

Ownership of Behavioural Safety in a Transient Workforce

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Abstract

The current safety targets of our industry are trending toward Recordable Injury Frequency Rates (RIFR) of under 10 per million manhours and “best practice” rates in the order of 5 per million manhours. This means that for every 200,000 hours worked there is enough hard barrier, process, system and individual ownership to make sure a maximum of only one trip to the doctor occurs.

Such targets on the way to injury free workplaces are essential and deliver an outcome which must be a priority for us all in the protection of our people. The challenges presented in achieving them are significant in that whilst every injury is in some way preventable, injuries do occur in the workplace in the process of normal standing, walking and acting without the need for impact or failure of equipment. To meet our goals we need to ensure every instance of procedural non compliance and action outside acceptable risk profiles is avoided by our organisations and individuals.

To achieve this, it is now almost universally accepted that behavioural safety in employees is the key trait required to successfully implement and follow the systems which ensure safe work. Ownership in behavioural safety is not simply achieved through sending people to a course. Education is a key tool, but ownership requires visible leadership and actions reflecting the values and practices communicated in training.

There are no shortcuts to achieving this individual ownership, there is however a timeline. Incidents can happen (and are sometimes more likely to happen) in the early stages of employment. Behavioural assimilation of new employees needs to be rapid and universal to achieve our goals.

The topic of this paper revolves around achieving behavioural safety in a fluid workforce, a workforce dynamic common in contract enterprises. In the contract environment the tenure of an employee may be as low as one day on a particular site if they are a service agent or a down day employee. More regularly it may be only a number of weeks on a site and under 12 months with an employer. With multi-site exposure for relatively short periods and relatively short career spans in contracting, achieving best retention and rapid absorption of behavioural safety is the key to attaining our safety goals.

Background

Defining Transient

In relation to people, the dictionary defines transient as, “remaining in a place for only a short time” which is better than the definition relevant to physics which means “decaying with time”. In defining transient it is also essential to define contracting. A contractor is someone employed for a contract. This gives a fixed term to the association spanning from life of mine to a few days making it transient by nature. In general it is a shorter term agreement of 3 years or less. This means that there is no certainty in the long term because this work involves peak loading it is predominantly done under contract and by contractors on a non permanent basis. Terms here are often as short as a week. In these contract workforces there are a number of factors which accelerate transition of employment. It is important to remember that contract employees are people like you and me and they will act in a manner that gets the best outcome for themselves and their families. Faced with work which strains their family situation people with options will transition to work or workplaces which best satisfy their needs.

In the best case scenario for a contract business this transition is people following the mine site contract work. This type of worker may be a long term contractor, the backbone of the contract industry. The reality is that work in this area incurs the highest rate of transition. Rather than the certainty of years of known work or workplaces, the worker will often be unsure of the location and amount of work two months ahead. They live in construction camps of varying quality and full time equivalent employment can only occur by moving between mines on a regular basis.

A further factor detracting from employees staying in this type of work in the long term is the unpredictable periods of underemployment which occur. These "slack" periods make a consistent, regular income almost impossible to guarantee, this is despite the reasonable annual earnings achievable. People will sometimes accept less money if it is regular.

This remote from home and irregular work pattern creates a drive for a large percentage of people to seek change. Also the experience gained in short term contracting then facilitates its own turnover as time on sites working on mining equipment helps build a resume which then assists in being employed on a mine in a full time role. This can be seen by the worker as delivering more consistent earnings, more conducive family situations and often seen as a desirable end goal. This process in turn makes contracting a viable entry process for people seeking to get into the mining industry. The current high demand in the industry further fuels the rate of movement through opportunity and alternatives for people with even limited experience.

Is there a Transient Workforce and why do we need one?

Something that moves around and goes up and down is hard to measure, but one solid indicator for our industry is the generic induction. In round figures there have been approximately 115,000 generics inductions issued in the last nine years, not including refreshers. In the last 2 years a total of 50,000 have been carried out, half of which are refreshers pointing to 25,000 new entrants in the last two years. The permanent workforce in Australian coal mining in 2005 totalled approximately 30,000 directly employed by the mines. Clearly the number of new entrants to our industry is large and the number of these that move between mines significant.

The easy solution to the added difficulty of behavioural safety ownership in transient workforces is to not have transient workforces. Practically, most industries which have peak loads or require specialist skills cannot operate without outside help of intermittent nature. Base loads should wherever possible be achieved through fixed workforces. The requirement for specialist services, construction, shutdown, and breakdown labour as well as peak operational load requirements are only practically managed by bringing in outside workforces. Mining is an industry with constantly changing labour needs with peaks of a day, week, month and in the case of over burden stripping, sometimes years. Sustainable operation requires the labour costs to stop when the need diminishes.

Defining Behavioural Safety

In simple terms behavioural safety is getting into peoples' heads and placing safety first in their thoughts. Within a framework of hard barriers, solid systems and sound procedures, there is still opportunity for significant harm to occur via individual non compliance with systems. Beyond amateur and not so amateur anarchists who reject authority who must be addressed through performance management and disciplinary procedures, there are normal, well meaning people who must be engaged in the process of safe work so it is at the forefront of the mind at all times. Behavioural safety means this; it means peoples' behaviours reflect an internal alignment with safe work such that their natural action is to act in a risk aware, safe manner. This ownership comes from training, observing, coaching, mentoring and assimilating. The training is the easy part, the observing, coaching and mentoring to achieve assimilation requires consistent visual reinforcement of the message. Behavioural safety hinges on people "seeing the walk not just hearing the talk."

Behavioural Ownership in the Transient Teams – The Challenge

So summarising so far, there is a transient workforce, we need one, new starters are common and they move between sites with regularity. The more transient situation is most common in short term works like maintenance or relocations. In this context, and relevant to our safety goals, the task of educating and ensuring behavioural safety ownership in a workforce is a challenging and difficult one.

In practical terms, what do our goals mean and what level of risk awareness and mitigation do we need in our people to be successful?

Targets of 5 recordable injuries per million manhours are being established within the industry. Translated into work effort this equates to one visit to the doctor, requiring some form of medical procedure, per 200,000 manhours. This is the equivalent of 68 years of continuous 8 hour days or if only Monday to Friday, 108 years of 40 hour weeks. Grey power notwithstanding, this is more than the average lifetime of work. 25,000 days of work, could you imagine going down to your back shed every day for 68 years, putting in 8 hours of work and needing only one doctors visit? Luck will not ensure such a result. When you think of 25,000 days straight it is hard to imagine, think of doing it in a dump truck and its easier to picture. Think of using explosive gases, hydraulic rams, gas cutting gear, working at heights and high voltage and the vision gets tougher. It is however, possible.

This possibility will only arise if the person directly involved has a sound systems framework, a good understanding of these systems but then most importantly a mindset that frames their every action with a risk aware focus on delivering safe work. Everyone can plan and achieve one safe day and 25,000 is just lots of one days stacked together.

How do we get that awareness into a full time permanent employee? Even in a good environment people have mental distractions such as home life, financial pressures, career goals and relationships which distract their thoughts on a regular basis. We screen people to make sure their internal make up is aligned with the overall culture of our organisations. We carry out inductions which familiarise them with the environment and risks. We expose them to the culture and expected behavioural patterns. We immerse them to make them like the rest. Then there is the issue of the rest. Getting new people to fit in is important, but maintaining and improving the safety standards of the existing workforce is in fact a much more demanding task. This is not a once off event but a never ending process. This is where the organisation gets to reinforce its induction message or potentially gradually erode the commitment base of the workforce. Does the rest of the crew put safety first, does management do what they said they would do, does the organisation cut corners. Our goal is a demanding one.

In the contract environment added to these challenges are a much higher level of uncertainty in the future, an internal need of the individual to be on the next job, a need by the contractor to win the next job and a general lack of long term alignment in their immediate role.

The How

Behavioural safety is delivered in a transient workforce the same way it is in a permanent one, with some additional pre-work required and some tighter constraints in delivery.

The first step is generating as close as possible a permanent environment for the workforce. The second is do the same things an organisation would for a permanent workforce but in diverse and short term operations to the best possible effect.

Chasing Permanency

The Individual

Despite the challenging picture in terms of workforce churn and difficulties in retention, our organisation has achieved a 30% improvement in our labour turnover rates since 2005. This assists our business but only brings the turnover closer to permanent workforce levels. There are key points to this process.

- **Simulating a Permanent Workforce**
- **Improving liveability**
- **Making people feel like they are part of the team**
- **Giving them consistent points of communication**
- **Giving them a career with options and a path**

The Environment

Independent of what we do with our individual staff the overall basis of work supply and availability must be as attractive as possible. In chasing a permanency the following are key.

- **Smooth out the peaks**
- **Show clients win - win**
- **Target the business that is best for your people**

Chasing Behavioural Ownership

There are two spheres of influence for an employee, both of which must deliver a strong, consistent message to achieve behavioural ownership. These are their employer's sphere of influence and the overall standards of the industry. The effectiveness of both of these can be strongly enhanced by communication. Achieving a Safe Business balance is a constant pivot point for management in the safety culture perception of the workforce.

Communicating the reason for approaching projects in particular ways, managing risk rather than avoiding it, is critical to the employee "buy in" to the safety culture. This comes into play in explaining the use of risk assessments to manage risk rather than solving every issue with equipment and cash or when contracts are lost on dollars, but allowances for safety are not transparent. As with high quality standards, high safety standards rely on the right HR environment to allow the successful communication integral to behavioural safety.

The Employer

To achieve our target mindset that will give each individual the focus to achieve 25,000 days with a maximum of only one doctor's visit, they need not only to be told, but see an environment where safety is number one in every aspect of their workplace. Independent of permanent or transient status, there is a need to assimilate staff almost instantaneously. Zero harm means from day one. Generally the new environment and desire to learn inherent in new employees should be strong so they will have a period of cautiousness and awareness given the right message, there is however no 3 month window to have them assimilated. Whether starting a 30 year career or a one day job we need staff safety focused from the minute they get out of bed. This requires reinforcing the message at every turn and every opportunity.

Without divulging Intellectual Property, the areas of focus for any employer are really a concentration on the basics of good communication and leadership as summarised below.

- **Inductions – Staff and Trades**
 - **Company Goals**
 - **Core Values**
 - **Define the Good Supervisor**
 - **How staff / trades describe us**
- **Strong Human Resources Focus**
 - **Engaged workforce**
 - **Performance management – Safety with production**
 - **Managers**
 - **Foreman**
- **New & Inexperienced Entrants**
- **Audit and Review – check what's happening, how the pressures of the work influence the safety focus**
- **Visible Leadership**
 - **The questions you must ask despite what you want to ask**
 - **Finding the Safe Business Balance**

The Industry Environment

As contractors we must continue to liaise and work together through avenues such as the Mackay Contractors Reference Group. Getting uniformity in these operations and cooperation in managing safety and HR issues such that staff see consistent requirements and standards between companies is an important outcome from such groups. Prioritising issues and approaching the resource houses as a body is vital in defining the issues and moving further toward achieving the maximum outcome on the priority issues.

The primary responsibility lays with the employer and their relationship their workforce. This however will not be sufficient if the individual does not see the values reinforced in the wider industry. There are key and often sensitive areas where the permanent site personnel can

have a very positive effect on the strength and penetration of behavioural safety in more transient workforces. Some major areas of impact are:

- **Being visible to the transient workforce**
- **Client involvement in SAOs and audits**
- **Positive and negative feedback**
- **Commercial reinforcement of safety goals**
- **Schedule with the workforce consistency and FFW in consideration**
- **Alignment of standards, clothing, heights, vehicles, radios, etc**

Summary

There is no silver bullet to achieving a behavioural shift in the average maintenance, construction or earthmoving contract employee. The goals we seek require an across the board uniform approach which tells any employee that safety is our number one goal. We seek ownership, not just compliance as the individual must seek to optimise application of systems.

As contractors we must work relentlessly to find consistent work for our people, liaising between clients to flatten out periods of demand which necessitate short term hiring's. We must continue to find ways to improve and streamline our remote induction processes such that a one day employee at Yarabee has as close as possible to the same introduction to our company and culture as someone starting on a major shutdown. In all our processes we must build the function of compliance and operating within the system, this culture needs to be ingrained for all systems not simply one of compliance with safety systems. Our selection processes, performance reviews, management rewards and recognition must all align with good safety performance through good process implementation. Any time this uniform reinforcement fails, the workforce will immediately see the misalignment and mentally register the failure to "walk the walk" detracting from the message of thinking and working safely, making our 68 years of safe work harder to achieve.

As an industry we must remain profitable, must improve our productivity and comply with the legislation as required of SSEs and Directors. In addition to this, we must achieve these functions whilst visibly conveying the message that it is the protection of the individual's health and well being that comes first. Where we make decisions about a project or a site we must think about the goals we have set in terms of injury avoidance and consider the impact on the transient workforce's ownership in the safety process lest we fail to reinforce the message in our actions. This is difficult, but transient workers are just like you and me, if they hear that their safety is the industries number one priority and they need to put safety before everything else in their every action but then see 3 different standards in 3 weeks, we cannot hope to optimise the ownership in that individual.

As managers we face balance issues every day and must apply the same rigour we ask of our workforces. They must make sure that despite time pressures, personal pride in getting things done and the need to exert the optimum level of effort to get the job done they put safety first, often at 3 am in the morning on night shift when they would rather be at home. Similarly for us as managers we must push to visibly put safety first despite profitability problems, skills shortages, production targets and physical hours in the day.

None of this is easy but we are making progress. Achieving ongoing reduction in injuries toward zero harm can only occur with effort from each of us as individuals and together as an industry to present a united front to tomorrows new employee, independent of whether permanent or transient.