

## Real World Group®

### Increasing Workplace Safety Through Employee Engagement

September 2014

An increase in employees' active involvement in safer behaviours in the workplace is a key bottom line factor that organisations are keenly focused on throughout the world. Certain industries (e.g. construction, oil & gas, manufacture, healthcare) involve environments where physical risks are particularly present in the day-to-day experience of the workforce.

However, in spite of the critical importance of health and safety, it is often perceived as a topic notoriously difficult to engage employees with (Pater & Lewis, 2012; Meldrum et al., 2009). With this in mind, a greater understanding of how organisations can help reduce risk and further emphasise the active promotion of "safe" behaviours is worthy of attention.

Many practitioners explain the clear, common-sense understanding of how having an "engaged" culture can increase safety at work – i.e. it is accepted that engaged employees care more about their organisation, work environment and colleagues, and are therefore more conscientious in what they do and don't do.

This article goes beyond these "common sense" links to explore the published literature on employee engagement and safety, to ascertain what we can learn from research and practical application to create even safer, more thriving organisations.

#### Employee Engagement

The first author to define "employee engagement" is said to be Kahn (1990) who described it as *"the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances."*

The CIPD (2013) defines employee engagement as *"being positively present during the performance of work by willingly contributing intellectual effort, experiencing positive emotions and meaningful connections to others"*. They state that this definition gives three dimensions to employee engagement:

- Intellectual engagement – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better

- Affective engagement – feeling positively about doing a good job
- Social engagement – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

Employee engagement has traditionally been viewed as an outcome, something examined as “(an antecedent, outcome, moderator, or mediator) of other performance-related variables (e.g., leadership style or psychological workplace climates)” operationalised in relation to performance at single tasks (Shuck and Rose, 2010). However, engagement can also be interpreted as a meaningful state, or psychological condition in which a person exists as they perform their work role (Kahn, 1990; Shuck & Rose, 2010).

Despite varying interpretations, there is a wealth of literature which expresses an underlying assumption that engaged employees are more likely to enact organisationally desirable behaviours and have a greater sense of wellbeing and positive attitudes to work (e.g. Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2008; Little & Little, 2006; Nahrgang et al. 2010).

In line with this, many researchers have demonstrated how employee engagement predicts employee outcomes, organisational success and financial performance (e.g. Bates, 2004; Baumruk, 2004; Harter et al. 2002; Richman, 2006). Further, employee engagement has been shown to have a statistically-demonstrated relationship with productivity, quality, profitability, employee retention, customer satisfaction and safety (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2006; Wachter & Yorio, 2014).

### Engagement and Safer Behaviours

The idea that engagement means to be “*psychologically present when occupying and performing an organisational role (Saks, 2006)*” makes employee engagement a key topic for discussion in enhancing organisational safety. This assumption is supported by the findings of a number of studies, including one by Harter et al (2006), who took the top and bottom quartile in employee engagement measures and compared measured safety outcomes. They found that “engaged” business units experienced 62% fewer safety incidents than those units with lower levels of employee engagement.

The view that increasing levels of employee engagement can lead to improved safety outcomes is also supported by a study into the Molson Coors beverage company which claimed the business saved \$1.7 million in safety costs by improving their levels of employee engagement; it was found

that engaged employees were five times less likely than non-engaged employees to have a safety incident and seven times less likely to have a safety incident that resulted in a loss of time. Further, it was claimed that the average cost of a safety incident for non-engaged employees was \$392 whereas for engaged employees the average cost was \$63 (Vance, 2006; Raines, 2011).

### How can we understand the link between engagement and safety?

Beyond the understanding of the fact that engaged employees are more likely to act in organisationally-desirable ways towards the organisation, customers and colleagues, it is also useful to understand other specific factors in engagement that help understand the link between engagement and safety.

For example, one of the key drivers of employee engagement is having the opportunity to contribute to organisational decision-making, sometimes referred to as “Employee Voice” (MacLeod and Clarke, 2008). Thus, it can be expected that employees in a more engaged team, department or organisation are more likely to be involved in discussions and making contributions to a range of topics, including health and safety.

Support for how taking a much more active stance in involving employees in discussions and decision-making around safety can enhance adoption of safer behaviours is provided by Meldrum et al. (2009). They conducted a 13 month investigation within a large construction firm in order to test a model of worker engagement using a series of one to one interviews with system stakeholders. The paper states:

*“Four key attributes that emerged during the study were found to support worker engagement in the project organisation under study. These were: knowledge and capability to engage, perceptions (of what was expected), attitudes and behaviours (what they actually thought and did) and actual involvement in H & S risk management.”*

*“[increasingly within the field of health and safety management we find focus on] how workers can be encouraged and supported in taking part in decision making about health and safety management (HSE, 2006; as cited in Meldrum et al., 2009)”.*

In other words, Meldrum et al.’s work suggests that the optimal way of changing employee safety related behaviours is to take a proactive long term approach, embedding this within organisational culture, and aligning change with existing initiatives, rather than treating it as a separate entity.

Specifically, they suggest that “[*Health & Safety*] management systems should not be centralised and bureaucratic... but demonstrated at local, site and work crew level.” (Lingard & Rowlinson, 2005, as cited in Meldrum et al., 2009).

### Leadership as the Key Enabler to Engagement and Safer Behaviours

Many studies show that leadership approach and management style are profoundly linked to levels of employee engagement (e.g. Alban-Metcalf & Alban-Metcalf, 2012, 2008). Therefore, engaging leaders can be expected to create safer environments for their employees through the culture they create of greater conscientiousness in working with others, and concern for the good of the organisation and its customers.

Beyond this, extensively researched leadership models such as Real World Group’s Engaging Leadership model include key behavioural factors such as “*Supporting a Developmental Culture*”, “*Building Shared Vision*” and “*Encouraging Questioning*” – each of which provide a key contribution to ensuring that employees are provided with the opportunity to learn from mistakes, create shared visions of how things should be in how we work together, and question when things could be done better, and more effectively (or safely).

Unfortunately, we find the world over that organisations tend not to typically be places where a leadership culture of learning from mistakes (such as in the *Supporting a Developmental Culture* factor of Engaging Leadership). Addressing this appears to be one of the keys to a safer culture, as described by Williams in a 2008 article in *Professional Safety*. The article reviews the strategies organisations can implement to achieve ‘the next level’ of safety performance and posits that optimising organisational safety requires:

*“...active employee engagement for safety. Employees must provide each other corrective feedback when risky behavior is identified, especially since shortcuts are often perceived to be faster and easier, and because supervisors are not always present. This corrective feedback also sets the norm that safe behavior is expected.”*

More specifically than creating a more engaged culture, Pater & Lewis (2012a,b) highlight the blockages and potential enablers to leaders’ effectively engaging workers. These can be summarised as:

| Leaders <u>fail to enhance</u> safe behaviours when   | Leaders that <u>enhance</u> safe behaviours...   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Quick and dirty answers usually become more muddy than efficient (e.g., back belts to solve all lower back injuries).</li> <li>▪ They write off engagement as impossible</li> <li>▪ Engagement is dismissed as too time consuming or not believing that there would be payoff</li> <li>▪ There are attempts at forcing engagement. 'Volun-telling' employees to serve on safety committees.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Make it personal – begin with leaders themselves</li> <li>▪ Welcome openings – engaging leaders open the door when opportunities appear</li> <li>▪ Be invitational – draw rather than push engagement</li> <li>▪ Make good contact – bridge the distance of communication</li> <li>▪ Energise first – put aside safety programmes that no longer elicit employee attention</li> <li>▪ Reduce blockages and make engagement easy</li> <li>▪ Design different approaches for different people</li> <li>▪ Encourage going viral – pay attention to what catches on</li> <li>▪ Structure it in – ensure engagement approach has structure</li> <li>▪ Monitor and report back</li> </ul> |

Source: Pater and Lewis (2012a,b)

### The Foundations for Safety and Thriving

Many organisations with whom we work are successfully enhancing the adoption and active promotion of safer behaviours through exactly the types of actions and behaviours described by Pater and Lewis (2012), Williams (2008) and Meldrum et al (2009).

A key foundation that ensures this is not an unsustainable “flavour of the month” - or flimsy attempt to enhance employee voice without the clear, demonstrated intention to take suggestions and contributions forward - is a more general approach to engaging their employees through the style they expect their leaders to adopt. Thus, they can create a win-win between the organisation and their employees, and benefit from the full potential of their people in creating efficient and safe environments, sustainable, superior productivity while maximising innovation and customer value.

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