enhancing Responsible Care's accountability and credibility, but also of improving member-companies' environmental and safety performance.

“The third-party review process was critical

to building trust,” says Bélanger. “Just because a company says they've met the Responsible Care codes, why should the public – or the association, for that matter – believe them? This really helped the industry match its words with its actions. If a company's performance wasn't living up to our expectations, we knew about it, and had what we needed for some effective peer pressure.”

From philosophy to hard facts

According to Bélanger, the results of member-companies implementing Responsible Care's ethic and principles weren't seen overnight. Rather, the initiative began to bear fruit over a period of 10 years.

“You have to recognize that you can't impose an ethic on people. You can impose regulations, but with an ethic, there has to be a buy-in, which takes time. So we gradually moved ahead with Responsible Care... It was an evolutionary process. It became a way of life for companies – one that's still evolving today.”

By the early 1990s, the association began collecting data that clearly illustrated that Responsible Care worked. Workplace safety records showed a dramatic improvement¹ and member-companies substantially reduced their environmental footprints (to date, overall emissions have decreased by 87 per cent²). The Canadian Responsible Care model was deemed such a success

that it was adopted by dozens of countries across the world – a global movement now overseen by the International Council of Chemical Associations.³

However, Wastle says the real evidence of Responsible Care's effectiveness was less easily quantified.

“Pride, I would say, was the number one indicator. It sounds cliché, but people would actually get tears in their eyes when they spoke about their commitment to Responsible Care... It's because they no longer had to park their ethics at the plant gate. They could be proud of the work they did, and companies began to hear that in the feedback that received from their plant communities.”

The sustainability commitment

With public attitudes about the chemistry industry slowly changing, the association's member-companies spent the better part of two decades focused on their performance: setting goals, monitoring their environmental and safety records, and making any necessary improvements. But as Responsible Care neared its 25th anniversary, pressure began mounting to update the initiative.

“The existing *Responsible Care Codes of Practice* had essentially remained unchanged for over two decades,” says Wastle. “Even though these codes were still delivering improvements to the health, safety

Jim McDonough – The Architect

As the association's project manager for Responsible Care, Jim McDonough had the difficult task of developing the original Responsible Care ethic and codes, and of securing their approval by the board and membership. His skills and background made him uniquely suited for the task; Jim had the discipline of

an engineer, industry experience from his days working for Polysar Ltd., and a philosopher-like ability to articulate a vision.

Jean Bélanger, former president of the association, describes McDonough as quiet, yet determined.

“Jim really understood what he was

talking about, and because he'd worked in a plant he had the respect of the plant workers. But he also knew when people were trying to pull the wool over his eyes – when they were saying something wasn't possible and it was. He was very determined to make Responsible Care work. He just went after it.”

and environmental performance of chemistry companies, people's expectations were growing higher. Our members began asking whether Responsible Care was equipped to address a wave of public concern around issues like health, climate change, conservation and our environmental footprint."

"I remember I was at our June 2007 board meeting where those concerns really came to a head," says Richard Paton, President and CEO of the association.

"At our dinner, several executives were saying that they didn't feel like environmental leaders any more. Then, the next morning, Larry MacDonald, who was chair of the board at the time, walked in and presented me with a hand-written piece of paper, basically outlining the direction that they wanted to take with Responsible Care. They wanted to review the principles and weave sustainability right into the fabric of Responsible Care. I just looked at it and said, 'Fantastic.'"

The three-year process of revamping Responsible Care began. First, the *Ethic & Principles for Sustainability* were developed and eventually endorsed by the associa-

tion's board of directors in February 2008. Next, three streamlined codes of practice – Operations, Stewardship and Accountabil-



Brian Wastle, Vice-President of Responsible Care, hands a copy of the new *Responsible Care Commitments* to Laurie Tugman, chairman of the Board of Directors of the Chemistry Industry Association of Canada.

ity – were drafted and given final board approval in June 2010.

"The motor that drove all of this was the company executives," says Paton. "They were the ones who recognized that Responsible Care had to evolve. They saw that what we had done in 1985 was 100 miles ahead of everyone else, but three years ago we were only holding on to that lead by five or 10 miles. The public expected us to think and act in a sustainable way, and we had to align ourselves with that."

Paton points out that Responsible Care's shift towards sustainability will mean ever-more stringent standards for member-companies to live up to.

"What I find remarkable is that everyone just thought this was the right thing to do," he says. "Responsible Care was already considered the 'gold standard' of environmental and safety initiatives, but nobody said, 'If it ain't broke don't fix it.' To me, that just proves how our members are ready to go the extra mile every day to improve the environmental, social and economic performance of their companies. In the last 25 years, they've achieved far and beyond what any level of government could have through regulation.

It's through their work and commitment that Responsible Care has maintained its vibrancy and sense of purpose over the last quarter-century. What I'm looking forward to seeing now are the innovative ways that our industry will put sustainability into practice over the next 25 years. That's going to be very exciting to witness."



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Brian Wastle – The Preacher

After working at Dow Chemical for 25 years as a process engineer, site manager and business director, Brian Wastle was named as the association's Vice-President of Responsible Care in May of 1991.

"Brian is the soul and conscience of Responsible Care," says Richard Paton, President and CEO of the association. "He's the guy that we rely on to push us and to ask us whether we're doing the right thing. "I think for Brian, Responsible Care is close to a religion, and anyone who is new to the association – whether

they're staff or new members – will be personally indoctrinated by him." Wastle oversaw the creation of Responsible Care's public verification process, the establishment of emissions reporting, and most recently, the development of the initiative's new ethic and principles for sustainability, as well as the *Responsible Care Commitments*.

¹ In 2008, member-companies reported 1.19 injuries or illnesses for every 100 employees, versus 3.2 in 1990. (*Safety and Health Analysis, Recognition and Exchange (SHARE) Network report, 2008.*)

² *Reducing Emissions 17*, Chemistry Industry Association of Canada, 2010.

³ Today, Responsible Care is practised in more than 50 countries around the world.