



ENGAGING WITH RISK

DAN DAVIS says engaging with workers in a deliberate, non-judgmental and humble way to understand the workgroup's risk is a powerful means to build genuine worker engagement and participation.

The morning air was crisp and cool as I took in a deep breath and rounded my car to say good morning to the team that had assembled to meet me. Firm handshakes and moments of uncertain eye contact done, the site manager asked:

“So, what’s first?”

“I’ve never worked in this environment before,” I replied. “I’d love to experience your workplace, and to learn about what you do and how you do it.”

The site manager, two team members and I headed out. The veil of low morning cloud had gradually made way for a clear, bright day, when, three hours later, we pulled up again outside the site office. I had learned about the operational flow, seen excellent new design features, but also learned about the frustrations and bottlenecks. There were stories of scary close-calls followed by nervous laughter.

I had gained an appreciation for the long hours and hard work it takes to

keep a site like this running, and the toll it takes working in remote environments, far from the convenience of towns and cities. I had also taken a note of some technical non-compliance issues around hazardous substances storage, but I’d not said anything. This was not the time for that kind of transaction. Instead, I had become genuinely engaged in the process of learning from this team as they gradually realised I had no other agenda, apart from respectfully listening to their perspectives.

ENGAGEMENT IS ABOUT HUMAN CONNECTION, AND THAT ALWAYS COMES WITH RISKS, **NUANCE, LEAPS OF FAITH AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS.**

The others got out and crunched away to get the morning tea I'd left in the smoko room. I noticed one of the guys hesitated for a moment. I took the risk and paused, opening a space for ... something. Over the next 20 minutes, I heard about significant work-related psychosocial risks and the subsequent mental health struggles this person was experiencing. As a trained mental health first aider, I was able to ask about suicidal thoughts. Immediate support was arranged, with this person's consent. It was upsetting, and I sometimes tear up when re-telling these moments. The biggest risk at this site was not the non-compliant hazardous substances storage, it was something invisible with profound implications for the operational risks of this workgroup.

CAPEX SECURED

At another site, towards the end of our time together, the local team, now reassured that we were not there to audit them or find fault, took me back out to show me something. They explained a situation where the risk of a multiple fatality event (to this point unknown to the organisation) had gradually increased, mainly due to the increasing frequency of extreme weather events in the region.

We were able to support the local workgroup by, with their consent, involving a senior leader with influence over the capital expenditure budget. Centrally held funding was immediately mobilised to engineer out this risk (with workgroup involvement), dramatically reducing the risk profile for the workgroup, and ultimately, the organisation.

Six weeks later a major cyclone hit the area. We will never know if our actions saved lives, but because this site's risk profile had been reduced through

improved infrastructure, it was literally able to weather the storm.

WORKGROUP EXPLORATION

Operational risk is the type of risk that will disrupt normal everyday work activities and that is inherent to the people, work environment, processes, equipment, and performance outcomes that deliver the main objectives of an organisation. The primary goal of good operational risk management is to build process reliability and operational resilience.

The tool and methodology for operational risk profiling we have developed is essentially a deliberate and proactive exploration of work environments and teams of workers (workgroups), to understand and appreciate the workgroup's risks at an operational level, its capacity to manage these risks, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of organisational level systems and support.

When done at the level of the workgroup, and in collaboration with worker representatives and team leaders, I have seen that it can be a powerful way of building genuine worker engagement and participation.

HUMBLE CURIOSITY

Operational risk profiling in my opinion works best if it is done in a spirit of genuine appreciation for work-as-done and humble curiosity about what good work may look like. Preparation and up-front communications are important. Participants must understand that the process is not about writing up another set of hazard or risk registers with wishful calculations of inherent and residual risk, written for auditors.

It is not another audit or inspection, where someone who they don't know and who hasn't worked in their local context tells them what they are doing

wrong. It is all about making sense collaboratively about operational realities.

In addition to helping senior leaders understand and reduce the overall operational risk profile over time, this approach can allow an organisation to estimate which of its workgroups are resilient enough to be the testing ground for change initiatives geared towards innovation and operational risk-taking in pursuit of strategic objectives.

SHARED MENTAL MODEL

In this way it is a tool that supports the concept of risk being about gains as well as loss. To take risks well, senior executives, operational leaders and worker representatives must collaborate to build shared mental models about the operational risks they are taking, the context of the risk-taking, and the capacity available to extend towards opportunities and dissipate threats.

I believe that meaningful and trust-driven worker engagement can emerge when one person gives another their full attention, unencumbered by a preconceived agenda or predetermined checklist. When the conversation is curious, the intent is to care, and judgement is suspended, then trust can emerge.

Engagement is about human connection, and that always comes with risks, nuance, leaps of faith and unanswered questions. What will I find out? What will happen next? Do we have each other's best interests in mind? Can we trust each other?

At the heart of better risk management and better worker engagement is the need to redefine health and safety and see it as an outcome of good work done well, together. ■

Dan Davis is head of research, development and training at HSE Global.