# Linking safety leadership and safety culture in Queensland—G&S Engineering

**INTRODUCTION**

**Dr Simon Blackwood**

**Deputy Director-General, Office of Fair and Safe Work Queensland**

Office of Fair and Safe Work Queensland is pleased to be part of the Safe Work Australia Virtual Seminar Series and excited to be sharing with you how we are working directly with industry to progress the work health and safety agenda in Queensland.

Over the past five years we have increased our focus on education, awareness and engagement with business and as a result we have reduced significantly, serious injuries across all industries. We have achieved even greater reductions of between 16 and 31 per cent in our priority industry sectors of manufacturing, construction, transport and agriculture.

An opportunity now exists for businesses to take the next step to drive further safety performance improvement. We consider safety leadership the foundation for achieving these improvements and we will be working with industry to increase the number of Queensland organisations implementing safety leadership and culture initiatives.

We are developing a series of films featuring executives from a range of businesses and industries, sharing their personal approaches and views about safety leadership. I’m pleased to present one of these films to you today, featuring Mick Crowe, Managing Director, G&S Engineering, speaking about his involvement with the Mackay Area Resource Industry Network and the business benefits of being part of a safety network.

Through the Safety Leadership project and in collaboration with Safe Work Australia, we are reaching out to Queensland business leaders to get involved, commit to safety and inspire others.

**Mick Crowe**

**Managing Director, G&S Engineering**

G&S Engineering is a heavy engineering service provider. We provide blue collar, mechanical, electrical, trades, supporting heavy industry—maintenance and construction, mining, sugar, iron ore, on a national basis but largely focused in Queensland.

While G&S has a national exposure we’re predominantly in the Mackay region. And the Resource Industry Network is local businesses that have banded together to collaboratively improve. So I’m involved on two levels. I’m on the Board, which is interested in whole-of-industry; but more specifically, the last three or four years I’ve been the Chair of the Workplace Health and Safety Committee, which brings members together to collaborate on safety in the region.

The reason I got involved was….We’ve got a thousand, thirteen hundred employees in G&S. So I get exposure to relevant statistics, I get weekly reminders that hazards occur, incidents occur, and risks are in the workplace. It always connected with me that inside Mackay there’d be companies that don’t have that level of exposure, or the warning signs. But over the last five or six years there’s been deaths in 20-person industries. And to me, it really hit me that those people don’t get any warnings.

So two things happened. We worked together collaboratively to say, ‘You might only be 20, but if there’s 50 of them, there’s a thousand people’. And what do our stats look like, and what are our trends? Then if you can get that awareness up, how do you then help people improve that? So we seek to basically share and collaborate so we hurt less people, and share and collaborate so we can influence the industry sector so it’s actually easier for people to be safe.

**Benefits of being part of a safety network**

Being involved in industry networks around safety—for me, it’s just like an acceleration program. You’re automatically being exposed to a broader range of experience, a broader range of problems, and a broader group that helps personalise the issues.

You have to stay so focussed on it. You need to know of every time there’s a learning. And if you’re just looking at yourself, you’re slowing down how fast you can learn. Secondly, you’ll also get energy from others who are doing good things, because….safety’s hard work. You have to stay on it, you have to stay focused. And being around other people who are getting wins as well, helps remind you that ‘Hey, this is worth it, and we’ve got to stay on this’. So I just think it’s the collaborative environment, the increased knowledge just through exposure. It’s no different to anything else: if you want to be great at your sport, you’re not going to get that in your lounge room at home by yourself.

Being part of a network, you get more learning opportunities, so hopefully your learning opportunities are minor issues, not major issues. And that’s a big goal in any safety program—make sure you’re learning off the near misses, not off the injuries to people.

**Developing a local safety culture**

The resource sector in Queensland is big and diverse, and there are lots of different companies that compete and everyone takes an absolutely serious approach to safety. One of the down sides to that is they’ll all set up rules that pertain to their own particular sites, and a lot of our members are exposed to multiple sites. To get great safety, the exposed person has to believe why you’re doing it. Every time you do something to that exposed person that makes them think ‘This is more about ticking boxes than it is about my safety’, you shift their risk bar: ‘I’ll do that because I have to, not because I care about me and you care about me’. And look, this is difficult stuff ok, you could never have a site that didn’t completely own the safety of its people and make sure they were trained. Similarly, if you take people who visit multiple sites and give them the same information four different ways, that essentially says the same thing, that’s not engaging them around safety.

So we’re working hard with sharing that message with our clients to say, ‘Hey look, appreciate that you’ve got a complicated problem, but the end game of all of this is safer people on the ground, and the key to that is their mind in the game’. And every time we give them some repetitive, non-value-add piece of safety experience, that degrades how far their mind is in the game. Then there’s more practical things like common standards around vehicles, because probably the biggest risk to our employees is actually travelling on the road. And minimising that is a way to reduce exposure to people. That then means, again, engaging with clients with different standards to make sure we can use common vehicles between sites.

Some of the bigger picture stuff—at the end of the day, each individual business has to own its own safety problems and lead in that way, and the network can help people do that. But then probably our broader approach is what can we do to actually reduce the base level of risk in the industry—as I said, better inductions, more consistent messaging and reduced travel time.

The Resource Industry Network Safety Committee is an influencing body. Our members are there voluntarily because they’re obviously interested in improving their safety but also in improving the region.

I think we can only grow the capacity through motivating, aligning and assisting in keeping our various members committed to the cause. It would be no different to when you decide you want to get fit—what do you need a personal trainer for? But you go better with a personal trainer because there’s someone coming along who’s just reminding you of the right things to do and sharing a few smarter ideas, but largely just keeping you on the path and sticking at it. The strength in any network is its actual members and what they do and I think we build the capacity in the region through collaborating and through keeping everyone motivated and committed to the cause.

**Mick’s personal safety leadership style**

I think the leadership style in safety for me, you always start with the person you’re trying to influence. And the person I’m trying to influence is a guy who’s on his fourth night shift, it’s raining, it’s cold, he’s doing a dirty job, when he finishes this job they can go home, he wants to go home, he’s been away from his family. And it’s all of these things that are making him think about everything except the job. So the leadership style needs to connect to that guy. Because the person who gets hurt isn’t the clean area, everything laid out, no pressure, happy to be here, it’s the person who’s under pressure. And so to connect with that person your leadership style has to be relevant to them. And you know, a thousand people, particularly with high turnover in the project spaces, how do I know? So for me you have to keep it very, very simple and very, very honest. And that particular person might have a risk profile that’s considerably outside what we’d like. He might be a compliant safety person. So you just be honest and you have to be transparent, and you have to be available, and you have to bring it back to things that matter to them which is, ‘Mate I don’t want to meet your family for the wrong reasons’.

So it’s got to be a value in your people and you’ve got to keep, through your leadership, showing that it’s your priority and that you expect and need it to be their priority in your supervision. And we need it to be the priority for the worker. And how well you lead will be a factor of how well that happens.

But, I’ve worked overseas as well and I’ve worked in places. I’ve got a safety award shirt for an LTI free year, and we killed seven people that year. But in that country, if you weren’t alive at the start of the next shift you weren’t deemed to have missed a shift. So when people talk to me about, ‘This safety stuff, it gets in your road’—well there are countries you can go live in where it doesn’t. Just keep in good touch with your mates, because you’re not sure how long they’ll be around.

So as a leader, if there are things that frustrate your people about safety, you’ve got to make it easier for them to be safe, you know. And where it’s not easy, you’ve got to absolutely communicate the ‘why’. It’s no different to anything. If you want someone to do something that is harder than another option, you’ve got to spend all your time on the ‘why’. And the ‘why’ is: why are you here at work in the first place? Who matters to you in the world? What would happen to them if you weren’t around? And okay, from that basis, now how are we going to do today’s job?

If your actions aren’t there to make sure no one’s life is seriously harmed through your actions, well what are you doing? And draw on that, and that’ll help shape your behaviour and you know what? Your people will respond to it. People respond to knowing that you care and knowing that you’re worried about them. And then once they realise that, they’ll help you in that cause and then it helps the rest of your business too, because they’re engaged, they see it as ‘we’re here for each other’.

**Strengthen your safety leadership**

My advice to people who want to strengthen their safety leadership commitment can only come from me and what works for me. What I do is, I think about what happens if I fail as a safety leader, as the person accountable for the wellbeing of all the people in our organisation. The reality is that if we fail in that, we could have a death or a serious permanent injury.

I strengthen my leadership by thinking about what more can I do, and then using the unacceptability of if it went wrong, if someone in our care wasn’t there for their kids, wasn’t there for their family, and that was under our control. And that’s the primary thing I use to strengthen my resolve, because that’s unacceptable. I don’t know, I don’t know how you’d have that conversation with someone’s partner and kids, knowing that you can avoid his injuries, with enough effort you can avoid it. So it’s a circular loop. The consequence is unacceptable. As a leader you’re in charge, you know you can influence the outcome and avoid it ever happening, so think about what all of your work is going towards and that’s your motivation for doing whatever it takes.