



Mary Armstrong:
Energized
for the environment

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The new head of Boeing Environment, Health and Safety is tapping into employee enthusiasm to help her build an effective organization and a new strategy.
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Every morning she glides along the highway in a hybrid car to her office in Kent, Wash. At home, she and her family carefully sort used food packaging and throwaway cans and bottles for recycling. They diligently turn off lights, the computer, and other appliances to lower their household environmental footprint. She and her husband just donated acreage to an elk habitat preservation foundation.

Until now, Mary Armstrong had been doing her part to keep the air, land and water clean, both as a private citizen and as a chemical engineer in manufacturing and senior executive involved in environmental compliance. She once worked on alternative energy sources at Chevron.

But suddenly, her selection as vice president of a new Boeing Environment, Health and Safety organization – designed to integrate and expand the focus of the company’s separate environmental groups and initiatives – has thrust her into one of the company’s most important and visible leadership roles. Environmental issues – brought to the fore by evidence of global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer and diminishing nonrenewable natural resources – now have the attention of the world. They also form a critical part of Boeing’s business relationship with customers and suppliers.

“It’s an honor,” said Armstrong as she prepared to tackle the most challenging assignment of her 23-year Boeing career. In her new position, she will report to John Tracy, senior vice president of Engineering, Operation & Technology, since EO&T consists of the majority of enterprise functions and technology groups that she must work with to implement an EHS strategy. Her organization’s activities will also be guided by a new Environment, Health and Safety Strategy/Policy Council. Among its members: Boeing Chairman, President and CEO Jim McNerney who said recently, “We’re in an era when attention to environmental issues has never been greater.”

The new organization will combine the existing Safety, Health and Environmental Affairs (SHEA) functions of Shared Services Group (SSG) with new functions focused on enterprise environmental strategies and objectives; defining and implementing enterprise environmental management systems and tools; and establishing standards, processes and guidelines for routinely tracking the performance of Boeing and its business partners. Her new team will have a hundred or so members integrated from existing teams, but its small size bears no relationship to the importance of her mission.

“This is something we have never done before,” she says. “It’s a compliment to have been selected for this, and I’m really excited about it.”

Supportive employees in the hundreds are excited too: They have been inundating Armstrong with congratulatory e-mails and phone calls – and ideas. Hardly surprising in light of the strong connection that Armstrong has cultivated with employees inside and outside her team. She has nurtured a loyal following through a balanced approach to getting things done that is both disciplined and personable. But even she is overwhelmed by their energy and enthusiasm.

“This is bigger than Boeing,” she says. “It’s something that affects all of us in a very personal way every day. It has captured the hearts and minds of our employees. They want to be part of a company that’s willing to step forward and say, ‘we’re a big company and we need to lead.’”

That’s particularly rewarding for Armstrong, who is almost evangelical in her insistence that people follow their dreams.

She once turned down a company-sponsored fellowship to manage a flight-test site in Glasgow, Mont. – “one of the best jobs I ever had.” She observed and learned from the daily struggle and determination of her childhood role model, her mother. A single parent, her mom raised a family while studying at night school to qualify for a successful career in accounting at the McChord U.S. Air Force base in Washington State. “My mother would work all day as a bookkeeper, come home and fix us dinner and then go to her classes four nights a week,” says Armstrong. “Then she would study on weekends. That had a lasting impression on me.”

And it’s reflected in Armstrong’s leadership style.

“She has very high expectations of those who work for her, but they are no higher than those she sets for herself,” says one employee. “She’s friendly but very clear about what’s needed. She’s able to break complex issues down into really simple, understandable terms. And you get the feeling that she’s not asking you to do anything she wouldn’t do herself. She’s on your side. That’s encouraging – and calculated to get you moving.”

These leadership attributes are going to be in serious demand as Armstrong sets about establishing an enterprise structure for her EHS team and begins working with the Executive EHS

Mary Armstrong at a glance

Current position: Vice president of Environment, Health and Safety, Boeing Engineering, Operations & Technology.

History: Process engineer for Chevron Research Company, Richmond, Calif. Joined Boeing 1984 as a process engineer for Manufacturing Research and Development. VP and general manager of the Boeing Aircraft Systems & Interiors division, VP of Boeing Facilities Services for the Puget Sound area and Wichita, Kan. VP/GM of the Commercial Airplanes Fabrication Division. Prior assignment: president of Boeing Shared Services Group.

Education: Bachelor of Science and Master’s degrees in chemical engineering from the University of Washington and University of Rochester, New York.

Organizations: Member of the Strategic Planning Council on the Board of the Puget Sound Blood Center. Board member of Island Wood, a Bainbridge Island, Wash., school inspiring environmental and community stewardship; past board member of the Point Defiance Zoo Society in Tacoma, Wash. Sponsor member of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Council to identify key environmental issues and ways Boeing will address them. “I’m inheriting a strong compliance organization, and Boeing has a really good track record with regard to its products and operations,” Armstrong says. “So for the next few months, I’ll focus on meeting the right people at Boeing in an effort to understand each other and the issues.” Armstrong also intends to meet representatives at key companies that have been identified as having done a good job in their environmental strategy and performance.

Her long-term priorities are to integrate the multiyear enterprise strategy into those of the business units, functions, R&D, the international group and suppliers.

What will success look like?

“When environmental capability and leadership are woven in to the fabric of Boeing’s management processes,” says Armstrong. Already, she has the backing of employees across the enterprise. “They are all essentially environmental experts in their own right,” she says. “They have a sense of ownership and a real stake in what we are doing.

“The creation of this organization was a bold and much-needed step for Boeing,” she says. “There couldn’t be a better time to be doing this.” ■