



How workplace dynamics can help create safer workplaces

By **Susan Kadar**, Director, Lloyd-Jones Meakin Group

- *Rules and regulations are important but they won't keep people safe*
- *People deprived of having a say how to make their tasks safe are less likely to be motivated to work safely than people who feel in control of their work*
- *Dr E Scott Geller's approach uses the human dynamics of organisations to change safety culture in a way that also improves job satisfaction, work quality and production*

Occupational health and safety (OH&S) is on the agenda in most boardrooms and executive suites across Australia. Although the number of workplace deaths has been steadily declining for the past decade, we are less and less prepared to tolerate that people suffer serious injuries or lose their lives through their work.

The states have put in place legislation to place companies under pressure to provide a safe workplace. Directors and senior executives are held accountable for workplace deaths and injuries. The number of successful prosecutions across the nation is climbing and lack of direct involvement in an activity seldom protects directors and company executives from penalties.

As the legislative environment becomes harsher, companies are bolstering their OH&S strategies. Good employers are continuing to do their utmost to provide their employees with a safe workplace because they feel morally

responsible for their wellbeing. They also understand the business benefits of running a safe workplace. No injuries means no excessive spending on backfilling and retraining, lower insurance premiums and higher productivity. Not so conscientious employers are improving workplace safety to avoid tangling with the law and to gain business benefits.

If workplace safety improves and fewer workers come to harm through their jobs, it's a good thing and the motives of individual managers are not that important. What is important though is that workplace changes introduced to eliminate, or at least reduce, workplace injuries result in genuine, sustainable improvements.

The most common reaction to the tightening legislative environment has been for companies to tighten their internal controls. Employers are working hard to be able to prove to regulators, and if necessary, to courts, that they have safety systems in place: employees and contractors are inducted, procedures are documented and readily available for employees, training courses have been held and attended, regular audits held, and so on. All this is good stuff and looks impressive when the WorkCover inspector visits but it won't always lead to improved workplace safety.

Enforcing regulations needs armies of supervisors

The problem is that rules and regulations only work if there are enough supervisors to enforce them all the time. Such supervision usually goes hand-in-hand with a punitive ethos that ensures that workers behave safely: when they are watched.

The economic landscape has changed significantly in the last decade and layers of middle management have been removed from companies across all industry sectors. It is not realistic to expect organisations to have teams of

supervisors enforcing safety regulations full-time. That scenario does not make business sense. It wouldn't make sense, even if companies could afford it. Supervisors overseeing every work process and micromanaging every activity would be a throwback to a paternalistic and autocratic management style where people had no choice about the way they work and took no ownership for their actions. 'I just do what I'm told, don't hold me responsible,' would be the catchcry of such a culture.

Research points to the human dynamics

The alternative to a heavily regulated and supervised environment is to create a culture where people take responsibility for their own safety without supervisors dictating their every move.

One of the world's leading authorities on reducing workplace injuries, Dr E. Scott Geller, says people can be motivated to take responsibility for their own safety and the safety of those around them if they are empowered. Dr Geller defines being empowered as feeling in control, knowing we can make a difference and believing that it is worthwhile to behave safely.

Research into workplace safety has shown conclusively that systems, rules and regulations are important but they won't keep people safe. Legislation may hold employers accountable for safety but without a shift in the way safety is still managed in many organisations across Australia, it will not result in improvements. Only people will: managers and employees working towards a common goal of eliminating workplace injuries.

Based in Virginia, USA, Dr Geller has spent decades researching the human dynamics of safety. He says that every successful safety approach takes into account the human element. Dr Geller has pioneered the use of behavioural science in the resolution of safety related problems. He says that paying attention to the human dynamics of an organisation enriches the workplace culture, improving job satisfaction, work quality and production and safety. People deprived of having a say how to make their tasks safe are less likely to be motivated to work safely than people who feel in control of their activities.

Safety as a business driver

Great companies have optimised production to deliver the highest return on investment to shareholders and they have a culture that does not tolerate waste, loss or injury. Their culture is shared and supported by every member of the organisation from senior executives to the newest apprentice. These companies often select safety as their key driver. They integrate safety into their

managing and business processes.

Integrating safety is easier said than done. It means genuine commitment from senior leadership to demonstrate the importance of safety through their actions that goes well beyond making statements at a staff meeting. These organisations genuinely care for their workers, and managers and employees regularly engage with each other to focus on, and resolve, safety problems. Does this sound like workplace dreaming? It is not. Several leading Australian organisations have achieved significant reduction in workplace injuries with a corresponding bottom line benefits by focusing on the human dynamics.

Case study

Just over two years ago a leading Australian mining company identified that its safety performance was slipping backwards. Working with a team of experts they spent some time analysing the reasons behind their unsatisfactory safety performance and developing a strategy to turn it around. They decided that their focus had to include safety leadership and engaging the workforce in safety, in addition to implementing a rigorous safety management system.

The main thrust of the new strategy was the establishment of ownership for safety among the company's leadership and line management. About 300 senior and middle managers (the whole leadership of the company) took part in a comprehensive safety leadership development program. Then they introduced processes and tools to engage the whole workforce and focus attention on values, attitudes and behaviours.

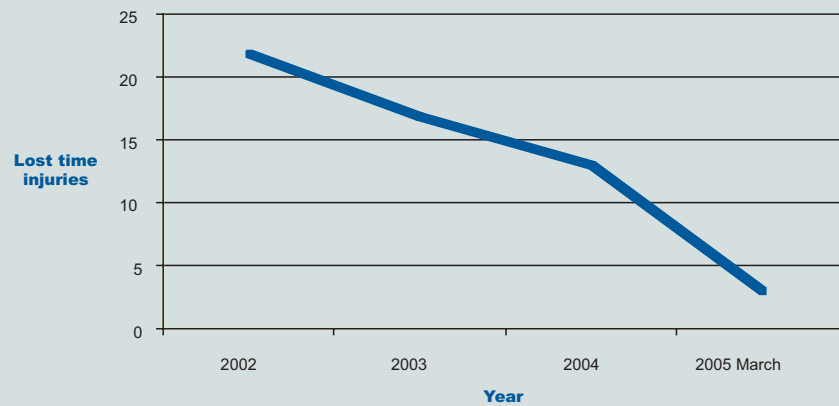
The mine is at a remote location in the north of Western Australia. The majority of workers are tough and 'macho'. Getting them to accept a 'soft' approach based on people caring for each other was not easy and it still needs some work. But the results speak for themselves. Figure 1 shows the decline in the number of lost time injuries.

People-based safety programs

Dr Geller recently toured Australia to talk about his latest research, People-Based Safety™. In a nutshell, it is about using the human dynamics of organisations to change safety culture in a way that also improves job satisfaction, work quality and production.

Organisations wanting to achieve consistently injury-free workplaces have to adopt a less conventional, more people-focused approach to safety. They need to create a culture that fosters ownership for safety so that safety self-

Figure 1



management can take over from decreasing top-down control.

Involving frontline employees

All this involves managing safety proactively and positively. Traditionally, companies have been putting in more time to investigate and follow up things that go wrong than into initiatives to prevent incidents occurring in the first place. Although everyone in an organisation bears responsibility for safety, it is frontline employees who are most frequently required to carry out hazardous tasks. They know more about the hazards and the best ways of controlling them than anyone else. After all, they are the people who work with a machine, on a construction site, or in an underground pit at a mine site every day. Yet, in many organisations they are left out of planning for and managing safety.

Superficial consultation is not enough

Legislation in all states requires consultation with workers about OH&S issues that impact on them. However, in many workplaces, consultative bodies such as the OH&S committee are ineffective and do not provide a forum for genuine engagement of the workforce. They do not empower workers in a way that Dr Geller describes empowerment.

Best practice companies have understood for a long time that good and sustainable safety performance can only be achieved through involving every member of the organisation.

The Chairman of Caltex, Dick Warburton AO, is well-known in the business community as a strong advocate of workplace safety. Mr Warburton says he welcomes any initiative that will reduce the workplace carnage. But he says draconian laws are not the ultimate solution. They may focus management attention on safety for a while, but sustainable results come from ongoing leadership commitment and management and employees sharing responsibility for safety.

A good example is Caltex itself. The company made a commitment to create an incident-free operation, in other words, an operation that does not result in injuries, loss or harm to the environment. With dedicated leadership and ongoing engagement of the workforce, Caltex has been steadily reducing its injury frequency rate,¹ lowering it by almost 30% in recent years.

Focus on a robust safety culture

Much has been written about the significant legal implications of the NSW Workplace Death Bill and similar legislation passed in other states. There is concern shared by various employer organisations that these Bills target directors and employers rather than fostering genuine improvements in workplace safety culture.

The national objective has to be the reduction of workplace deaths and injuries. No-one argues against legislation that promotes that aim and requires companies to put in place measures improving employee safety. It would be a tragic and costly mistake if directors and executives, out of fear of punitive measures, were to put their energy into bolstering up their defences rather than focusing on building a robust safety culture.

Turning around your workplace's safety culture

Achieving great and sustainable safety performance is a journey. It starts with leadership's commitment to establish safety as a value: a *value*, not a priority. Priorities change, but an organisation that is committed to safety as a value will integrate safety into all its business and managing processes.

The value for safety is shared by everyone, from the CEO to operational employees. It is the norm, not the exception, that senior managers discuss the safety aspects of tasks and that employees willingly contribute. If something goes wrong, there is no need to sweep it under the carpet. No-one is going to be blamed for slowing

down production, the incident will be analysed to understand what system and human factors contributed to the failure and how to prevent it happening again.

Understanding the work process does not start on the factory floor. It starts with designing the actual buildings for safe work practices, not retrofitting the safety requirements. It also means that the sales force does not enter into contracts that require operations to shortcut procedures to move the order out on time. Employees are truly equipped to carry out their tasks safely, they are trained, and they take ownership for their safety at all times.

Most organisations start the journey by putting a stake in the ground; taking a really good look at their safety to understand what are the issues and develop a strategy to address to them and achieve their goals. They then make sure that the whole leadership team is aligned to the commitment to safety and is prepared to drive it consistently and persistently. The next step is to involve the rest of the organisation and communicate the safety vision, making sure that the message is not just broadcast, it is heard, understood and accepted.

Now is the time to start the 'real' work to

consider how best to implement the strategy. This may involve getting employees actively involved from the start, strengthening the safety management system, building up safety leadership skills in senior and middle management, training employees, making sure the OH&S committees are effective and make a meaningful contribution, and factoring the traits and behaviours of people into the management process.

Many organisations have implemented Dr Geller's People-Based approach to safety. Most have succeeded and their investment has paid off. However, no two companies are the same and no two companies can travel the same journey or use the same tools to achieve results. But every company can figure out what its own journey should look like, adapt the tools available to the organisation and reach its goal.

Good luck and drive carefully!

The Lloyd-Jones Meakin Group is a strategic safety consultancy working in partnership with Dr Geller.

Notes

- 1 All medical treatment and lost time injuries per million hours worked. ●