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Observe first, speak later

HELEN PARKES on the value of conducting detailed observations and talking to many people before proposing a solution.

Some years ago I was asked to give health and safety support to an organisation which sold building products (bricks, sand, cement, gravel, roofing materials) from an open yard fringed with multiple sections of pallet racking. In a warehouse at the rear they manufactured concrete pillars and processed timber. To the side there was a shop selling paint, small items and hand tools. The company employed 20 people and had just been purchased by a larger group.

Workplace transport risks were not being managed – the site was chaotic. The company was located in a mixed-use zone attracting a large number of commercial and retail customers. The risks posed by the high levels of transport and pedestrian activities were exacerbated by a compact site layout. Cars, vans, HIABs and flat-bed trucks operated on the site, in addition to the company's forklifts and dumper truck.

I was asked to support the company to manage the workplace transport risks.

SECURING COMMITMENT

Significant change was required. My first priority was to establish the site manager's appetite for this. He was resistant because he had "run the site like this for years". He didn't understand why the parent company was concerned. To nudge him in the right direction I took him on an undercover trip to a well-run national organisation nearby to show him what a good site looked like. He still just wanted to make superficial changes, but I persuaded him to give me a chance.

To develop an effective and sustainable solution I took a whole of business approach. I first got to know and understand the business without focusing on OHS needs. I had discussions with the owner, manager and staff and asked questions about the:

- Business focus and values;

We designed a new layout that was informed by safety and business needs – improving both health and safety and the productivity and operation of the business.

- Product movement, turnover and replenishment activity (eg questioning why sand was stored at the rear of the site);
- Transport and pedestrian activity (movement patterns, busy periods, types of vehicles etc); and
- Supplier, staff and customer needs.

I also conducted observations of site activity, customer and employee behaviour and informal processes.

Only after this did I assess the safety management system and processes. By not focusing initially on OHS I avoided jumping to bland safety solutions that could have had unintended consequences or been inappropriate for the operation.

It also gave me the opportunity to develop a positive relationship with the manager and staff.

DEVELOPING THE SOLUTION

I facilitated sessions with the site manager and staff to develop actions for improvement. I modelled the site layout on squared paper, and involved the staff with their knowledge of customer and vehicle activity. Over a few lively discussions we designed a new layout that was informed by safety and business needs – improving safety and the productivity and operation of the business.

The win-win solutions included the removal of the bulk sale of sand and gravel to a sister site nearby. Relocating the low value, low turnover sand not only removed the need to operate a dumper truck on site, but the space created was used for customer parking (improving safe access to the retail area), and enabled the company to increase the footprint of their more profitable lines.

Another solution was the co-location of products regularly purchased together. Items on site were stored "where they had always been stored". The staff identified that some items sold quickly and were frequently purchased together. By locating these products together in a more accessible location we reduced the number of transport movements needed to fulfil orders (improving safety), while increasing potential sales and reducing the time required to fulfil orders.

We also overhauled the site layout – much more than a just painting a few lines and putting up a few signs that the manager first envisaged.

The staff got really into the site design. During the process they developed an understanding of workplace transport risks, and the solutions identified were not only practical, but the staff owned them. I was able to act as a facilitator – keeping them on track and providing technical input, rather than dictating requirements and quoting the 'rule book'.

THE OUTCOME

This approach ensured health and safety was integrated into the business. It supported them to achieve their goals while keeping people safe and healthy.

The solution was developed with the business, for the business, and the knowledge they gained would support them in the future as the business changed.

It reinforced to me that as a health and safety professional, developing a good understanding of the company I am working with better equips me to develop win-win solutions that help, not hinder – and add real value.