



# From life-changing workplace accident to life-changing workplace attitude

Doug Healey, an Auckland regional branch manager with a nationwide transport and freight company, is proud to work in an environment where managers lead health and safety by example.

“We haven’t so much changed our health and safety culture in recent years as introduced a whole new culture,” says Doug.

“Our people are everything to us. Without them, we wouldn’t have a business. Their safety and their mental and physical health are important. If someone has a problem, then they know they can come and talk to me and we’ll work out a solution together. If they need to work fewer hours, then we’ll work that out.

“That change has been driven from the top. When hazard identification and management policies were first introduced, our people just laughed really. But when the business leaders are passionate about health, safety and wellbeing, that trickles through the business.

“There are real benefits. Today, we have fewer accidents and lower absenteeism and a fitter more energetic workforce.”

Doug speaks from the heart. Just before Christmas 2005, he was working on-site for a previous employer when a stack of 6 m steel pipes began sliding from the back of a truck which was being loaded.

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Doug ran to push a colleague to safety before the pipes came crashing down, but they struck him instead and he suffered three fractured vertebrae.

Doug had to learn to walk and ultimately to run again – and to break through the pain barrier to achieve that.

“Looking back, there were a combination of factors which led to the accident, but fatigue played a major part,” he says.

“Our employer had policies in place in theory but very little in practice.

There was no active health and safety engagement, no hazard or accident register.

“People would routinely work double shifts. When I was injured, it was almost midnight, it was the last load of the night, the forklift operator who was loading the truck had been going for 18 hours and was exhausted.”

It was five years before Doug was well enough to return to work, with a new employer. By that time, he’d learned “a heap of stuff” about workplace health and safety, largely from the internet.

“As a manager, I came back with different priorities,” he says. “I set about engaging workers in health and safety.” I set up a health and safety committee and recruited colleagues from different parts of the organisation.”

His employers also took on board what he was saying and he says the workplace is very different today.

“This all began before the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA) changes, but there was a strong sense of ‘right, let’s take a look at this.’ One of the first things we introduced was a ‘dry site’

policy – no more Friday night beers. Before that it wasn't uncommon for people to have a beer and then carry on working."

**"Everyone you see on-site will be wearing their high viz and PPE – gone are the days when people wandered through the warehouse in jandals."**

Today, the business has strong hazard identification and management processes in place as well as wellness measures.

"Back when I joined, the warehouse would open and the trucks would just roll in," he said. "Today there are prominent 'stop' signs and the storeman is waiting for trucks and will go out and talk to the driver and discuss any hazards and check the area is clear before allowing them through.

"Everyone you see on-site will be wearing their high viz and PPE – gone are the days when people wandered through the warehouse in jandals. People really care about their safety and the safety of their colleagues and they are quick to call out any unsafe behaviour."

One of the first actions in effecting change was to explain to staff what the planned changes were and why they were doing them.

"We got everyone into meetings, office staff, storemen, day and night drivers and explained what we wanted to do and why and that communication has continued.

"We provide a lot of safety training and we keep training records to ensure everyone has done everything they need to do.

"We have regular toolbox meetings and at each of those, we'll do some safety training. For instance, we'll watch a video on the correct way to lift a carton to protect your back from injury. Then we'll demonstrate and get everyone up to have a go. They have a laugh, it's a bit quirky but it's a good way for our team to learn."

There is also a strong focus on wellbeing – driven by Doug. Having fought his way back from a wheelchair to running marathons, he now volunteers as a community fitness instructor – and that extends to his workplace.

"People here have a very different attitude to their health now. A lot of people have started eating healthy and exercising and have lost weight. They'll go for a walk or a run at lunchtime. Quite a few have done marathons with me."

"That means our workers are less at risk of conditions like diabetes, gout or heart disease.

"Our people know they are important to us. They aren't just engaged in health and safety, they are more engaged in their careers. There's real enthusiasm for succession planning. People are enthusiastic about doing more training – such as taking their Forklift or Class Two licence or Dangerous Goods Certificate.

"That's good for our team and good for our business."

## WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views
- workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

### KEY POINTS

Worker participation in health and safety leads to:

- a more engaged workforce
- fewer accidents
- workers calling out unsafe behaviour.

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