

Triple award winner

PETER BATEMAN talks to Fran O'Keefe of O-I New Zealand, who won a personal award and was involved in initiatives that picked up two other awards.

Health and safety is built on trust, says Fran O'Keefe, winner of the Safeguard Health and Safety Practitioner of the Year award at this year's New Zealand Workplace Health and Safety Awards.

"It's rewarding seeing them come to me with a safety problem they have correctly dealt with."

Health, safety and training manager with Penrose-based glass container manufacturer *O-I New Zealand*, O'Keefe is self-effacing by nature, and is reluctant to be seen giving advice to people starting out in health and safety. Nonetheless, her 18 years in the business has taught her that the best approach is softly-softly: observe how things

work, and build the trust of staff at all levels.

"Find out who are the key players, the people with mana, and get them working with you for their own people. Otherwise you can spend a long time doing something and then discover you've been dealing with the negative people and they're not going to implement it."

The theme of trust runs through many of the initiatives she has been involved in since she started with the company in the early 1990s, and is pivotal to a shift in responsibility implemented over the last year. In that period she has coached managers and supervisors to assume responsibility for conducting safety audits, hygiene inspections, toolbox meetings, reporting and analysing near misses and plant damage incidents, and conducting formal Job Safety Analysis (JSA) exercises for both safety and environment.

"They are being paid as a manager, so manage. They are being paid as a supervisor, so supervise. It's no different from production requirements."

Stepping back

O'Keefe has been instrumental in training supervisors and managers in the methods they need to accept greater safety responsibility and to have greater safety awareness, and can now step back and act as coach and mentor.

"They are at the coal face. I'm more in the background giving hints, rather than saying hold on, I'll be over in a minute. So they own the procedure."

This kind of fundamental shift isn't something that can be done overnight, she cautions. Only recently she had a couple of supervisors approach her for help with a JSA they were doing. They had the training to do it, but needed a little reassurance.

"Before I would've said leave the basic info with me and I'll do it. Now it's: you're doing the job, you do it."

Staff trust O'Keefe to deliver the appropriate training, and she, in turn, trusts them to implement it correctly, allowing her to step back and reach the stage where some days she won't step onto the production floor at all. This is not a trust to be lightly breached. She won't tolerate being taken for a ride by people who ask for her support and then ignore it, risking their lives and those of their workmates with a "couldn't be bothered" attitude. (Hence the comment in her award nomination that "you don't mess with Fran if you are taking any shortcuts.")

The results, she says, are pleasing. Supervisors and managers have received their new responsibilities well, and some tall poppies are emerging.

"It's rewarding seeing them come to me with a safety prob-

lem they have correctly dealt with. Now they are just updating me."

Productivity award

The initiative which saw O-I take out the Department of Labour Best Productivity Gain from a Health and Safety Initiative at the awards has led to a five percent reduction in energy needs in one of the plant's huge furnaces, as the flue dust which used to settle and solidify in the furnace's two regenerator pits can now be efficiently removed frequently and without risk – a far cry from the days when staff would have to crawl into the dusty pits, in extreme heat and at risk of falling debris, and try to chip away at solidified dust using long rakes. Even then, only a small portion was ever removed.


The old method was so risky and unpleasant that it was only attempted every five to eight years, resulting in unnecessary energy use to overcome the loss in furnace efficiency.

A while back a "super sucker" vacuum system was tried, but wasn't successful: it removed only some of the dust, had little impact on the solidified material, and still required the operator to stand at the entrance to the pits, exposed to heat and dust.

The company decided to pull together a multidisciplinary group to brainstorm solutions. The group included trades staff from all parts of the business, including many who didn't normally work in the furnace area. Also included in the group was a former OSH inspector.

The group's first solution was a pulley-driven scraper which could be left in the pits and used monthly to prevent a small task turning into a major safety issue. Again, the solution failed because it couldn't remove more than a small proportion of the accumulated dust, and still left

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staff exposed to heat as they mounted it on a lifting rig to pull it through.

Undeterred, the group met again and worked with a local engineering firm to design what is affectionately called the Dingo – a totally remote device that can stand the extreme heat of the furnace and gradually dig into accumulated solid dust. It worked, leaving staff to operate it remotely without exposure to dust or heat.

Wellness award

O-I also took out the OfficeMax Best Initiative to Improve Employee Wellness award with a medical warrant of fitness programme, which attracted 98 of the 187 staff. Each person

was given a health assessment - including blood tests – and medical follow-up if required, as well as a personalized exercise programme designed by a student from Auckland University of Technology’s sports faculty. Follow-up assessments monitored each person’s progress and adjusted their exercise regime.

Staff who required help with personal issues, or to manage conditions such as asthma and diabetes, were referred to appropriate support groups, and an on-site peer-support group was set up for smokers trying to quit.

Some potentially serious health conditions were identified, including a number of staff who were unaware they had

cancer, some who had cataracts (since operated on), and an employee who did not realise he had hepatitis. He was monitored, ended up having a liver transplant, and is now happily back at work.

O’Keefe says O-I’s workforce is ageing and has an unusually low staff turnover, factors which make the medical WOF approach particularly effective for both employees and the company. “Wellness links with our literacy training. It gives people some core skills and information they can use outside work. If they are not well, it gives them a chance to get treated and then supported back into work.”

From the company’s perspective, it makes sense to keep it

highly experienced staff as fit, well and productive as possible. Also, the workforce is predominantly male, a group notoriously reluctant to seek medical help unless they absolutely have to. (O’Keefe paints the scenario: “Doc, I’ve noticed my left leg is missing. Do you think there’s something the matter?”)

She hopes more people will take up the medical WOF when the company offers it again next year, so that eventually a high proportion of staff will sign up and that progressively fewer interventions, proportionally, will be required.

“For the people who do need action, we can pick it up early and give them a good life plan to work on.” ■

Hearts & Minds

Auckland 19 July 2007



Supervisor/
Management
Drama Based
Workshop

Kevin Berry (Facilitator)

Kevin Berry has delivered highly engaging and interactive safety leadership workshops for Shell, Alcan, Thiess, Comcare, Barclay Mowlem, Transfield, BHP Billiton.

Learning Outcomes

- Understand how beliefs attitudes, values & assumptions impact on your behaviour and commitment.
- To lead through being proactive.
- Create an environment where everyone’s position of influence within the organisation has a mental model which includes OHS&E considerations in all decision making.
- Learn how to build trust & respect.
- Onsite people will make choices, which will reflect a value and recognition of OHS&E practices. This might include reporting near misses and taking preventative actions.
- Generate buy in so safety becomes a joint effort and responsibility.
- Develop influencing skills through good communication.

Learning through Laughter

When people are emotionally engaged, they are more likely to remember what they’ve learned!

Reducing Workplace Incidents

Managers and supervisors must work in partnership with their employees if they are going to reduce workplace incidents and the costs associated with dangerous work practices.

The Power of Professional Actors

Our program engages people on an emotional and intellectual level, using roleplay and acting to access behavioural patterns.

Lowering Human and Economic Costs

We work with individuals on developing a short and long-term action plan that will lower the human and economic costs to their business.



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