

Building relationships to ‘supercharge’ health and safety representatives’ role

Air New Zealand launched an innovative approach to health and safety 18 months ago, using High Performance Engagement (HPE), the collaborative way of working the company has adopted business-wide. With a focus on using its employees’ skill sets and knowledge to help solve issues, Kalman Soma, who works in cargo, says the process has ‘supercharged’ the role of the company’s health and safety representatives.

“Air New Zealand has always had health and safety at the forefront of all it does,” says Mr Soma, who has been with the organisation for 10 years and an elected health and safety rep for the past five.

“But HPE has really knocked down any silos which could sometimes develop – there’s a lot more two-way communication around health and safety between workers and leaders. We’re seeing a lot more collaboration and less top down approach to decisions made. It’s a truly integral part of the business.”

The Air New Zealand HPE model was pioneered on similar systems used in the United States to aid in resolving industrial disputes.

Darren Evans, General Manager People Safety & Aviation Medicine for Air New Zealand says that using it in the context of health and safety is a really good approach to help the business achieve even better health and safety outcomes.

“It’s to have passion. Passion about health and safety.”

“Our employees are such an important resource for us in terms of being at the forefront of health and safety – ultimately they are the ones that see day-in, day-out any potential risks. Utilising our reps, who are employees themselves, and coupling this with HPE to really bring up any issues and using this group to solve them – that is what is making the difference.

“The first step in HPE is identifying the problem,” says Mr Evans. “It’s about front-footing the issue. Air New Zealand has more than 12,000 employees. Eighty per cent of these are in operational roles, and around 70 per cent belong to a union.”

Mr Evans says HPE involves interest-based problem solving and consensus decision-making.



A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER

“We have applied this approach to key health and safety projects, including reinvigorating our health and safety representative programme.”

“HPE is the way we are working in collaboration with our people and union partners to create good outcomes for the business and our people. It focuses on those closest to the problem coming up with solutions – and that complements perfectly with what we want to achieve in health and safety.”

To help achieve the right outcomes, Air New Zealand incorporates the HPE programme into health and safety in three key parts.

The first stage has been relationship building. The second will be setting a shared agenda, understanding what the issues are from all parties and coming to agreement on what real engagement looks like. The third stage will be execution, putting the policies which have been built together into action.



“It’s important to note this is not an overnight solution,” says Mr Evans. “It takes time and we are still at the beginning of the journey.”

“The first phase focuses on engaging with those employees closest to the risk. It is important the time is taken to do this. We have spent significant time working with our union partners and our health and safety reps to create a deep understanding and develop really good relationships with all parties. The time it has taken to do this has been well worth it to reach the position we are in now.”

A steering group was established to oversee the project which feeds into a wider programme of HPE across the whole business that is overseen by Air New Zealand Chief Executive Christopher Luxon, senior leaders and union managers. Alongside this, work groups and sub-committees of employees were set up to deep dive into issues and create solutions.

Thirty health and safety reps from across New Zealand and around the world were invited to ‘step out’ of the business for a week to engage in a facilitated process.

“Together we looked at what our challenges are, what is being done to solve them and how we can help empower reps to really add value to the business as part of their role,” says Mr Evans.

“It’s important to note this is not an overnight solution. It takes time and we are still at the beginning of the journey.”

“By the end of the week, groups of health and safety reps presented to the steering committee on what they needed.

“While not all changes have been put in place, the work the health and safety reps did with us over this period really created the plan for how we are going to achieve results for our health and safety reps going forward.”

Connecting the health and safety reps and building a strong sense of community is a major focus. Air New Zealand has recently launched a number of initiatives for the reps including a regular newsletter and holding an annual day-long forum for them – this year’s was designed by the health and safety reps themselves.

“While these are still early days, feedback from the unions, health and safety reps and leaders has been very good,” says Mr Evans.

“We are starting to see the creation of a community of health and safety reps. It has been well worth the investment in having our people lead the invigoration of the programme.”

Mr Soma says that sense of community is also extending beyond health and safety reps to other workers.

“I see my role as a health and safety rep as being all about making the workplace safer for myself and my co-workers, through acting as a conduit between my colleagues and leaders to identify risks and find solutions.

“Now, when workers identify a problem, the process of seeking and reaching solutions happens much faster. When people are engaged in that process and see results from their actions, then that helps to build community.

“Recently, the cargo team I work with identified a risk around office employees coming into the warehouse to find items. That requires them to walk along aisles which are also used by forklifts.

“My team raised this as a risk and we were involved from the outset in the process of trying to find a solution. The health and safety reps, in collaboration with the rest of employees, came up with possible solutions and management provided resources to trial these.

“We tried a variety of approaches, including a physical barrier – which worked but wasn’t practical. Ultimately, we found the best option was installing

lights at the end of the aisles. When a pedestrian enters an aisle, they turn the light on and the forklift driver knows not to drive along there. That has now been actioned.

“Before HPE, that would have taken a lot longer to process but now health and safety reps and management are collaborating in this way, we have more of a voice and are getting our views across faster. Workers were involved and saw rapid results.

“There’s also an increased awareness of what we do as health and safety reps, and our colleagues are more likely to tell us if they identify a problem.

“I’m excited now about being in a health and safety rep role. Our opinions are sought, we are looked to for guidance and we are listened to – and when you are excited about what you are doing, then you are going to do a better job.”

Andrena Corby, from Air New Zealand’s People Safety Team, said that sense of community was tangible at this year’s health and safety reps’ forum.

“Now, when workers identify a problem, the process of seeking and reaching solutions happens much faster.”

“In line with the focus on greater collaboration, this year the business provided resources, but the conference was designed by the health and safety reps themselves,” she said.

“The feedback was amazing. Our health and safety representatives are spread across New Zealand and around the world, but there is now a real sense of community.

“Our health and safety reps now have clear vision of what their role is: to be a role model of safe attitudes and behaviour, to understand what our risks are as a business and to encourage reporting, keep up to date with health and safety reporting and promote health and safety and wellbeing initiatives.

“And it’s to have passion, passion about health and safety – and that passion is what we were seeing very clearly at the forum.

“We are working closely with them to understand how we can support them in terms of the tools they need to assist them in their roles.”

WORKER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

The best outcomes are achieved when a business and its workers work together on health and safety. Worker Engagement and Participation is about having planned ways for:

- workers to give input on issues which will (or are likely to) affect their health or safety. This includes asking for and taking into account their views
- workers to improve work health and safety on an ongoing basis (eg by raising concerns or suggesting improvements).

This will help you and your business make better decisions
- and keep your people and productivity thriving.

KEY POINTS

Worker participation in health and safety leads to:

- a sense of community amongst health and safety reps
- workers feeling empowered to raise health and safety issues
- collaboration between workers and managers on solutions to identified risks.

For more examples and information visit [worksafe.govt.nz](https://www.worksafe.govt.nz)
