

# SAFETY CULTURE'S RED FLAG

Being able to read the safety warning signs seems to be an art many New Zealand workplaces lack, says Hamish Brown. He outlines ten actions that businesses can take to improve their health and safety culture, and ensure their employees aren't looking for a better, more caring employer.

## A SERIOUS WORKPLACE

accident or death doesn't come without warning, but being able to read the warning signs seems to be an art many New Zealand workplaces lack, or choose to ignore.

This is made evident by the fact that after an incident, investigations show, in case after case, that: "There were a number of practical steps that were open to the company which would have prevented the incident".

Indeed companies are still being fined in the courts for their lapses, which does little to enhance their skills to see the warning signs.

And now that 10 forestry workers have been killed in the last year, we suddenly discover that 150 forest-based workplaces visited by Worksafe were not complying with safety regulations, and 15 have been shut down because of serious imminent danger to workers.

## UNDONE BY WEAK SAFETY CULTURE

It is well proven that even compliance with all the right processes, safety equipment, and safety audits, can be quickly undone by an ineffective and weak safety culture.

Recognising early warning signs that a safety culture is compromised, may mean the difference between taking proactive corrective action, or having to suddenly react to an incident where someone is seriously harmed, and the focus is once again diverted to repercussions, and blame.

So what are some actions

you can take to improve your business's health and safety culture? Here are just ten ideas:

### 1. Health and safety culture starts with leadership.

Ask your most senior manager to make sure that any employee or contractor understands that when they step onto your site they:

- Are told that they are stepping onto the safest worksite in the industry. (Why would you invite them to step onto the second, third, or tenth safest site?);
- Are told why it is the safest site;
- Are told what is expected of them;
- Are told the key safety beliefs of the company;
- Are told the company is only interested in working with the best;
- Are told that if they cannot support the company's health and safety practices and culture, they should leave.

**2. During recruitment, screen front-line supervisors carefully.** They are the ones who will support, mentor, and help employees live your safety culture, or not.

**3. Measure your health and safety culture.** Even our preliminary, and simple, Safety Culture Litmus Test will signal if the safety culture is a risk factor. No accountant would ever guess the financial status of a business, nor should anyone try to guess something as important as safety culture.

**4. Identify and remedy hazards**—all of them. Your entire workforce should be identifying,

resolving and communicating about hazards. Being pro-active makes for a safer environment, and builds employee engagement.

**5. Recognise and reinforce** behaviour consistent with the desired culture. For example, ensure everyone is comfortable stopping at-risk behaviour—no matter where it occurs.

**6. Be tough on problems, not on people.** Avoid the rush to blame—it is usually systems and practices that inadvertently encourage risky behaviours.

**7. Build a 'just and learning culture'.** Learning from mistakes helps employees become more proactive, removes fear of unfair discipline, and helps build teamwork, productivity and trust.

**8. Make health and safety a strategic business advantage.** Effective health and safety is strongly indicative of an effectively managed business.

The best customers, best employees, and best business investors are actively interested in the quality of leadership and management.

**9. Encourage employees to speak-up,** to question things that don't work for them, to speak openly about things that need to change, and explore ways to resolve problems alongside management.

**10. Ensure health and safety is considered** within every strategic and operational decision.

## FAR FROM BEING 'WARM, FUZZY STUFF'

If an effective safety culture is a core value, then it has to hold hands with the core value of

caring for those you work with. Unfortunately, these sorts of values are often regarded by some managers as "the warm, fuzzy stuff". In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Working with people, influencing them to engage and change is the toughest, most courageous work any manager has to undertake. Dismissing that as warm and fuzzy is simply a cop out.

There is plenty of evidence that businesses that genuinely care for their employee's wellbeing enjoy high levels of employee satisfaction and consequently customer satisfaction.

This shows up as better productivity and profitability. An effective safety culture is not only the catalyst for improved safety, but also for improved efficiency, quality, service and delighted customers.

Your safety culture serves as a red flag not only for the safety of your most important asset, but also to forewarn whether half your employees are, in effect, sitting in the departure lounge waiting for a better, more caring employer.

The art of seeing the warning signs starts with measurement, so then potential risk can be managed and resolved. It does not start with crisis and then the question "What do we do now?"

