

Six Keys to Effective Environmental Compliance

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Environmental regulation is not new. Nor is the recent emphasis on streamlining the compliance process through regulatory reform, and other methods in the news. But the most reliable and useful “streamlining” you can do for your organization is based on the following six common sense, fundamental principles that in my experience are the Six Keys to the kingdom:

1. Plan ahead

When you treat compliance like a last-minute add-on, the result is inevitably project delays and budget overruns. Avoid these problems by integrating your compliance needs into a consistent planning framework. Even if you decide not to develop a comprehensive environmental management system, you deserve to make sure there are no surprises at the last minute.

2. Involve the right people

What skills and experience do you really need? Are they technical? Legal? Administrative? Can you do the necessary tasks in-house, or do you need consultants? Do different people need to be involved at different phases of the project? And make sure you focus on *this* project, not the last one or the next one – many industries have a lot of variety in the details – and the devil is always in the details! Do any of your people need training or coaching to enable them to do their jobs better?

3. Find out what the rules really say

This is the “key of keys:” for it is not what you *think* they say, or what you *hope* they say, or what you believe they *should* say, but exactly what they *do* say *right now* as applied specifically to your project. If you don’t know, how will you find out? “Compliance by rumor” (doing what somebody else did on some other project) is one of the biggest time and money wasters in environmental compliance, because it leads to three fatal errors: doing too much, doing the wrong thing, and doing it again and again because it’s “the way we’ve always done it.” Make sure you’ve got the rules down cold, and understand the context in which they are applied. And no, this isn’t just – or even mostly – about lawyers.

4. Invest the effort to do it right the first time

You don’t tolerate poor quality and rework in your manufacturing processes; they are known wasters of time and money (and reputation and market share). Why then do you tolerate them in this arena? How much could you save simply by holding an outcome-focused meeting at the beginning of the environmental compliance process to establish the required information needs and standards?

5. Do neither more nor less than is necessary

Focus, focus, focus. Environmental compliance is not about covering your backside with paper, or creating bullet-proof vests with thick documentation. These strategies not only don't work, they cost way too much. If you've got extra resources to invest, use them to move toward sustainability or to remedy stubborn environmental difficulties with your processes, not to overdo the paperwork. If you have used keys 1-4 above, you should be in good shape here.

6. Continuously monitor and improve your performance

Is what you are doing now working? Or are you repeating the same problems you had last time, and the time before that? Are your compliance processes integrated, smooth, and cost-effective? If not, what stops you from accomplishing this goal? How often do you review your compliance processes to make sure you are planning ahead, involving the right people, finding out what the rules really say, investing the effort to do it right the first time, and doing neither more nor less than is necessary? Where do you want to go next?

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