

IS SAFETY CULTURE A FANTASY?

Dealing with the symptoms will not transform culture. You need to deal with the cause to truly change attitudes and behaviours and move safety culture from the realms of fantasy, says Hamish Brown.

SAFETY 'CULTURE' IS BECOMING the new buzz word. Type 'safety culture' into your web browser and, at last count, Google will reward you with 695 million results. Peter Drucker said 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast' in the late 1990s, and since then culture has become mainstream. No wonder most people now understand that a bad safety culture will more than likely result in employees harming themselves or others.

There's plenty of evidence to support the idea that culture, and its attendant human factors, combine with hazards in the environment to precipitate accidents. Now with the increased reliability of modern workplaces, human performance is becoming a key focus for accident prevention.

More and more there is talk about safety culture in the same breath as there is talk about the inclination of employees to comply with rules or act safely. The inclination to comply is rightly linked to attitudes and behaviours, but they do not define culture.

As the talk about safety culture increases, more and more 'experts' sign up to conventional wisdom that identifies safety culture as "the way things are done around here", or being able to "quantify the attitudes and behaviours of the workforce towards safety". The implication is that if we measure worker attitudes towards safety then we'll know what the culture is, and therefore be able to change those attitudes and behaviours.

Fantasy is the activity of im-

agining impossible or improbable things, and no matter how much we want to believe them to be true, it is still fantasy. The belief that knowing employee attitudes and behaviours relating to health and safety (how we do things around here) will reduce New Zealand's chronic health and safety statistics is flawed.

It will not be until there is understanding about why employees have certain beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions that we'll start to transform safety outcomes. MBIE's new research initiative to "provide a benchmark of attitudes and behaviours relating to health and safety in the New Zealand workplace across the four priority sectors", will need to get to the root cause of why those attitudes and behaviours exist before it has any hope of benefiting New Zealand's employees.

Knowing, for example, that employees are reluctant to report a near-miss, or prone to cover up an incident, does identify an attitude and behaviour, but it is symptomatic of deeper issues. It is fantasy to think that treating the symptom will make the cause go away. Surely the first priority when thinking about safety culture is to measure and understand the causal effects.

Our experience shows that most employee attitudes and behaviours about safety are determined by how management approaches it. This is backed up by research which says 80 percent of an organisation's culture is determined by senior management. We frequently hear that "the

Symptom	Cause (examples)
Poor health and safety capability at a strategic level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> H&S regarded by leadership as a compliance issue (similar to GST, or PAYE) so responsibility driven down to less influential employees
Employees reluctant to submit incident reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No acknowledgement or feedback provided Fear of being responsible for wrecking incident metrics, and negative reactions from peer group Reporting requirements deemed onerous and petty Fear of punitive action Literacy issues and complicated forms Perceptions nothing will change
Minimal employee participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees disengaged because they feel they lack ability to make a difference Managers fear loss of control if employees are equal participants Employees feel their participation is based on tokenism

health and safety of employees is the most important aspect of a business", and where this is true we see great results, but mostly it is lip service.

We know that if an enterprise's leadership culture was such that they really owned and demonstrated that safety was a strategic priority, then their considerable skills would make zero harm a reality in short order. The reason any passenger who randomly flew on a US domestic jet every day would go approximately 19,000 years before dying in a fatal accident, is mostly about airline executives understanding that the safety of their passengers is a business issue. Once we get to that point about workplace safety in New Zealand, we'll start to make some rapid progress.

To move safety culture from the realms of fantasy, and for it to provide a catalyst for improvement, will take the courage to uncover cause rather than identify

symptoms (as shown above).

Taking action to address symptoms is a low level activity which may improve 'culture' at a superficial level. For example 'Minimal employee participation' could be considered to have been improved by increased numbers of employees participating, or by ostensibly protecting workers who raise issues, which simply tinkers at the edges. But the cause—a manager who fears loss of control—will always find ways to keep control and minimise an employee's input. The result perpetuates 'us and them' attitudes and *c'est la vie* behaviours. Remedy the cause and suddenly attitudes and behaviours will change.

Dealing with the cause is the true and courageous work of culture transformation. Without it, fantasyland will prevail. **et**

