**Communication for Better Business**

**What was the workplace issue?**

A workplace had undergone a series of business changes. There was considerable uncertainty about the future and poor workplace communication was affecting the safety of the site and reducing productivity through inefficiencies and poor morale.

**What was the impact of the issue on the workplace?**

Poor communication resulted in many issues – a non-productive, non-supportive workplace where communication was often confused and there were occasional instances of perceived bullying. There seemed to be little interest in following standard operating procedures and as a result safety incidents numbers were increasing and therefore unacceptable.

**What was the foundation skills gap?**

The foundation skills gap covered several areas – workers were not used to engaging with Standard Operating Procedure SOPs to guide work, nor did they treat each other with respect in a manner appropriate to a workplace.

*“We found that there were some general problems with the ways that workers communicated, problems such as intolerance – people just didn’t know how to work in a team, and they’d say things like “I can’t work with you – you don’t do things that way I want you to”, or “you’re too slow”. And some workers just didn’t think about the ways that their behaviour affected others – lots of whispering about people, name calling, talking behind backs, and then we had an incident on Facebook with people moaning about workmates. Sometimes we have issues around WorkCover too. If an employee was on a return to work program, for example, there would often be resentment about that person not pulling their weight. All these sorts of issues put together a workplace where people didn’t communicate effectively, and that meant that safety and productivity were affected,”* said a site manager.

The gap is incorporated into the ACSF skills of Oral communication and Reading at levels 2 and 3.

**What was a possible solution?**

With assistance from training experts, the company designed a short training program that focussed on the topics:

* Workplace of respect
* Ethical behaviour at work
* Health and safety

Supported by Commonwealth government funding through the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) Program, the training was rolled out to all operational staff at 15 sites, across four states, provided by five registered training organisations. The program was always referred to as the ‘’Communication for Better Business” training, even though it was essentially a language, literacy and numeracy program. Those who planned the training believed that mentioning ‘LLN’ or ‘foundation skills’ could cause some embarrassment to workers who would attend, so the phrases were never used.

It started with an induction for all trainers to ensure familiarity with the training materials and the approach. Regular teleconference meetings followed, attended by trainers, company supervisors, ForestWorks staff and CFMEU representatives – these meetings ensured consistency across sites and dealt with any issues that arose.

**How did the solution change practices?**

On the whole, workers viewed the training as an opportunity, recognising that respectful communication can set the scene for a workplace that’s good to work in. There was also recognition that safe work practices are important to everyone.

The company manager played an important role in organising the training and ensuring that all sites saw its value. He said, “*It’s hard to measure the impact that this sort of training has, but lots of supervisors and managers are commenting about positive change – that has to be good.”*

Through the training, there were a small number of staff who were identified as having very low levels of language, literacy and numeracy skills. A second training program was put into place to cater for the needs of these staff members who were generally supported by other workers. In fact workers can now talk openly about language, literacy and numeracy issues, without there being a negative impact on those with low levels skills. There is general recognition that we all need to develop our literacy skills at some stage during our working life, and that talking about literacy skills is helpful to understand the requirements of work.

**Where to from here?**

The funding received in this program is no longer available, however the process outlined in this scenario can be used to address workplace issues.

Organisations need to identify what the issue is that is holding them back. What is preventing them from being where they want to be? This gap analysis can identify whether the issue relates to workplace change, safety, teamwork and/or communication. The ForestWorks’ WELL Tool provides a series of scenarios and activities that examine industry case studies. These would be a useful starting point. ForestWorks offers services in workforce development planning. This may assist organisations to plan their workforce needs and therefore the associated training required to achieve these goals.

**Related Resources:**

[ForestWorks website- workforce development](http://www.forestworks.com.au/workforce-development)

Podcast: Building your worker's foundation skills.