



ADAPT, SURVIVE, THRIVE

PETER BATEMAN presents the edited highlights package from this year's Safeguard National Health & Safety Conference, held in Auckland at the beginning of June.

"Collaborate, innovate, but above all, act. Make a change that makes a difference."

This exhortation from WorkSafe NZ's **Pelin Fantham** to open the conference helped set the tone for the next two days, as speakers presented a variety of perspectives to reflect on.

Opening keynote speaker **Todd Conklin**, beaming in from his home studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, needed little introduction to this audience. Health and safety doesn't really do rock stars, but if it did, Conklin would've been at the top of the charts these past few years.

A couple of years ago he'd been invited to Thailand after an incident when a load had fallen from a sling being used to load a ship from a beach. The operation had been working successfully for months. One day the team had been asked to load an awkward and unusual object. It was outside scope but they

figured out a way to do it, and up it went. As always, the drop zone had been coned off and the load fell within it, so no one was hurt.

The question, said Conklin, was this: was this incident a success or a failure? If you are focused on operations, it's a failure – but if you're focused on safety, it's a success. "They predicted the failure modality, they put controls in place, and failure happened exactly as they had predicted."

The boss reckoned the workers had made a series of bad choices, so their contract had been terminated to send a message about the need to adhere to procedures. Conklin chose to reframe the issue: it wasn't about workers making bad choices, it was about workers only having bad choices to make. The team was reinstated.

Phil Parkes, chief executive of WorkSafe NZ, said the target set by the

government around 2013 – a reduction in workplace fatalities of 25% by 2020 – was too narrow in its focus because it ignored the harm caused by work-related health issues, including psychosocial health.

In the Covid pandemic, he said, there have been 26 deaths to date, compared to 6000 workers who have died from occupational disease in the last ten years. "Is that equitable? I don't think so."

While WorkSafe would continue to deal with acute injuries and enforcement, it also had to broaden its scope to encompass these wider issues which harmed more people.

"To transform, we have to get to the root cause, which is rarely safety. The root cause is the way work is done."

CTU president **Richard Wagstaff** said workplaces in New Zealand don't tend to have a culture of engagement with workers. "We need to go to a place of



co-design when an issue or problem or opportunity is identified. It sounds simple, but it's a huge journey."

He cited problems with the bus service in Wellington, where routes were changed without asking the drivers if the new routes were workable. He called for workers to be given more respect. "It's part of a wider shift where the voice of working people is louder and more respected in how work is done."

In **Craig Marriott's** session on developing a health & safety strategy, he acknowledged it takes time to "shift mental gears" out of your daily operational mindset, and to set aside time to talk to the right people to establish where the organisation is placed now. He also noted that some people put up their plan for next year and called it a strategy. Wrong. A strategy needs to look three to five years ahead. Next year's plan cannot be a strategy.

But the mistake that derails any H&S strategy, he said, is when it doesn't align with the overall strategy of the business. An ambitious but blinkered H&S manager

"WE NEED TO GO TO A PLACE OF CO-DESIGN WHEN AN ISSUE OR OPPORTUNITY IS IDENTIFIED." RICHARD WAGSTAFF

might wish to recruit another half-dozen H&S people to the team, ignoring the fact that economic times are tough and the organisation is retrenching back to its core business. "The business strategy will always win."

Psychologist **Bridget Jelley** put up photos of current leaders and invited people to clap if they demonstrated the qualities of a future leader. Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump provoked not one clap, while Mark Zuckerberg prompted a handful. Angela Merkel received generous applause, cranking up a notch for Hinemoa Elder and Jacinda Arden. There may have even been a cheer.

Her point? That future leaders need

to demonstrate empathy, trust, being vulnerable, and the ability to genuinely listen.

"Soft skills have been viewed sceptically. It's more comfortable sticking to KPIs, but the future of leadership is soft skills."

Changes in the nature of work, she said, mean that people at work are now at greater risk of psychosocial injury and stress-related disease than they are of having a physical workplace incident. Soft skills, therefore, are critically important.

"This isn't soft. It's really hard."

Beaming in from Melbourne, **David Provan's** presentation was all about safety culture, and it came with a



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stinging critique of popular safety culture models. The trouble, he said, is that they all focus on how much people know and care about safety, rather than enabling better safety outcomes through a focus on work conditions.

Post-Chernobyl, he said, there was a “25-year love affair with the idea of safety culture – DuPont, Hudson, Kiel Centre, Kraus – but the safety science world has moved on.”

In his view, the number one problem in safety is goal conflict, and understanding how an organisation resolves it. The focus of any descriptive model, therefore, must not be static, but needs to enable an organisation to move towards where it wants to go.

Middlemore hospital intensivist Dr **Carl Horsley** said that better healthcare for patients has to be predicated on better care for staff, but the classic

model – safety is when nothing happens – will only get you so far.

“We work in a messy, dynamic, uncertain place called healthcare. The [Swiss] cheese is alive.”

He described his team’s experience over the last few years with taking a Safety-II approach, noting that moving away from “what is so different about this case?” to “what is so normal?” constitutes a significant but necessary shift. The briefing after every event values normal work and makes visible when the team encounters or does something different.

“What surprised you? We find that question to be really revealing.”

Victoria McArthur from Mates in Construction outlined New Zealand’s suicide statistics and said that more than half of those who take their own lives have no history of mental illness. “This

is about mental distress, not mental health.”

She asked that anyone in the room who is struggling to tell someone, “in the best way you know how”. She pointed out that the organisation’s two field officers, **Richard Hepi** and **Slade McFarland**, were present, and that one of them was positioned at the doors.

Acknowledging the challenging subject matter, she said that if anyone felt the need to leave the room during the presentation they should give a thumbs-up at the door to show they were OK; if not, they could expect to be approached and given support.

Michael Wood, Minister for Employment Relations and Safety, closed day one with what he described as his mantra: workplaces which are fair, safe and productive. “We see these things as inter-dependent and not in conflict with

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Graduate Courtenay Hurt-Suwan already had a background in HR management in the construction labour hire industry when she chose to upskill through SIT2LRN. The Auckland-based Mum-of-four launched her own business in 2018 – Social Labour Supply (SLS) – to support Māori and Pasifika into long-term, sustainable employment.

“As the business was starting out, I had time to upskill myself for the future requirements of the business, so I started the Graduate Diploma in Occupational Health and Safety Management.”

Courtenay said she loved the online learning offered by SIT2LRN, and urges anyone contemplating online study to just give it a go. “Never look back and wonder ‘what if?’”, she said.

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each other.”

Citing the \$51 billion the government spends each year on goods and services, he said discussions have started on an all-of-government procurement approach in which health and safety is embedded and budgeted for and measured in the expected outcomes.

Opening day two at breakfast, **George Adams** spoke about ACC’s new Impact Fund and the nearly 200 applications so far, of which two – Robotics Plus and Mentemia – have been approved. Asked if that low rate of approval indicated ACC is setting an unusually high bar, he said it was a fairly normal in the investment world. “You kiss a lot of frogs ...”

Erik Hollnagel, beaming in from Denmark, noted it was 11pm his time so he wouldn’t be taking questions at the end due to his desire to go to bed. Fair enough.

“SOFT SKILLS HAVE BEEN VIEWED SCEPTICALLY. IT’S MORE **COMFORTABLE STICKING TO KPIs, BUT THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP IS SOFT SKILLS.**” **BRIDGET JELLEY**

He described how different functions within organisations – production, quality, safety – typically operate within their own silos, and how this leads us to focus only on the most obvious problems, only to discover there are greater problems lying beneath.

He described the classic Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle as “ossified” because people use it mechanically without asking themselves if they are even trying to solve the right problem.

Management, he said, needs to consider the performance of the system as a whole, from multiple perspectives. “We have to move from fragmentation to

unification.”

Gerard Vaughan from Farmstrong described the initiative as necessarily a farmer-to-farmer programme, because farmers are willing to make changes when they hear about them from other farmers. Farmers telling their own stories are therefore a key resource.

His colleague **Hugh Norriss** outlined evidence showing that improved wellbeing results in fewer injuries, an important finding that surely translates more widely than just the agricultural sector.

ACC’s **Phil Riley** said it is important motivational for us to understand the

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scale of the problem we face: 185,000 work injury claims every year. ACC was investing around \$300m over ten years in workplace injury prevention.

His colleague **Virginia Burton-Konia** said that when she came to the Safeguard conference four years ago she thought: how can we stimulate this? She revealed that event was the genesis of the ACC grants programme, “because you are the people driving change that we can pick up and harness”.

Walking on crutches, **Andrew Leslie**, chief executive of Recreation Aotearoa, told us about the mountain bike crash he had in Wellington in March last year. It left him lying on the track, unable to feel his body due to a spinal injury. Flown by helicopter to Christchurch, he was operated on within hours and put into an induced coma. Waking up a week later he thought he was hallucinating – New

Zealand was now in Level 4 lockdown. His life had changed and so had the world. Weeks in Christchurch hospital and three months in Burwood saw him learn to walk again.

Benjamin Hemi, from Tainui Group Holdings, spoke on behalf of Te Rōpu Marutau O Aotearoa (TRMA). He said at the 2017 conference he heard WorkSafe say that Māori are 44% more likely to be injured at work, “so I am officially the most dangerous presenter here”.

He said health and safety is part of tikanga Māori. “We have a sign-in system. It’s called a pōwhiri or whakatau. On a marae, our induction is the tea towel – you get in and wash the dishes. You may call it a Take 5, we call it a karakia: thinking about what we are going to do before we do it.”

He spoke about three values, the first being kaitiakitanga, the concept of

being a guardian or protector. “From the Māori world view, we are part of the environment, not superior to it.”

The second value, whakawhanaungatanga, is about relationships. He said he likes to do inductions one-to-one, face-to-face, to make that personal connection.

The third value, manaakitanga, is about genuinely caring for people. At Tainui they have manaakitanga awards, which take the form of a paddle. “The person who holds it is the treasure.”

“Everything we do today is about this. We are going to ask you to join us.”

TRMA members went on stage to waiata and the room stood as one. Some of us may have discovered grit in our eyes.

A hard act to follow, but **Kate Cole**, beaming in from Sydney, had us listening agog at the extent of the

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measures to protect worker health enshrined in Sydney Metro's H&S model. With so many tunnels to construct, health risks are ever-present. She said health incidents – exposure to excessive noise or excessive dust – are reported up, in the same way as safety incidents. An occupational hygienist and a H&S practitioner are embedded in the design process, to ensure it becomes health-in-design as well as safety-in-design.

"We are building this infrastructure for the people of Sydney, so how can we honestly do that while taking people's health away?"

Air New Zealand's Brent Armitage, who has transitioned from HSR to H&S practitioner, said he missed his job on the ramp at Auckland airport but is enjoying the journey he's been on.

Understanding someone else's reality is vital, he said.

"Too many times on the ramp,

"WE HAVE A SIGN-IN SYSTEM. IT'S CALLED A PŌWHIRI OR WHAKATAU. YOU MAY CALL IT A TAKE 5, WE CALL IT A KARAKIA: THINKING ABOUT WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO BEFORE WE DO IT." BENJAMIN HEMI

someone in an office made a decision without asking me, and I was stuck with making it work.

"Everyone's truth is different. Practise exploring their truth, while bridging it to reality through aroha."

Last up was scientist and entrepreneur Michelle Dickinson, aka Nanogirl. She told us the ability to ask questions, so strong in toddlers, is conditioned out of us.

"We've been trained to believe that we are supposed to have the answers, yet what we need is to have the questions."

Each table was equipped with a balloon and a sharp stick, and invited

to blow up the balloon and use the stick to pierce it from one side to the other without popping it. The first group popped every balloon, but there were lessons to be learned. The second group had one or two who almost succeeded. Further lessons. In the last group, one person managed it. Cheers!

Learning from failure, she said, is just as important as learning from success. "Where there isn't psychological safety to celebrate failure, you hide your mistakes."

After the applause had died down, MC Michèle A'Court said she felt brainier, and also more childlike. Didn't we all? ■



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