

We profile three more winners in the 2007 NZ Workplace Health & Safety Awards.

# Wisdom is everywhere

**PETER BATEMAN** learns how Palmerston North City Council won the employee participation category.



Council safety reps Dennis Maxwell (left) and Debbie Wilson (3<sup>rd</sup> from left) with HR advisor Fiona Meredith and Ray McIndoe, GM of the council's City Enterprises division.

"I believe wisdom is held everywhere in the organisation, and you've just got to find ways to unlock it."

**Ray McIndoe**, general manager of City Enterprises with Palmerston North City Council, offers this thought as he stands in his office overlooking the Square and scans the horizon anxiously. A heavy rain warning has just been received and his staff could be affected.

"People might express that wisdom in different sorts of language, but it is still there. Never assume it is held only at management or supervisor level."

The council put this belief into action about 18 months ago, when its health and safety performance – "we were doing OK" – had plateaued. Good systems had been put in place, but some spark was missing.

Also, he explains, the council is one of a dwindling number which retains in-house service delivery in parks, cemeteries, refuse collection, construction, and other physically demanding tasks.

The result was that the council's health and safety statistics, while not out of the ordinary in themselves, didn't look too good when compared with those of other councils which had largely contracted out these functions.

But the key motivation, McIndoe stresses, was the need to constantly improve, and to be able to demonstrate that improvement.

### Engaging staff in safety

The solution? To involve the council's 600 employees in health and safety to a much greater extent than before, so that everyone would feel a sense of personal responsibility for their own health and safety, and for that of their colleagues.

The members of the council's four OHS committees were clearly positioned as health and safety leaders, more OHS representatives were created – there are now 20 trained reps – and the reps' profile was lifted, with clear empowerment to create OHS opportunities and initiatives.

The result? Reduced lost-time injury figures (from 1.5 working days lost to injury per full-time employee per year in December 2004 to a touch above 0.4 in December 2006 and still trending downwards) a swag of staff initiatives completed, and a real sense of staff engagement in health and safety. Also, what amounts to a waiting list of people keen to be elected as reps.

"A waiting list is one way to describe it," explains McIndoe. "Whenever the time comes to elect new reps we have an over-supply of people wanting to do it, and disappointment if they don't get selected."

### Committee structure

Three of the council's four OHS committees cover distinct operational areas with their own distinct set of hazards – essentially blue collar, white collar, and dealing with external contractors. The fourth overview

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committee has management and union representation as well as safety reps, and acts as a conduit to ensure management is aware of safety issues.

Staff on the HR team also sit in on each committee to learn of any issues which might impact on policies and procedures. All committee members are encouraged to become trained safety reps, and are offered additional training via ACC on hazard management and incident investigation.

### Staff-led initiatives

Safety reps and other staff have come up with so many new initiatives in the last 18 months there is no room here to list them all. They include:

- OHS noticeboards (to allow reps in each area to communicate to staff);
- laminated floorplans (showing where the first aid kit is located, where the nearest trained first aider sits, where the safety rep sits, where the accident register is kept, and how to seek help);
- floor warden jacket tags (so that if someone else has to step into a warden's role at short notice they will know what to do in an emergency);
- workshops (run by reps for staff in their own area);
- awareness surveys (conducted annually, with prizes);
- written competencies (developed last year by staff).

Two initiatives that particularly stand out are the OHS induction for new staff, and the input of safety reps in developing new safe working procedures.

The induction process was felt to be incomplete, so reps developed an induction safety brochure for managers to include in new staff induction packs. But that wasn't enough – what if managers didn't use it? So they wrote a standard process and communicated it to all council managers. That wasn't enough either – what if it still wasn't used? So they developed an audit process to complete the loop, with a prize for new staff who have completed the safety quiz at the back of the brochure. They run the audit process themselves.

Safety reps were also heavily involved in developing a plain-English document called Safe Systems of Work, and the rep in charge of the cemetery wrote – off his own bat – a guideline for cemetery operations safety that is now attracting the interest of other councils.

### From forms to policy

The key to kick-starting greater staff engagement was to get staff to write OHS policies. By lifting their eyes from form-filling to the policy level, McIndoe explains, they became engaged with the council's entire operation rather than just focusing on their own work unit.

"Before, people saw their own work site as important, but didn't look too much outside that. Now we have people moving to the next level. There are lots of people wanting to contribute to the whole organisation in terms of continuous improvement. People can see they are making a difference. That's the real success."

McIndoe is also delighted to see this level of engagement with the "depot" workers, the staff who maintain parks and reserves, do civil works on roading projects, and collect the rubbish. In other words, the staff who are at most risk of injury.

"The traditional groups who would sit back and not say anything are now on the safety rep waiting list. They don't feel safety is just a manager or supervisor role any more."

### Making a difference

**Fiona Meredith**, an HR advisor with the council with a particular interest in health and safety, agrees that involving staff in health and safety has had an impact at a wider level.

"It's given us a chance to show staff that they can get involved in decisions about things that relate to all council, and that a group of staff can get together and really make a difference by coming up with new ideas, and that management is prepared to support that."

She cites the council's WSMP audit, which the council last year passed at secondary level on its first attempt. This success would not have been possible, she says, without the assistance of the safety reps, who each carried out a pre-audit audit in their own work areas and came up with an action plan for improvements, which they then worked with fellow staff to implement.

Right on cue safety reps **Dennis Maxwell** and **Debbie Wilson** have shown up for the photo opportunity, so we all troop downstairs in search of natural light. The weather warning has proven accurate. Undeterred, the foursome line up, troupers all, ignore the cold and rain, and contrive to look genuinely happy and fully engaged.

With all council staff now more focused on the big picture, these four appreciate the photograph is for the greater good. ■