



MIND THE CULTURAL GAP TO REDUCE INJURIES

Moni Hogg : Safety II thought leader and consultant



Safety improvements through team collaboration benefit the whole of industry

An exciting trial is underway that is melding Pasifika cultural leadership and traditions with the latest contemporary safety thinking (Safety II) to reduce injuries to Pasifika Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) workers and workers from all ethnicities, to benefit the whole of the country's horticulture industry.

Guided by a steering group of Pasifika cultural and safety experts, alongside myself, the two-staged project started with a trial at Apata Group Ltd in Tauranga with the company's summer RSE crew that ran across a fortnight in April 2023. Those learnings are now informing the second phase of the project consisting of full-scale pilots at two further growers in the Bay of Plenty and Auckland.

It is hoped that learnings from this project will not only improve the safety and welfare of workers by giving them a voice and a shared responsibility in making safety improvements, but also benefit the whole of industry through team collaboration to uncover opportunities for operational improvements.

The Safety II approach, based on internationally recognised safety science, seeks to reframe the pursuit of safety in our workplaces based on an understanding that safety is an emergent capacity to enable things to go right across varying conditions. This capacity is referred to as 'resilience'.

Where previously behavioural science approaches saw workers as a problem to be controlled, the new science sees workers as highly adaptable actors who balance unpredictable demands and constraints and make (almost always good) decisions to keep our systems operating.

Each year, around \$15 million is paid out in horticulture-related ACC (Accident Compensation Corporation) claims. Lumbar sprains, cuts to hands and fingers, back or shoulder injuries and eye injuries are the most common claims. Many workers report feeling levels of stress, which represents an invisible yet important psychosocial risk. Workers in our industry are often incentivised to work longer or quicker than is safe during peak seasons.

That's obviously not an ideal situation - however you unpack it. Many workers are away from home and frequently the breadwinners for their families and communities back in the Pacific Islands - and here in

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Aotearoa, growers with tight timeframes and economic imperatives too, can ill afford to be short of workers to get the job done.

After Horticulture New Zealand and ACC's Grow Home Safe project flagged this as an area of concern, the idea of a cultural competency project, drawing on a Safety II approach, to problem solve the industry's injury concerns was conceived. The idea is to create cultural safety to support operational teams as they engage with the concepts to maximise the results.

Within the Apata experiment, the safety and operation teams were reviewing reports of manual handling injuries and were motivated to reduce them as a priority. The wellbeing of workers was of primary concern, and the downtime during peak season created production risks requiring attention. With approximately six shifts involved in the high-volume packing and shipping effort during harvest, a team that was safe and performing to a high standard was essential.

There's a temptation to jump to the conclusion that the injuries are simply down to language differences and the seasonal nature of the work, but in truth the reasons may be more complex and nuanced than imagined. That's where Safety II comes into its own with its focus on understanding how work is done in practice from the workers' perspective, rather than solely relying on the insights of management.

A 'Learning Team' was trialled with the Samoan workers at Apata's packhouse. As it turned out, Apata had recently upgraded its processing facilities using the latest technology. Being the first season using it, understandably there were teething problems to iron out. Rather than focus on why the injuries were occurring, we sought to get insights into what was helping and hindering their performance and how they were achieving success despite the demanding conditions.

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There's a challenging bridge to cross to establish a high level of trust from Pasifika workers (and the wider horticulture community) – especially when they are unaccustomed to Aotearoa and our ways – to enable them to feel comfortable and culturally safe enough to share their valuable insights with us. That underlines the importance of a Pasifika steering group that can guide, lead and support this project.

Hans Key is a much respected Samoan elder and safety expert with WorkSafe. He emphasises the importance of allowing the leadership of this project to have a Pacific lens. "Workers from the Islands are not just a labour force as they come in and out. They appreciate the work they do in New Zealand and pride themselves on their work ethic," he says.

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"Through this project we want to instil in the teams awareness, but more importantly, bring forth the innovative capabilities of the teams to contribute to the workplace, give insights and suggestions, and contribute more of the skills and talents they bring with them from their home countries."

Heath Dibble, the line manager for Apata's kiwifruit packhouse, who has day-to-day involvement with the Pasifika workers says, "it's been awesome, an amazing process, and the team has been really open and helped us identify things we were not previously aware of."

He's positive about what the project has to offer the industry. "The principles of looking at the positives first really worked. The guys opened up about the great things they were doing to keep themselves and others safe. They then thought deeper around where we could improve," says Heath.

"We discovered these guys have skill sets, outside of their daily packhouse roles, that could contribute to the problem solving needed every day. Apata is keen to ramp up the Learning Teams methodology across other teams to continue to bring out the best in our teams."

That's a view backed up by Keith Bardwell, Apata's point of contact for this project and the company's health and safety advisor. Excited about carrying on with Learning Teams, and the mix of cultural and Safety II methods that provides deeper understanding of what's really going on at work, he admits to finding out information about the reasons behind the injuries that he wasn't previously aware of.

"I've been happily surprised to discover the work teams were being very proactive in responding to the



The project's second phase sees full-scale pilots at two further growers in the Bay of Plenty and Auckland

challenges associated with the new upgrades to the production line. They were taking a lot of initiative, and when supervisors were tied up troubleshooting technical problems, the teams were creating flexibility by swapping workers across teams to ensure production continued to run smoothly," says Keith.

"We found out that the team weren't lifting too much because they were trying to be heroes, they simply ended up having to keep up with the production pressures resulting from the line changes, and were doing their best to adapt and do the right thing."

"On a personal note, the Learning Team process has also bridged the cultural gap between myself and the teams," says Keith. "I now find myself stopping for a chat with the guys regularly and gaining more insights into how they're working on a day-to-day basis. This kind of trust will help us make further improvements together next season." ●



For anyone keen to learn more about the project, or volunteer time and resource towards the pilot, get in touch with: Matt Thorn, HortNZ project manager matt.thorn@hortnz.co.nz