

Safety culture's warning signals

Nobody wants a serious workplace accident or death, but the inability of many New Zealand workplaces to read the warning signs should be a wake-up call that is not to be ignored.

Many workplaces simply keep on doing the same things over and over again until the crisis of a serious harm injury or death seems to take them by surprise.

Investigations continue to demonstrate that, "There were a number of practical steps which would have prevented the incident".

Even now, it has taken the death of 10 forestry workers to suddenly discover that 150 forestry based workplaces were not complying with safety regulations. Fifteen have been shut down because of serious imminent danger to workers.

Recognising the early warning signs that a safety culture is compromised may mean the difference between life, debilitating injury or death.

It is well-proven that even when there is compliance with all the right processes, safety equipment, and safety audits, these can be undone in an instant by a disengaged employee or contractor. The results could be catastrophic for your business, your clients and your investors.

Here are a few simple things you can do to improve your business's health and safety culture:

- make sure the people you appoint as supervisors understand the importance of safety culture – they need to be trained to support, mentor, and help employees understand and live your safety culture
- measure your health and safety culture with our preliminary Safety Culture Litmus Test that

will signal if your safety culture is a risk factor - your accountant would never guess the financial status of your business, so no one should attempt to guess something as important as safety culture.

- check to see if employees feel comfortable raising safety issues with their supervisor/manager.
 - find out if employees from one trade feel comfortable approaching someone from another trade if they see them in an unsafe situation
 - can employees refuse unsafe work and do they feel they can exercise that right?
- The safest workplaces are ones where management trusts employees enough to refuse unsafe work - when so entrusted, this trust is rarely abused
- are employees encouraged to report incidents and close calls?
 - does the company have an incentive programme that discourages incident reporting?
 - are reports of unsafe conditions addressed promptly?

There are compelling reasons for establishing an effective safety culture other than saving lives and reducing injuries.

Improved business reputation and quality assurance, increased employee engagement, and reduced operational costs are just some of them.

Safety culture is a powerful leadership tool for improving productivity and financial performance. It is inexpensive to maintain, and ensures everyone is mindful about risk and takes responsibility for keeping themselves and others safe.

We have over 10,000 survey results from managers and employees who continually reinforce research which says 80% of an organisation's safety culture is determined by senior and supervisory leaders. We've seen serious harm injuries go from 18 per year to zero within twelve months once management 'get' the importance of an effective safety culture.

Once management makes the mind shift from safety being a compliance issue to a business strategy that delivers competitive advan-

tage, their considerable skills can be focused on targeting zero harm. 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.

Today the health and safety of employees is unquestionably a business issue:

- employees expect to go home safe
- clients do not want to be tainted by their suppliers' poor safety records
- banks and investors are recognising that there is a link between well-managed safety and a well managed business.

The collapse of Pike River's business and the shutdown of others because of poor safety culture should send clear signals.

Knowing about your safety culture can provide invaluable warnings – you'll know about the safety of your most important assets, and you'll also be forewarned about whether your employees are, in effect, sitting in the departure lounge waiting for a better, more caring employer.

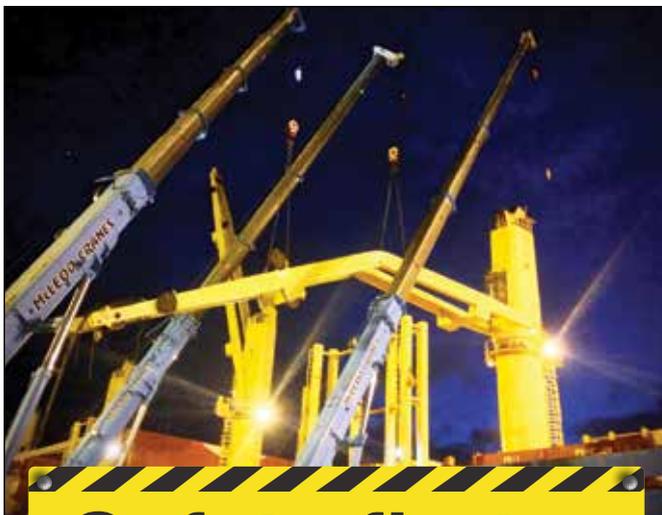
The ability to see the warning signals starts with measurement – until that happens it is likely you won't know what you don't know.



Hamish Brown is managing director of Concordia NZ, workplace and safety culture specialists that help organisations understand their own strengths and weaknesses to make informed strategic choices through effective measurement and understanding of their own culture.

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