

Value disagreement

Trust can be cosy and comfortable or it can foster productive disagreements.

RHIANNON LLOYD advocates the latter.

“Trust is everything” is a line much favoured by management gurus in their quest for goal alignment and corporate culture. Businesses, they say, should strive to achieve a high level of it to gain employee buy-in because trust facilitates agreement and commitment.

No surprises, then, that from a health and safety perspective, workplace trust is often considered to be imperative.

However, NZLI proposes a spin which challenges this notion. Being comfortable is not good enough. Instead, business leaders should encourage a form of trust which permits constructive contests and productive disagreements. This type of trust has been identified in the health and safety space as fostering ‘constructive unease’ and it is not comfortable for good reason. Constructive unease is ‘trust with sharp teeth’.

In 2015 Rob Jager, the Chairman at Shell Companies NZ, responded to the 2013 Independent Taskforce report by proposing that strong safety leadership required a passion for safety and an attitude of “chronic unease”, by which he meant “... resetting your tolerance of risk, so you are constantly questioning whether what you are doing is enough”.

In such states, workers need to be able to speak critically, and business leaders must be alert and ready to listen. Trust which permits these kinds of discussions is not about agreement, but about valued forms of disagreement.

PARTICIPATION

In looking at the link between constructive unease and worker involvement it’s important to ask what kind of worker involvement we should be aiming for. Health and safety research is showing us that the biggest barrier obstructing progress in this area is employees not feeling able to challenge each other; workers are uncomfortable saying to their colleagues “That doesn’t look safe, you should probably find another way”.

If this kind of involvement can be accomplished, a health and safety mindset can rapidly become contagious, as those



already engaged feel able to confront, discuss and teach others. It is this kind of worker involvement which requires a practice of trust which goes beyond consensual agreement, and towards a form of collegiality which means that telling someone they’re doing it wrong is just as valued as telling someone they’re doing it right.

Allowing constructive unease throughout the organisation can get us there.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

Safety leaders can foster constructive unease in their organisations by allowing respectful disagreements to unfold, and by themselves maintaining a state of chronic unease. For example, instigating a requirement for monthly staff-led shop floor safety observations means that workers become more comfortable with reviewing and assessing the actions of others over time.

Ideally these requirements should be anchored in a safety mission statement which legitimises such behaviours as compassionate rather than confrontational. Leading these practices are safety leaders

who are conscious to provide time and space for critical and difficult questions to be posed in their organisations.

The comfortable kind of trust will get you only so far. Our research has shown that when health and safety is in the spotlight, the best kind of trust is that which emboldens workers to start uncomfortable conversations with both management and each other. Rather than shying away from a problem, these conversations aim to identify and address safety issues as they arise.

Such engagement goes beyond simple participation, and shifts an organisation into a state of alert and challenging conversation which will consistently push those in safety leadership positions to dig deeper and to relentlessly question whether what they’re doing is really enough. ■



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