

Career Corner



Sammy Davis

Vice-President, Safety & Security Papa John's

Interviewed by Alysa D. Lambert, Ph.D., Professor of Human Resource Management, Indiana University Southeast

Sammy Davis is the head of safety and security for Papa John's, a well-known American pizza restaurant franchise. Headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, it is the fourth largest pizza delivery restaurant chain in the United States. Papa John's was founded in 1984 serving pizza to the locals of southern Indiana. The first Papa John's pizza was made in a broom closet in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Specializing in delivery and take-out, the pizza became very popular very quickly and Papa John's now has more than 5,000 locations in 45 countries and territories around the world. Recently, Papa John's has expanded, adding additional headquarters in Atlanta, GA and Milton Keynes, England, about 50 miles northwest of London.

Davis, who has been with Papa John's for seven-and-one-half years earned a bachelor's and master's degree in Safety from Indiana University. He is currently in the final stages of completing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Indiana Wesleyan University. Before joining Papa John's, Davis was the Global Director of Safety for CEDA International, a specialty industrial and environmental services company, for almost nine years. In his last year and a half with CEDA, he was the Interim Vice President for Safety.

Lambert: How and when did you enter the safety field?

Davis: I've been in the health and safety profession for about 33 years. This is all I have ever done. Originally, I started, straight out of high school, working for the YMCA teaching water safety courses. That morphed into what was supposed to be medical school. I won't get into the details, but life happened, and I chose to do a skydiving adventure with a competition team instead. I was young and thought traveling the globe sounded like a much better adventure. After that little ordeal was over, I started working for the City of Louisville, Kentucky as a paramedic. It was the most fun I have ever had in a job and if I could still physically do that job and make the money that I am making now, I would still be doing it. There really are no words other than "special" and "amazing" to describe the people that go into the EMS, Law Enforcement, and Fire Fighting professions.

It was during that time I received a brochure from Indiana University Southeast about their safety program. That's how I got started officially in safety. I went through that program and met Dr. Earl Blair. He mentored me through the bachelor's side and convinced me to get my master's

degree. He and I are still very close friends today. He is my sounding board when I have tough questions that need answering.

About four years ago, I decided to work toward my doctorate. I chose to attend a Ph.D. program in leadership rather than safety because I didn't want to be pigeonholed into the safety field. Right now, Safety Leadership is a huge area, so I thought why not do the leadership Ph.D. and then tie them both together. I am so glad that I did because that area of research is so open right now. It's just amazing when you go to conferences, and you talk to someone about Safety Leadership. They are blown away by the topic. It really is the new thing right now.

Lambert: Do you feel that your formal education adequately prepared you for success in the HR field?

Davis: Yes and no, and I will answer both for you. Yes, I think the academic side of it prepared me for the fundamental aspects of safety. Where I'm going to say no, and I have had this conversation with multiple folks in academia, is I don't think my formal education prepared me well for the business side of safety and what should be expected of those that end up leading safety groups and departments. I think there's a huge opportunity for safety programs to integrate business into the safety curriculum.

When I came out of the program, I realized I had a very strong compliance education, but the very first time at the director-level that I was handed a P & L [profit & loss statement], I had to struggle through that. There was no Siri to ask, "what is a P & L?" or "what is ROI [return on investment]?" Anytime a company considers adding a program or buying a piece of equipment, you must calculate an ROI. Students may come out of safety programs not knowing what an ROI report is, let alone how to go about that process.

I think that the programs prepare students well for the fundamental safety topics, but I don't think they prepare safety professionals or safety students for the business side of it. Unfortunately, coming out of the program, it's probably another 5-7 years down the road before you really need it, but I think we could do a better job preparing students for the business side.

Lambert: Your comments are likely applicable to many university programs in human resource management also. The emphasis on business goals and outcomes is very important in both fields. What consumes most of your time in your current position? What fills your day?

Davis: Normally, my time is consumed in incident investigations and trying to create strategies to reduce injuries and accidents. This is extremely important at Papa John's because we have such a wide range of employees. For example, we have employees in the restaurants with a whole different mindset versus our commercial CDL drivers, and as safety leaders, we must develop a strategy that impacts both. You're talking about two different groups of people. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to reach all those levels and still drive change to maintain the safety culture that we've been fortunate enough to establish over the past several years.

Currently, it's all about COVID. I've been fortunate and unfortunate to be the lead for all the COVID issues here at Papa John's. It's been kind of like a roller coaster that has come off the rails multiple times. I have lived COVID day in and day out. I have been on CDC calls every day. We have an office in the UK, so I'm very fortunate in the fact that I see it coming. What's happening in the UK is usually about two weeks ahead of what happens here. I can get a sort of preview of

what we might be experiencing next. The unfortunate part is that we are in a pandemic, so managing through that has consumed about every hour of my day.

One of the things that we did early on was to implement a very robust safety program around COVID, and it is extremely strict for our restaurants and supply chain operations. Just to give you the short version of it, if we have a confirmed case in a restaurant or distribution center, it shuts down. We then have a professional third party come in and sanitize the facility before it reopens.

Another part of the unfortunate piece when a restaurant closes is that they must submit what we call a Reopen Request. This goes through not only my approval but also through both our legal and operations departments. That may not sound bad but take into consideration we have stores on the West Coast -- that's a three-hour difference. We have stores in the UK with a six-hour difference, and they want to open just like everyone else does. So, it might be 11 PM here, but it's only 8 PM on the West Coast. They still want to get open. It makes for some long nights when we're trying to reopen stores.

We're confident in our process. If you consider the millions and millions of contact points that we have day-in and day-out at our 5000-plus restaurants; all the people that we have talked to; all the drivers and all the pizzas we have delivered, compared with the number of cases we have had, it is just unbelievable. Our number of COVID cases has been minimal, and I am so glad we were so strict upfront. Looking back over the last two years, I'm glad we "overreacted" at the beginning, because it is paying dividends now.

We did receive some pushback early on because of our strict stance but it doesn't do Papa John's or the franchisee any good to keep a store closed. Once they realized that we were all on the same team, and after they realized it was our goal to get them open as soon as possible, we were able to build some trust. We could say to them, "just give me the documents I need, and I'll get you open within 10 or 15 minutes." In the beginning, it was a little rough, and we had some difficult conversations, but at the end of the day, I'm glad we did what we did. This last year has been pretty smooth. It has worked well for us.

Lambert: Are there any challenges that you face as a professional that are unique to your industry? If so, what are they and how do you address them?

Davis: Yes, from a safety perspective, the driver aspect is a huge challenge. We've got delivery drivers in restaurant operations as well as commercial drivers that are a part of our supply chain. This creates a unique dynamic when developing strategies that promote safe driving within both groups.

Another challenge that I have is that Papa John's is a global operation. This offers its own challenges with time zones, language barriers, and multiculturalism. Safety leaders must be able to take into consideration the different cultures and languages and formulate ways that resonate with each group of individuals so that they understand the health and safety requirements of our organization and why they have been enacted. Providing training in their native language and utilizing interpreters during investigations allows for a better understanding of the information that we try to provide or gather. Then factor in the different governing bodies we, as global leaders, must learn to work with. Our safety leaders must be knowledgeable of regulations pertaining to different countries, states, provinces, and even local communities.

Lambert: How have the requirements of the safety field changed since you entered the profession?

Davis: Early on, the safety field was all about compliance. One of the comments you will hear within the safety community is regarding the “safety cop.” It was all about telling everyone what they're doing wrong. It was about finding fault and figuring out “how do we fix that?” Then we transitioned into more of a behavioral approach where we tried to figure out how we could modify people's behavior to make them work safer. There was also a focus on the equipment, going through a time when we focused on how to adjust the equipment to the worker. It was either an equipment malfunction or we didn't have the right equipment. Over the past few years, however, it's become more about leadership and how do we get not only the safety leaders better prepared, but how do we get the other employees on board to lead safety? I think that's kind of the transition that we've seen throughout this field since I started.

Lambert: What do you see as the most important issues or challenges facing safety today? Do you foresee any different issues or challenges going forward?

Davis: Obviously, right now it is COVID, but before COVID, one of the major issues was with the economy. It was growing, and now it's kind of tapered off again. This has an impact on safety leaders because when organizations are doing well, they are more open to safety improvements. Then, there is the other side of the coin. When the economy is struggling, organizations begin cutting back, and it is not uncommon for safety to be an area that is impacted. I am very fortunate to work for an organization that places safety on top of the priority list and shows an interest in advancing workplace safety.

Another issue we are seeing now, and will continue to see, is getting organizations to understand safety. It seems like when things are going well, everybody buys into safety. Everyone always says, “safety first.” You see that slogan everywhere. This is one of the absolute worst slogans, and I refuse to support it. Safety typically only comes first when it doesn't impact production or operations. When it does impact production or operations, it often takes a backseat. This is one of the biggest things that we fight and will fight in the future. Getting people to understand the importance of safety at all times, which brings me back to the business side of the safety field. The better prepared, from a business perspective, that we get these young professionals, I think it will be easier for them to explain their stance on safety and back it up with evidence-based data that shows the impact of safety on the bottom line.

Lambert: What competencies or KSA's do you think individuals need today to be successful in the safety area? Are there any that are more important or unique to your industry?

Davis: Obviously, there are the regulations. They are the foundation of what we do. But I was told early in my career, don't ever try to memorize the standards and regulations from OSHA, EPA, and FDA, etc. because you are going to kill yourself trying to do that. The best safety professionals are not the ones who can recite them; they are the ones who know where to go to find the information when they need it. They change periodically, so it is even potentially dangerous to rely on recall alone.

If I were king for the day and developing a college curriculum, I would include the regulations, but I would also really push the business piece and the leadership piece. I was the guy, early in my

career, in meetings who couldn't answer the financial questions because I just didn't know what they were asking. So, if you're going to be in this profession and you want to advance to or go beyond the supervisor/manager level, you really need that skill set. It's best to get that early on so that you can start to hone those skills.

Lambert: What advice would you give to those entering the safety profession for the first time?

Davis: If I could give any advice at all, it would be to learn your senses. Use your mouth a lot less. Use your eyes and ears a lot more. The best advice I can give anybody new to the safety world is to listen...be a good listener. You will pick up on so many things by listening to people and by using your eyes and watching what's going on. This relates back to leading through others that I mentioned previously. Observe how they act. Listen to how they speak. Watch what they do and learn how to use those actions to your advantage. Finally, build relationships and learn how to use those relationships to solve the issue you may be faced with as a safety leader.

Lambert: Thank you, Mr. Davis, for your time and your observations.

Editor: Thank you, Mr. Davis and Dr. Lambert, for a great interview. I'm sure our readers will benefit greatly from reading and reflecting upon Mr. Davis' career and career advice.