

# HEALTH AND SAFETY, DOING THINGS RIGHT FOR YOUR PEOPLE

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## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author.

## Introduction

The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 is now a reality and it clarifies the responsibilities of those involved in workplace activity. One section of the Act is given over to worker engagement, participation, and representation (Health and Safety at Work Act, 2015). This paper examines why worker participation is specifically defined in the Act and why it's important in all areas of the business.

In New Zealand, it seems the general view of health and safety in the workplace is one of having to comply. Many conversations do not concentrate on the incidence of death, injury or illness as a result of activity while at work. Nor do they consider the impact that workplace harm has on people, families, communities and businesses.

Many New Zealand businesses are relatively small, with the vast majority being owner-operated with less than five employees. It is unfortunate that the impact of the Act on business and lifestyle has been so vastly overstated, especially by some in agriculture. One academic confidently stated that the proposed law would effectively ban children from farms. The reality is the legislation won't interfere with the good things about being a farmer, and it doesn't involve a mountain of paperwork. In fact – it may end up saving the farm as well as saving lives.

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## The context

On 19 November 2010, twenty nine miners lost their lives in the Pike River disaster. As more facts about the mine and its operation became evident, the Government set up an independent taskforce to investigate the state of workplace health and safety in New Zealand.

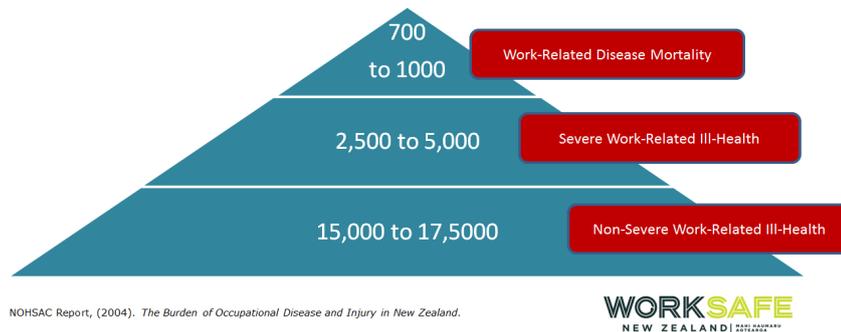
The report is an indictment of work practices across the country. The summary report states “...*the fact is that a lot of bad things happen to people at work in this country. Each year, around 1 in 10 workers are harmed, with about 200,000 claims being made by people to the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) for costs associated with work-related injuries and illnesses*” (The Independent Taskforce on Workplace Health and Safety: Executive Report. p.10).

The cost of this rate of injury is significant. “*Workplace injuries and diseases inflict an enormous emotional toll on the people affected, and significant economic costs on New Zealand. In 2010, the costs were most reliably estimated at \$3.5 billion a year (almost two percent of GDP)*” (The Independent Taskforce on Workplace Health and Safety: Executive Report. p.10).

Less well known, however, is the non-injury toll. “*Occupational illnesses have significantly worse human and financial impacts than harm incidents. These illnesses arise from a broad range of poorly-managed hazards in the workplace, resulting in gradual impairment or chronic harm conditions such as cancers and musculoskeletal disorders, and acute harms related to hazardous substance exposures*” (The Independent Taskforce on Workplace Health and Safety: Executive Report. p.10).

How great is this toll? Estimates are that between 700 and 1000 people die each year from illness caused by workplace conditions, and another 17,000 to 22,000 are incapacitated in some way (see Chart 1). For example, MBIE’s 2010 State of Play report estimated that airborne exposures to harmful substances cause 41% of work-related hospitalisation and 59% of work-related deaths in 2010 (Work-Related Disease in New Zealand: The state of play in 2010. MBIE August 2013).

## BURDEN OF WORK-RELATED DISEASE AND ILL-HEALTH



**Chart 1**

One model for estimating occupational disease outcomes estimated that in 2010 there were 97 deaths and 670 hospitalisations because of work-related exposures to airborne substances in the agricultural sector (Navigatus Consulting. Simple National Occupational Diseases Estimates). Some will find this number hard to believe. If, however, we look at self-reported occupational exposure (see Table 1) it is clear that exposure to pesticides, dust and noise is common in the sector, and high incidents of associated illness or disease should not be surprising.

**Table 1**

	Dust	Smoke/Fumes	Oils/Solvents	Pesticides	Irregular Hours	Lifting	Loud Noise
<b>Admin and Managers</b>	25.2%	19.2%	15.6%	5.0%	12.1%	27.4%	21.8%
<b>Professionals</b>	17.3%	15.1%	12.0%	3.7%	13.8%	25.5%	19.7%
<b>Technicians</b>	19.3%	13.6%	15.6%	5.9%	12.4%	31.1%	18.1%
<b>Clerks</b>	18.3%	13.5%	7.3%	2.8%	7.9%	24.2%	15.8%
<b>Service and Sales Workers</b>	20.1%	23.6%	21.8%	2.9%	24.1%	53.6%	24.4%
<b>Agricultural and Fishery Workers</b>	55.8%	28.2%	35.9%	63.0%	27.9%	70.0%	48.9%
<b>Trades Workers</b>	75.4%	42.6%	58.8%	16.7%	13.8%	68.8%	71.6%
<b>Plant/Machine Operators</b>	55.3%	43.0%	33.0%	10.6%	33.0%	56.4%	67.6%
<b>Elementary Workers</b>	37.2%	25.7%	31.9%	16.8%	23.0%	64.6%	52.2%

Eng, A., et al (2010). *The New Zealand Workforce Study I: Self-Reported Occupational Exposures*

Note: Lifting and loud noise figures reflect those reporting exposure >25% of working time; Irregular hours reflects regularly working outside of 8am to 5pm

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The taskforce points out that five industries – manufacturing, construction, agriculture, forestry and fishing – account for more than half of all workplace injury entitlement claims and have the highest entitlement claim rates (as high as 32 per 1,000 full-time-equivalent employees in the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries).

## **Agriculture**

In this paper, Agricultural statistics unless otherwise stated are deemed to consist of land based primary industries excluding forestry. The dataset includes farmers and growers and direct employees, but does not include processing, transportation or contractors. Depending on the season, this mix of horticulture and pastoral farming consists of over 56,000 separate businesses and employs up to 120,000 people. Over the last six years, an average of 19 people have died from injury each year in this sector, and over 25,000 ACC claims have been accepted each year.

The cost to agriculture is huge. The 2014 ACC data shows us almost 27,000 workplace injuries, which are estimated to have a lifetime cost of over \$90 million. It is probable that over 800 people are missing every day from New Zealand Agricultural workplaces due to injury that took place at work. Who pays? The sector does with higher ACC levies, the need to employ temporary staff, or trying to work short-handed.

## **The fix**

Something has to change – the big question is What? Rob Jager, Chair of the Independent Taskforce, stated in his introduction to the Taskforce Report: *“It will require strong top-down and bottom-up leadership. It will also require a fundamental change to the prevailing ‘she’ll be right’ culture in New Zealand. She most clearly is not all right. Businesses, workers, unions, industry organisations and the Government all have vital and shared roles to play... (The Independent Taskforce on Workplace Health and Safety: Report p.5).*

Basically, we have to change the ‘safety culture’ on farms. Workplace culture change happens all the time, and there is no reason to believe a change can’t happen in agriculture. In fact, changing culture in a small workplace is far easier than in one with multiple departments on multiple sites. Herein lies the first indication of how change must occur – we can’t set out to change the sector as a whole – we must change every business within the sector.

This may seem like a tall demand given the 56,000 individual businesses across the agricultural sector. Given that WorkSafe has around 100 staff on the ground to cover all 250,000+ businesses in our economy, many would say it is simply impossible.

What WorkSafe brings to the table is a willingness to help support this change by engaging with and helping to educate the sector, and a legislated stick to use where unsafe practice continues. The sector needs to bring a mind-set that people getting hurt or ill because

of workplace activity is unacceptable and effort needs to be put into changing the systems, knowledge, attitude and behaviours that contribute to the current rate. The ultimate outcome is where most people in the sector find unsafe behaviour morally unacceptable.

The fix is in the hands of the people who run farms. Owner-operators, managers, sharemilkers – whoever runs each individual property is the person who can make the biggest difference. The question then remains, what to do, and how?

What will make an impact at an on-farm level? The answer is surprisingly simple – having in place suitable systems and processes, and developing a safety culture – ‘doing things right’ and ‘doing the right things’.

## **Beyond compliance**

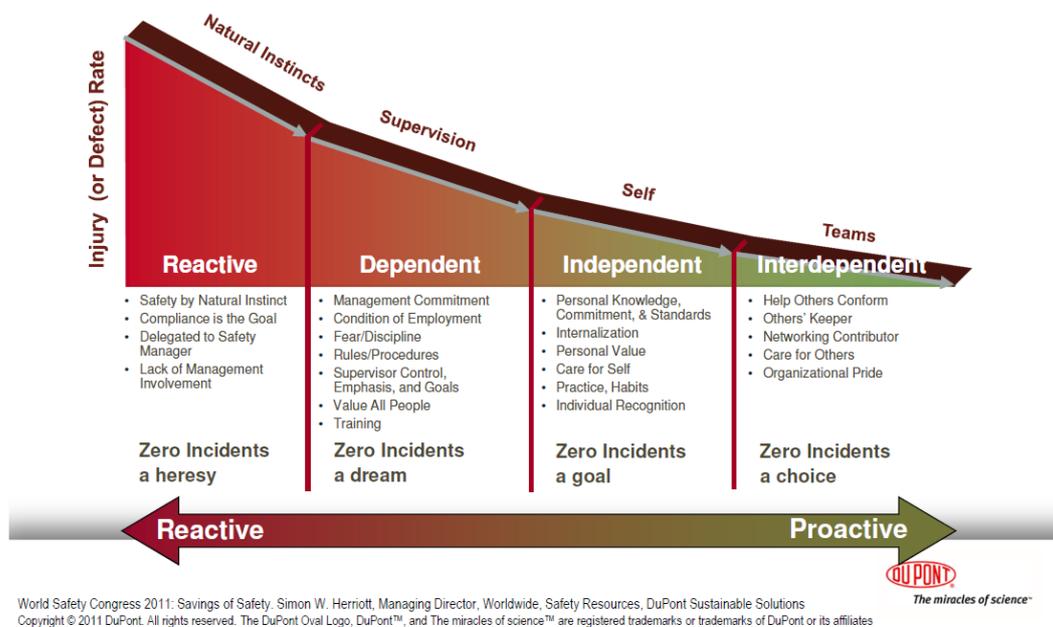
There appears to be a lack of understanding of the basics of good health and safety practice and how the mechanisms which promote this are the same mechanisms that contribute to overall good business outcomes. Simply seeking to comply with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 is not really an option if you want your farm to be a safe, healthy and productive place to work. An attitude of ‘doing it because I have to’ is far removed from having in place the leadership and communication that encourages continuous improvement, innovation, and a positive contribution by all staff.

Simon Herriott of DuPont challenges compliance thinking with his presentation “The Savings of Safety: Leveraging Safety Excellence for Business Excellence. In essence, he argues the processes that encourage good safety (developing the culture and effective management of safety) not only save the direct and indirect costs of the incident and injuries or ill-health, but are the same as those processes that mean you have effective management of the enterprise as a whole – giving business excellence (Herriott).

The DuPont Bradley Curve shows one way of interpreting safety culture by showing four stages. This is shown in Chart 2.

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**Chart 2**

The Bradley Curve was developed from analysis of incidents across many organisations. The curve shows clearly that ‘Safety by Natural Instinct’ more often known in New Zealand as ‘common sense’ is not a solution, even when businesses have compliance as a goal. These organisations have the highest rate of injury from workplace incidents.

Note the vertical scale reads “Injury (or Defect) Rate”. The research in this area shows clearly that the stages here apply as much to other organisational outcomes (such as production and protection of assets) as they do to injury or illness.

Those organisations with the lowest injury rates are organisations with great communication and involvement from everyone in the organisation. These organisations have a proactive approach where problems of any sort are ‘sorted’ before they become problems, because people understand where the organisation is going, and share a vision about how to get there. While this sounds like ‘management consultant speak’ and something for large companies, in reality it is most applicable and much easier to achieve in the very small organisations that characterise farming in New Zealand.

For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that many resources are available to help farmers develop suitable safety systems. The term ‘suitable’ implies that a system should be customised to the size and type of business. What is suitable for a farm with 20 employees may be overkill for a farm with an owner-operator and a family member. The website [saferfarms.org.nz](http://saferfarms.org.nz) has a large amount of advice, and for those who struggle, there are several reputable providers around the country who can assist in developing the right solution.

## Changing culture

While WorkSafe and other organisations can implement programmes of work to assist change and provide sound information around safety management systems and risk management, the reality is that the safety culture on the farm will define how harm free that workplace is. A farm can have in place all the paperwork, signs or systems in the world, but if people aren't using them then the risk of harm stays high. A safety culture ensures that harm prevention is part and parcel of everything that happens on the farm. A good definition of 'culture' in the workplace comes from Schein "...a pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group has learned... These basic assumptions are not readily observable or measurable as they are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs that are the ultimate source of values and actions (Schein, 2004).

The fuzziness of the culture concept and the unconscious nature of the basic assumptions make it difficult to influence culture directly (Nielsen, 2014). What seems to be important is people's perception of the relative priority given to safety versus task completion by those responsible for directing work (Zohar) Basically, the boss and those who direct work set the tone for safety actions.

This approach to change is primarily leader-based, as it focuses on the pivotal role of leaders in creating cultural change. This is not surprising, as the boss's commitment to safety is generally acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of successful safety performance. But you can't achieve cultural change just by telling people what to do or giving them a piece of paper with it written on it, because it involves complex social processes. The change emerges out of the interactions between the people on the farm, who says what, who does what, who sees what. The boss has the opportunity to influence the change process by enabling and focusing the interaction between individuals (Marion *et al.*)

Gerard et al. have drawn from a huge body of work that examines health and safety literature. Interestingly enough, the concepts are the same as those drawn from research into what motivates people at work. Why is this important? Because well-motivated people work differently. They tend to expend more discretionary effort – that is, go beyond the minimum expected of them. The upshot for a business here is that the things that develop great safety

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culture also develop great work cultures. A staff member who feels capable and able to speak up about one thing (eg a new risk) will transfer that ‘permission’ to other things (eg, improvements to process).

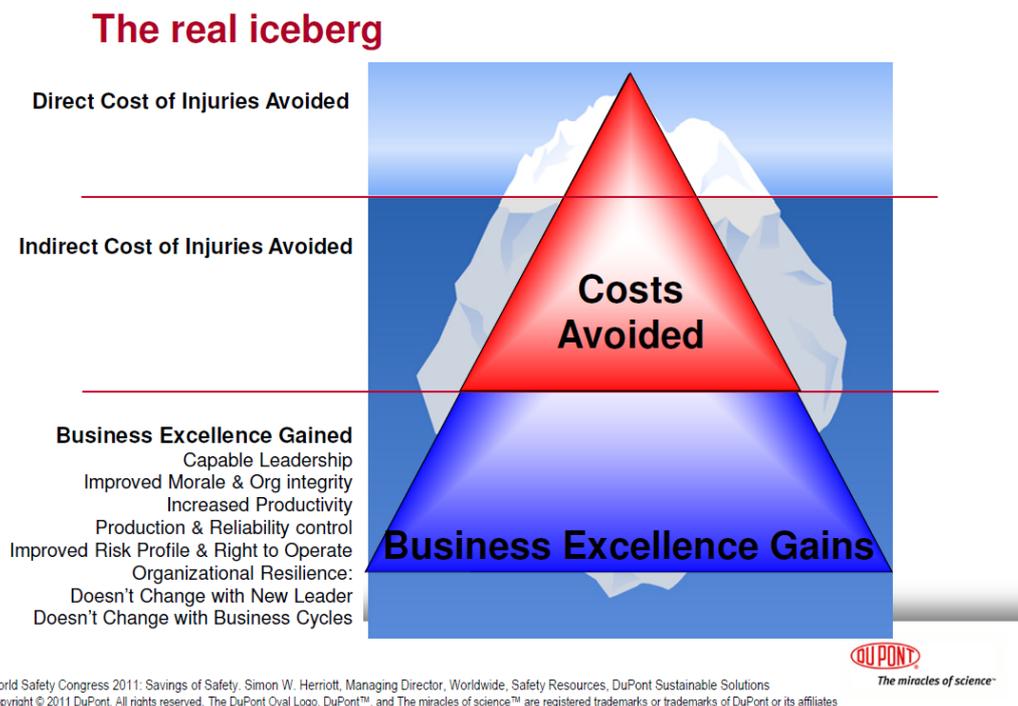
We have all heard the complaints about finding well-motivated staff. So keeping those who have potential to be good workers becomes very important, especially as a farm puts effort into developing them. Having a farm culture (we can drop the ‘safety’) that follows the core values will considerably enhance worker satisfaction and motivation, which in turn will mean better retention of staff.

In fact, the biggest organisational cause of disengagement is incompetent leadership. Basically, as a manager, it's how you act with and around staff that will have a significant impact on whether they are engaged at work, or not.

### The Business Effect

There are two reasons why having the right culture is important. It protects the people on the farm, and it protects the business.

Herriott shows the impact of the avoiding incidents on savings in Figure 3.



**Figure 3**

We have seen similar results in New Zealand by working the other way. Good business practice equates to good health and safety outcomes. DairyNZ worked with Synlait Farms and other farms in Southland to trial ‘Lean’ management practices. Among the results, lower turnover rates, lower number of hours worked, less cluttered work environments, better communication, and better maintenance – all precursors to lower incident rates (and, as it turns

out, higher production rates) (Inside Dairy, 2016) They are now continuing that work with the FarmTune programme.

## **Creating the culture**

Here's a good start point for any leader – what experiences have you had that you can draw from. If you had a great job, what made it great? If you had a really bad one you couldn't wait to leave, why was that? Chances are some of those things will resonate with your team too. The bottom line – people want to feel valued and challenged; they want to be trusted and given the freedom to explore and learn within the job. However, don't expect people to behave like you do, or respond to things like you do.

Team is the operative word. Yes, you may be the employer, and they may be 'staff', but you're all part of the same team, so act like it. Rallying around the idea "we're all in this together" builds a sense of unity and community, which fosters culture. No one has sole ownership of good ideas. Utilise those other brains that work with you.

Are you engaged? People will practice what they see. Are you having fun? Can they see it? Fun is you laughing, joking and celebrating WITH your team. Get to know them and hear their stories. When you engage with them personally, they become engaged work-wise as well. Learning about them will allow you to see what motivates them.

So when developing culture, talk with each other. Easy to say, but hard to do. People need to trust that their opinion will be respected and there won't be ridicule or comeback for expressing views. That doesn't mean everyone has to agree – it means that any response is done in such a way that more considered views are openly shared in the future. People need to be able to share their ideas and speak openly without fear of repercussion. People want their opinions heard, and they want to feel good.

Coach people, using feedback as a tool. Positive feedback should be given right away, to encourage more of the same performance. Say "Thank you!" for a job well done. It's a powerful motivator, and should be done often—in person if possible. Negative feedback should also be given a.s.a.p., so workers have the opportunity to self-correct. The secret is to have a discussion, and pinpoint what needs to be improved and how that can be done.

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When problems arise, examine the circumstances, understand the context, and only then pass judgment. Respect and trust your team and you will get the same in return. If you make a mistake, apologize and admit you were wrong. This will allow your employees to relate to you better, and they will appreciate your honesty.

Try to get everyone engaged in planning and decision-making. That way the results become their baby too: something they're willing to strive for. To do this, whenever possible, ask for input and use their ideas. This way, they have a vested interest in seeing the project succeed. This can not only empower and motivate employees, it can also lead to new and more productive ways of working.

Work is like exercise. People stop doing it when they don't see great results. The reason usually is, because they aren't pushing themselves hard enough, and/or because the results aren't visible. Don't be afraid to push the team, because when they accomplish great things, it's all worth it. If the team isn't accomplishing anything, you either have the wrong people or the wrong plan.

To keep employees engaged, they have to feel like they are more than just a number and that's done by letting them know what's going on. People are engaged with leaders who share, sacrifice and communicate- and hold themselves accountable when they didn't make the right decision.

To create a culture, get to know those who work on the farm, show them respect and trust, learn what motivates them. Encourage them to speak up about things that can be done better, get them involved in planning for the future, keep them informed and let them push themselves.

Mix this culture with good systems and processes (production, safety) and the farm will start to fly.

## **Summary**

New Zealand businesses, of all sizes, are generally poor at determining and controlling health and safety risks associated with their business. The overall impact of this is high work-related illness, injury and mortality rates. Agriculture is one of the worst sectors.

The underlying culture in the agriculture sector seems to be one of acceptance of injury and illness as an unavoidable consequence of doing business. There is a huge reliance on 'common sense' to deal with risk.

There is good evidence that change has to be driven from within the farm, not from WorkSafe or any other external body. One very powerful reason for this change is that adoption of the culture, systems and processes that underlie good health and safety practices creates a stronger business, because that culture, and those systems and processes, are the same as those that lead to business excellence.

Is compliance with the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 an option? No, it's compulsory. And it won't interfere with the good things about being a farmer, and it doesn't involve a mountain of paperwork.

Are safety systems and processes enough? No, because once the basic systems and processes are in place, they need an ongoing commitment by everyone on the farm to make them work. And the secret to getting that commitment? A workplace that has engaged and motivated people, the result of good on-farm leadership.

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