Q&A on Safety and Culture

Interviewer: Gareth Byatt – Director, Satarla Australia
Interviewee: Kevin Hard – Director, Inspiration-all

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Thank you for making the time to talk with me about your experience and activities in the world of safety management, Kevin.

Could you start by describing your business, Inspiration-all, and the services that you provide?

Kevin: I set up Inspiration-all after working closely with some incredible leading-edge consultants in different business areas such as modern leadership, cultural safety, wellbeing, sustainability, risk management and engagement. We focus on culture change through modern thinking and challenging the status quo. To quote Peter Drucker, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence, it is to act with yesterday's logic."

Most of our team have advised at senior government level and have been involved in leading edge research in their subjects, and they serve as trusted advisors with our clients. As such, we feel we can bring in expertise to support organisational transformation at any stage of its development.

Gareth: Thanks for this explanation, Kevin. I'd like to talk about some specific safety elements that you get involved in, if I may. We talked recently in London about Behaviour based safety. Many people talk about it – but is it working, and if not, what can be done to address it?

Kevin: In my view, Behaviour based safety has worked to an extent, but we find that organisations can't get to the next level of safety culture by focusing only on Behaviour based safety. The problem is that it is very much about 'telling' people how to behave, and it can lead to an excessive amount of policies, procedures and management systems to make sure they do so.

We find that, when organisations rigidly apply this approach, they run the risk of becoming 'systems obsessed'. There comes a limit, or a point, at which they can't improve their safety culture by introducing more and more systems – they need to look at things differently. We believe this requires true

engagement with the workforce, and looking at their overall culture in a deep manner. Most organisations we work with are at this stage.

For example, we have worked with a major construction company which reduced their procedures by 5000+ by going through our review. Another major global firm reduced their procedures by some 40%. They were previously 'system obsessed' and couldn't improve their safety no matter what they tried. Therefore, we need to move from behaviour based safety to cultural safety®.

Gareth: So, what's driving the behaviours towards this, and why do organisations demonstrate these characteristics?

Kevin: If we look at the drivers of behaviours, we find that it's the culture that drives behaviours. What this translates to is the language used by leaders and managers, their behaviours. How their organisation provides the right tools and environment for this culture to exist is key. Only then will the workforce believe that you truly care about their safety - and caring is critical to improving safety cultures, integrated with other areas and aspects of the business.

Gareth: OK, so this brings us onto the important subject of culture, and how to embody it in a truly impactful way. How can a culture be truly effective, and what's the true impact on safety when you have "a good culture"?

Kevin: To move a culture forward to a highly engaged and effective level, we have to truly and properly value the workforce; we have to care about them and make sure they feel a part of our organisational vision and values. When people feel they are valued, research tells us that oxytocin is released. It is the primary drug ("hug drug") where we get collaboration and innovation, and the holy grail – discretionary effort, in a positive proactive environment. If people don't feel valued, then we experience cortisol, which is associated with stress and other negative impacts where you get absenteeism and presenteeism which leads to incidents and accidents.

Imagine the impact on safety when people feel valued and feel great at work, where they are proactive, they go out and prevent incidents happening elsewhere when they find them and share their ideas for continuous improvement. We have case studies and research to prove this can happen, from around the world.

Gareth: Can I move onto the topic of compliance now. Perhaps this is perceived as the arch-opposite of culture, but I'm not so sure. I suspect you have quite a lot to say about compliance, in its various aspects and elements?

Kevin: Compliance is absolutely necessary, and having a compliant culture isn't bad, it's just not going to be what you need to improve to the next stage of a 'people focused' culture. We tend to put in more systems and processes if something goes wrong and end up with a culture of compliance which we can't escape from. We will never get to the next level of safety culture unless we involve, listen to action feedback from the front line. Though we should of course make sure that we are compliant with legal and regulatory requirements.

One of the main issues is that we don't involve the front line enough in writing standard operating procedures (SOPs), risk assessments and other 'compliance' systems. This means 'compliance' is often forced on the front line without realising that 'one' procedure works best for each 'job' and the front line know what that is, because they are the ones that execute the jobs and tasks. It's not because something has been written by the safety department or operations department that it is right, and often they are not updated, they are duplicated or worse still, put into a file as a 'tick box exercise' to meet 'compliance'.

As leaders, we need to engage with the workforce, to have a just culture so people feel safe to talk about safety and to action what is fed back with a thank you for telling us. We then need to change the operating procedures and risk assessments to address the changes and share the learning.

Gareth: I can see how true workforce engagement is a clear message here to achieve a successful culture, and good safety outcomes. When you focus on this, does anything else change in the organisation? Do other aspects of the organisation benefit from this approach? We know that we don't manage safety in a vacuum.

Kevin: It's still quite amazing to me to see organisations that look at safety, wellbeing, quality etc as separate silos – but it still happens. When we connect things properly together, we see an improvement in overall business performance, which I define as quality, productivity, sustainability and resilience which ultimately links through to risk, through an integrated strategic approach to transformational culture improvement. We have our own integrated improvement model which is 'engagement' led by authentic leadership, underpinned by caring, driving business performance improvement, including safety and wellbeing. That model is now being

referenced in level 7 and 8 strategic management and leadership and has recently been requested to be a part of the IOSH leadership diploma.

Gareth: OK, this sounds really positive Kevin, but how do you sustain it and keep it going? How do we avoid the effort petering out?

Kevin: *Continuous and sustainable improvement is about involvement by as many people as possible contributing new ideas, solving different issues with different people and approaches and empowering teams to make their own decisions and changes based on trust and experience. I have a saying that we all listen to the biggest radio station in the world – WIIFM. That's 'What's in it for me'. If the workforce see what's in it for them, why and how they can contribute then you have sustainability.*

Gareth: One last question from for me, related to the point we just discussed – how does this effort impact the organisation in an overall sense, including aspects such as Corporate and Social Responsibility and their impact on the broader community in which they exist and operate?

Kevin: *Well, we are proving with our own research with the likes of 'Engage for Success' and the CIPD, including with case studies, that an engaged workforce is more positive, has much more energy and has a better work-life balance – which means at weekends we tend to find that they have the time and energy and the wherewithal to contribute to local communities, charities sustainability issues and the like. There's a dramatic difference if they don't feel engaged at work by not being valued, cared for or a part of the organisational 'journey'.*

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Kevin. It is certainly interesting times in the world of safety and risk management today.