

COMMUNICATING SAFETY: Simple ways to avoid workplace health and safety accidents

by Andrew See [Andrew See is a Brisbane barrister who specialises in workplace health and safety and industrial relations. In the 1990's he was Manager Policy of Queensland's Division of Workplace Health and Safety.]

Introduction

My father once told me that “consultants (and probably lawyers too) are just people who borrow your watch to tell you the time.”

Sometimes that is probably true. On other occasions however an outsider can provide a perspective that is important. The reason for this is that we can become so engrossed in our own daily operations, our work methods, systems and reporting protocols, that on occasions we simply don't know what the time is. We become so use to looking up and guessing the time, or relying on other people's watches that we either don't bother looking at our own watch, or check to see if it is in full working order.

And herein lies a new problem facing managers and safety professionals alike.

Like a poorly tuned time piece, so too are people slowly tuning out of safety. Not that they think it is not important, they do. But there is emerging evidence to suggest that workers have stopped looking at

their watches, or if they are, then they may not always be looking at them when they should.

Supervisors too are guilty of not asking workers the time. Not that they may necessarily need to know what time it is, but that they need to be confident that all workers have watches in good working order and depending on where the worker is located, designed for the use in which it was intended.

I want to consider this issue of telling the time, from a communication and safety perspective and in particular having regard to various behaviours that I have observed in relation to supervisors and safety professionals.

In the case of supervisors, they like most categories of workers come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Some are old hands, some new young guns. Some supervisors have been drilled in international safety practices imported into Australian work places, whereas others have been shaped by state based safety laws that have come of their own over the past decade.

Safety professionals as a group appear not that much different. It would be fair to say in the case of mining and non-mining activities, that these folk have transformed the landscape of workplace health and safety in this country. And it is clear that companies, government and industry groups have invested large amounts of resources in

order to safeguard against the knowledge gap that may have once existed in this highly technical area.

Yet in both cases and despite the seemingly pivotal role of the supervisor and the safety professional, poor communication processes seem to often mar the effectiveness of health and safety management systems. Why I believe this issue is relevant and important, is because it would seem that the issue of communications at work, is under-reported when one peruses the available data on the causal factors of workplace accidents.

This article seeks to highlight some of those communication issues that occur to me as warranting closer examination by those responsible for safety performance.

Know your supervisor's strengths and weaknesses

There are three types of supervisory behaviour that I have observed over the last couple of years that warrant special mention. These are:-

- The 'old dog'
- The supervisor who cant be told
- The supervisor who lacks assertiveness and is reluctant to make waves and speak out

Let's examine these individual behaviours in turn.

Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks

How often have we heard the expression, that “you can't teach an old dog new tricks”.

Yes, there are examples where radical transformations can take place. Consider for example the case of the military boot camps, where delinquent or undisciplined young adults are sent to training school only to be transformed into well drilled and high performing defence personnel. Or there are the swag of new reality television shows that chronicle the diet and exercise habits of severely overweight men and women in a bid to determine who will be the “biggest loser”. But in the context of daily workplace health and safety, is there a possibility that the adage more than often rings true?

Put simply, how much attention is genuinely given by companies to ensure that in a regular and ongoing way, that the ‘old dogs’ are on board and stay on board?

In my view, this first category of case is a real risk to the workplace. It is not because this supervisory type reflects a person bereft of skills – far from it. What the problem is here, is that the seasoned supervisor, may without adequate reinforcement, monitoring and an appropriate degree of corrective action, fall back into the habits of old ways, some of which may over time be highly inconsistent with the preferred behaviour or culture expected of the workplace.

The 'old dog' supervisor is more likely to have acquired or learned behaviours at the workplace that are the result of conditioning over time and where more than an occasional power point presentation by a company safety officer is needed to modify such behaviour. In this case the risk to the employer is not that the supervisor doesn't have the knowledge and competencies to undertake the role effectively, but that he or she may also have other traits and acquired behaviours that are hard to shake.

Particular risk areas here relate to compliance of protocols and policies.

The Supervisor who can't be told

The second type of supervisor that one needs to safeguard against, is the supervisor who can't be told. These are persons who have an air of confidence or brashness about them that exudes full knowledge of all things.

These are persons that sometimes others do not approach on workplace issues, because either:-

- they constantly giving you the impression that they have nothing to learn, they are experts in the field and that you really don't need to bother with; or
- that it is all too difficult or time consuming in dealing with them.

Beware of this type of supervisor.

My primary concern in relation to this supervisory type is that this person can often cause blockages in the communication channels, either because people assume that this supervisor is confident or competent and does not need to be told something or checked up on, or because on occasions fellow employees make value judgements as to whether or not it is worthwhile to interact with these persons on issues that may whether rightly or wrongly, seem discretionary or not viewed as 'safety critical'.

The real danger here lies in this second case scenario, where fellow workers begin exercising discretions and making value judgements as to whether or not the communication should flow to or from the supervisor. This is but one example of the hidden face of safety communication and an area in my view, where companies are reluctant to identify as posing any real problem to their own safety system.

The Unassertive Supervisor

For the purposes of this article, the final supervisor that in my view poses a safety problem at work is the one that lacks assertiveness.

These supervisors are true dangers to the workplace. They lack the communication skills to assert themselves in tough situations and are inclined to compromise where otherwise decisive action may be required.

A person exercising unfamiliar responsibilities in the role as a newly appointed supervisor would be one such example, as would be the case of a supervisor who feels (whether openly or otherwise) confronted by workers of the group that he or she is required to supervise and prefers less rather than more conflict in the giving of directions that may on occasion include the issuing of safety instructions or the reinforcement of safety protocols.

Such a supervisor may in turn need the support of his or her own manager in order to reinforce or provide additional back up in issues of people management. Unfortunately invariably supervisors are reluctant to seek this assistance, as it may be viewed as a lack of capacity to otherwise perform their role at work. The consequences of all of this, is that you can have communication gaps at work arising from this behaviour. This may not necessarily be shown in the context of the issuing of edicts and instructions, but it could be a valuable and missing part of the safety management system, where informal feedback mechanisms could contribute to improved safety management.

Health and Safety Professional

While many of these attributes can equally apply to the health and safety professional, there are additional areas that have been identified in the case of safety personnel that may warrant an occasional closer examination.

These relate to:

- Role clarification
- Capacity to influence the agenda ; and
- Staying in the loop

Let us consider each of these issues in turn.

Role clarification with non-safety professionals

The allocation of responsibilities is a critical component of any risk management system. Not necessarily insofar as how the various work roles are described, but more how they interrelate with each other, not just on paper but in practice.

Safety Officers more often than not sit outside of the operational reporting stream. That is, while they may have clearly defined roles, in relation to daily practices, on occasions they are not consulted when planned or unscheduled changes take place. For some organisations, where the safety personnel may move in and out of various workplaces either on rotation or as a consequence of job vacancies, many protocols and unwritten practices may not necessarily make their way to the new incumbent.

Lines of communication (both formal and informal) with safety personnel and operational staff at all levels, need to be clear and reinforced in an ongoing way.

Capacity to Influence

The health and safety professional also needs some capacity to influence the agenda.

There is no point providing ancillary support to operational staff in the case where the safety professional has no capacity to influence what is taking place organisationally.

Relevant issues here may be the taking of short cuts that may otherwise not be sanctioned by safety practitioners, the legitimacy to maintain a close supervision of the veracity of the health and safety activities on site and the ability to negotiate with other senior mine staff regarding policies and procedures that may on occasion appear time consuming or unnecessary.

Stay in the Loop

Finally, the health and safety professional must stay in the decision making loop. Invariably decisions relating to staffing and changes in daily work arrangements may have a bearing on indirect health and safety outcomes.

Some of the issues that emerge in this later case may be less obvious, but nonetheless warranting of intervention or assessment from a workplace health and safety perspective. While in many respects this is also linked to the clarification of the roles and the capacity to influence, it exists also as much as a process of workplace communication. High risk workplaces must reassess whether the role of a safety professional as a point of reference in the decision making process, is a legitimate one.

Conclusions

At the heart of workplace health and safety lies communication. No human behaviour, intervention or activity can occur without it.

At least in the case of Queensland statistics¹, both in the context of organisational and individual causal factors, there is evidence that over the past several years, that communication as a casual factor of workplace injuries, is on the increase.

So too are the number of medical treatments, number of high potential injuries and number of disabling injuries. The alarm bells should now be ringing, but only through synchronised time pieces. Sometimes it may be worthwhile to let someone else borrow your watch.

¹ Queensland mines and quarries safety performance and health report 2005-06