

Lowering the Ladder to Learn and Grow

Welcome to the Lowering the Ladder Series - a selection of interviews designed to inspire, empower, and encourage each other in the health and safety profession. Those times when we lower the ladder to help someone up, or are encouraged to climb the ladder ourselves, can be turning points in our lives, supporting us as individuals, and the profession as a whole.



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Position: Snr Health, Safety and Wellness Advisor,
Manatū Mō Te Taiao/ Ministry for the Environment

Tell us a bit about your current role

I am a part of the People and Capability tima at the Ministry for the Environment (MfE). I support the safety and wellbeing of all our kaimahi across Aotearoa. My mahi is to provide subject matter expertise on health, safety and wellbeing strategies and initiatives, at a national level. I am there to provide support to our kaimahi, people leaders, health and safety representatives and union delegates. It's a varied and challenging role and I am enjoying it immensely. The culture at MfE is one of inclusiveness and respect for people as individuals, and a sense of mahi whanau exists within the tima. It is a real strength of the Ministry.

Prior to this, I worked at the Ministry of Justice and at ACC as a Business Customer Solutions Partner. At ACC I specialized in working with New Zealand businesses to reduce their injuries and increase their understanding of how health and safety is good for business. I also promoted the benefits of having injury management and return to work processes in place, to support kaimahi/staff re-entering the workforce after an injury or illness.

What got you started in Health and Safety?

Do you remember being asked as a child, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Well, I am doing it. I have always had an interest in all things safety.

My whanau call me Miss OSH and I have been known to give safety briefings before family events. I once gave a ladder as a Christmas gift to my neighbours after I saw them using an old broken one. I set it up in their garden and decorated it for them to find on Christmas Day. Growing up, I was fascinated by programmes such as Air Crash Investigation. It fascinated me that a chain of events leading up to a disaster could have been prevented by having effective barriers in place.

All my roles, throughout my career, have had a health and safety element in them. From organising music concerts, to helping to design skateparks and mountain bike tracks, to running roadside fatigue stops with the NZ Police and Waka Kotahi. For me, it's always been about making sure we do all that we can to keep people safe.

In 2011, I embarked on my first dedicated health and safety role, when I became a WSMP auditor at ACC. Later, I became a peer reviewer. It is an absolute honour to be invited into businesses to review their health and safety management systems and I have had the privilege to visit many different industries. From road transport, to beekeepers, to metal manufacturing — this diverse exposure has allowed me to develop as a health and safety generalist.

But I have to say, it was the family run businesses that I had a soft spot for. I got to see how passionate these owners are about their people and customers. I was always in awe at the amount of innovation that New Zealand businesses put into incorporating safety into design.

Who has helped you get where you are and how?

I have been very fortunate to have incredible support throughout my health and safety career. I have had many encounters with people who have taken me under their wing, who have challenged me to think bigger and who inspired me.

Sandra McKie, NZ Defence Force Deputy Director, had a big influence on my management style when I was younger. She taught me that 'the standard you walk by, is the standard you accept'. This is critical when it comes to how management supports health and safety in the workplace. You need to show courage and conviction and walk the talk as a leader.

Anthony Joines, Former Curator at Pukekura Park, New Plymouth, taught me how to fight for my ideas. I remember the first time I had to pitch an idea to Anthony and he just said, "No". I went to walk out of his office thinking 'Now what do I do?' "If you believe in what you are saying, convince me." So, I turned around and pitched it again. He said, "Good! Don't back down at the first 'no' you get".

Working in health and safety you can often feel isolated as you are working by yourself most of the time. However, I am very fortunate to have an amazing network of health and safety professionals around me. In particular, I have a group of former colleagues that I stay in regular contact with. We frequently debate and bounce ideas off each other. They are Silvija Read, Karin Sedelmayer, Steph White, Odilia Nì Fhiach, and Cobus Kilian. All of whom are passionate about health and safety and are a source of inspiration and support for me.

Robyn Bennett, NZISM President is another. Robyn is an outstanding auditor and has always been willing to share her knowledge with me and give me honest and robust feedback to help me grow as a health and safety professional. She just has a way of breaking down complex issues into easily understood steps. Robyn is always keen to help people understand the 'why' of health and safety, and I believe in that as well.

Were there any pivotal moments in your career, that were difficult at the time, but you look back on and understand the value of the experience? What did you learn and how has that helped you?

I had a work injury early on in my career. It was devastating on so many levels. My mental wellbeing certainly took a hit and, it was at a time when you didn't share what was going on in your head because it was considered a weakness. Thank goodness that has changed. I think the work that Lance Burdett (Warn International) is doing in this area is incredibly powerful and is helping to destigmatise and change the mindset that we shouldn't talk about mental health at work.

I felt shunned by my employer at the time because they were only interested in having workers that were 100% fit. They literally told me not to contact them until I was... 100% fit.

However, what was a really hard time has turned me into the biggest advocate for supporting people to rehabilitate mentally and physically from an injury in the workplace and to be open about how you are feeling.

There is a perception out there that you must be 100% fit to do your job before you come back from an injury/illness. The question I often asked when I was running an Injury Management workshop is: 'Who ever is 100% fit when they come to work, even without an injury?' It's just not a realistic goal to expect everyone to be 100%, every day.

Finding ways for people to stay at work while they are rehabilitating, or to stay in contact with their workplace, can help a person in so many ways. It helps them maintain that social connection and support of their workplace and it helps prevent the development of sedentary habits at home. There are so many more positives than negatives to helping people stay at work.

Workplaces often have very good procedures on how they will manage a hazard or an event from a risk management point of view. But seldom do workplaces have an immediate planned response to 'manage the injury'. That is, have a plan of how they will communicate with the injured worker, rehab advisors, etc., and support the person to come back to work, either on reduced hours or by modifying their existing role.

My journey after a workplace injury has taught me that, with clear communication channels and a plan, an injured worker can be integrated back into the workplace safely during their recovery and remain a productive member of the workplace team.

How do you encourage others to learn and grow?

Stephen Covey once said - "The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply."

I have been very fortunate to have supported and mentored people in their health and safety education and career pathways. Often, they will say afterwards - "Oh thank you, you have helped me so much, I have some ideas now of what to do". And I will say— "It was all you...I just listened".

As Emily Rice says - "...when you listen to each other you are creating an environment of safety. A place when people can share their opinions and offer suggestions".

There is nothing more empowering to a person than being listened to and understood. You don't have to agree with what the other person has said, you just need to show that you have tried to understand them.

Share one thing with us that you have learned in your career

If you want people to get on board and be motivated to support a health and safety vision, you need to provide a space and make time for people to ask questions and understand the 'why'. You then need to be open to what they truly think about your ideas and be prepared to change them.

When did you last lower the ladder?

If you have an inspirational story to share, the WISE NZ Group would love to hear from you. Please get in touch via LinkedIn.