

Challenging the way we solve problems – with support from WorkSafe NZ

The opportunity

With a number of similar safety incident reports coming from the library network at Tauranga City Council, the team there had an opportunity to re-think the processes they used to investigate incidents and solve problems.

H&S Business Partner at the Council, Mark Clifford, says the reports and incidents coming in from the library network often described disruptive visitors whose challenging behaviour left library staff mentally fatigued.

While signing off 'trespass orders' to exclude some of these visitors Council GM of Community Services Gareth Wallis *believed there must be a better way*. He felt that the current process of just issuing trespass orders further marginalised people with problems who needed support. Gareth supported the H&S team's idea to try to find a different solution.

With the support of WorkSafe NZ's innovation team, the Council team began with a focus on solving problems. However, as the process unfolded, it became apparent that taking a broader and empathic view was leading to better understanding of their business.

The process

WorkSafe's Innovation Team helped the Council to develop an empathic approach that tied together workshops, workplace observation and sensemaking sessions.


Initially, the thinking focused on fixing a specific problem area – that of disruptive people in the libraries. Early ideas were to consult with psychologists in an effort to understand their minds, and 'fix' the people themselves. Both Mark and Angelique Fraser, H&S Change Manager at the Council, have reflected on their thinking at that early stage.

A decision was made to engage with the library staff to try to understand the problem in more detail and a discovery workshop was scheduled.

As they designed that first enquiry session with the library staff Angelique reached out WorkSafe's Innovation team to see if we had any ideas that might help. During the discussion, it emerged that an [Appreciative Inquiry](#) type approach could be interesting. **Maybe we could ask staff to describe what's great about libraries first, and then see how the problems emerge from that wider context?**

Allowing staff to first talk about a positive vision changed our perspective of what approach would lead to better outcomes for the libraries and their occupants. We found out that librarians wanted a better form of inclusion, they didn't want to fix or exclude certain people.

Conducting a range of inquiry activities both removes bias and provides a richer understanding of workplaces.



"Looking back now I cringe - as I can see a desire to do something different playing out using the same old deficit, 'people are the problem and need to be fixed', mentality."

Angelique

"I thought I was going into the library system to stop unsafe practices. It appeared that there was a persistent problem and I thought that the libraries needed help to make it go away."

Mark

The Council then ran a workshop to canvas for ideas and develop an overview of what's important in their libraries. They then conducted worker observation sessions to confirm assumptions, and provide deeper exploration of the things that people told them.

The first workshop was grounded in positivity with participants visualising when their workplaces were at their best. Getting this positive vision out early allowed subsequent discussion on barriers to achieving that vision to be placed in context, and not dominate thinking. We took the themes noted during the workshop and scheduled some observation sessions.

Watching and talking to workers and customers as they interacted in libraries allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of those places. It was not an audit; we had no preconceived notions of what we should find. Watching and listening with an open mind allowed us to understand more complex issues that hadn't found their way into reports.

Finally, we conducted a sensemaking session to develop insights into the human needs that underpinned what we saw and heard. Sensemaking involves telling stories about the things we've seen and heard and conducting exercises to understand the thoughts, emotions and beliefs that underpin those things. Often the things that are important to people aren't immediately obvious in the things they say or do, so being able to search deeper is a rewarding exercise and one of the hallmarks of innovation.

The insights and needs that were identified in the libraries are now being used to design creative solutions for them. Early ideas for prototyping include:

- Peer to peer support for those who need it
- Create a network map of local support services for Tauranga citizens
- Conduct training with librarian staff on how to provide the best access to that network
- Communicate to the public the times at local amenities that best suit their individual requirements. E.g., noise levels, classes etc

The learning

By spending their time focusing on creating positive outcomes, the Council now has scope to provide better systems that will minimise the harm described in their incident reports and improve the health, safety and wellbeing of their workers. It's been good for the workers, good for the safety team and good for the business itself to view these events through a different lens.

Despite its simplicity, this is an excellent way of approaching complex problems in social settings. When the common purpose for a council is to be there for its community, people can't and shouldn't be eliminated or engineered out, so new approaches like this are important. You can see for yourself the perspective shift between those early solutions focused on 'fixing' the teenagers and the eventual design ideas for improving library service provision.

This process of understanding your business through the safety team is also versatile. There were a couple of entry points into this for the Council, both their reporting and a member of their Executive team wanting to do something differently.

This type of inquiry can be scaled up and out into a sector, industry, or wider NZ business networks. Or similarly, at larger organisations it can be scaled down into divisions or teams. All it really took for the Council to get started was being curious and reaching out for some advice.

Much of previous double diamond innovation discussion in NZ has focused on getting *individuals* to pick these methods up, but this was a team effort and it worked well. That is a key aspect that is worth exploring further. Being able to apply multiple people and their range of skills to it, as well as transparency to the executive has made it all possible.



WorkSafe Innovation is keen to trial this team-based approach in different contexts, and want to design a support network to allow teams to self-form around issues they're experiencing. If you are interested in hearing more about how this might work or want to access the methods and tools described above, please click [here](#).