



Involving everyone in learning reaps benefits for Contact Energy

Bringing teams together to learn from incidents is transforming worker participation and engagement in health and safety at Contact Energy.

Rather than ‘investigating’ incidents in the traditional way, the innovative Learning Team approach brings all parties together to discuss the event – concentrating on developing a capacity to ‘fail safely’ rather than prevent failure.

This leads to better assessment of the conditions, issues and risks, and more effective solutions.

Contact Energy’s work ranges from generating electricity to retailing electricity, gas and LPG and customer service and billing. It has 950 employees and works with more than 450 contractors and service providers, adding up to about 260,000 hours of labour each month.

It’s a 24/7 business across a diverse range of sites. Some key health and safety risks include working with high voltage electricity, gas and chemicals, shift work and vehicle use.

Tania Palmer, General Manager Health, Safety & Environment, said although Contact had reduced injury rates, the company recognised they could do more to improve the way they managed health and safety.

“We are empowering people to own health and safety.”

“We asked workers for their views. They told us they felt health and safety was entirely run by head office,” said Tania.

“They had stopped talking to us because they felt that we ignored their ideas. If people aren’t communicating, how do we know we are doing things well, how do we know where there are gaps? That provided many insights and set us on the path to change.”

Megan Curry, HSE Engagement Manager, Health, Safety & Environment, said it all began with the leadership.



“We asked ‘Is it okay that people feel this way?’ Leaders agreed it wasn’t. They tried an experiment – changing how the business responded to incidents.

“Previously, the business had required an alert to be sent to senior management after any incident. That was a terrible experience for the sites,” said Megan. “Within minutes they’d get a call demanding answers.

We weren’t getting good actions from that. We encouraged leaders to support good problem solving, rather than demand immediate answers.”

So, they dropped the requirement for alerts following any incident, and did away with investigative-style post-incident interviews.

“We know people make mistakes. Rather than saying ‘failure is bad, why didn’t you do it this way?’, we asked workers: ‘Where are our defences weak and what can we learn and improve – how could we fail safely?’”

This led Contact to try a different approach and they turned to Learning Teams – an idea developed by Todd Conklin, an international thought leader on the new views of safety.

“One of the team facilitates and asks questions about what conditions were at play leading up to the incident,” said Tania.

“Where are our defences weak and what can we learn and improve – how could we fail safely?”

“It puts problem identification and solution creation in the hands of our sharp end workers, the people who do the work every day and know what the risks are, what works and what doesn’t work.

“At first, the contractors were anxious – because of our reputation for being pretty fierce about safety breaches – but people came out saying it was the most constructive meeting ever.”

“It’s a far less formal approach but it’s leading to changes that are far more meaningful. One example is around ‘dropped objects’ when working at height.

“Rather than keep saying ‘Stop dropping things’, we improved defences,” said Megan. “We have things like lanyards, nets and an exclusion zone – with these layers working successfully, a dropped object becomes a ‘successful failure’ because no harm occurs.

“During a later Learning Team, it came out that exclusion zones weren’t working as well as they could, because one team’s exclusion zone would get in the way of another team’s work, and people would still walk through.

“The different teams worked out between themselves at that meeting the need to collaborate when planning work. Now they plan together, so exclusion zones are more effective and don’t slow work down either.

“This level of learning about work planning wouldn’t have come out in the old style investigation which would have focused on things like training people harder not to drop stuff”.

Tania said that Learning Teams have been simple and inexpensive to implement.

“They are empowering people to own health and safety processes and outcomes. Leaders support these actions to happen rather than directing them. By moving away from blame, to workers and leaders problem-solving together, everyone is happier and safer, and working more constructively.”

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 and
- > 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 to make better decisions – and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

Engaging with workers has:

- > transformed company culture
- > empowered workers
- > produced innovative solutions.

For more examples and information visit [worksafe.govt.nz](https://www.worksafe.govt.nz)
