

News

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Empowering the individual is key on the road to success

By Martin Worthington, SHEQ Director, Morgan Sindall Construction and Infrastructure

I believe the key to successfully delivering a safe highways project is by fostering a sense of community and trust amongst the whole team, and ensuring everyone on site – from operational lead to the smallest subcontractor – feels empowered to make a difference.

On any sized project, it is possible for an individual or team to underestimate their own importance to its ultimate success, and for other members of staff not to appreciate how pivotal each of their colleagues is to its efficient day to day running when creating a safe environment.

If a member of the team is relatively new, or doesn't work in a 'senior' role, they may not feel confident enough to speak out if they see activity taking place which they perceive as being an unsafe action or condition. When working on a project, it can perhaps be intimidating to be the one person to put their hand up and say that something doesn't look or feel right.

In order to counter this, we use a number of techniques, including the recent introduction of 'Safety Empowerment Cards' on a pilot site. This provides every worker on site – whatever their job title or length of service – with the ability to halt an operation that they think is unsafe or has the potential to put colleagues at risk. This is a simple but effective way of instilling responsibility and power into the individual. While the cards have only been used on one site to date, their success means we are currently looking into rolling them out at projects across the country. We have found that the Safety Empowerment Cards are also a great way of showing new recruits that they are trusted members of a team.

When people start a new job, it is vital for both employer and employee to make a good impression, as this will set the scene for the future working relationship. One innovation we've implemented is the translation of our induction boards and signage into languages such as Punjabi, Romanian and Polish. On some projects information can also be accessed through a QR code on the boards, and we are considering rolling this out on a wider basis. While this may seem an obvious use of existing technology, it has not previously been implemented in this way and it has proved invaluable both in providing a warm welcome to new members of the team, and to impart essential details about health and safety. Other documents and videos are also translated where appropriate, and we have similarly created stickers for workers to wear identifying themselves as able to translate certain languages if required. We have also made good progress in increasing the use of graphics rather than the written word in on site literature – another simple but effective way of enhancing awareness of safety risks.

We also use QR codes for easy access to our Positive Intervention app which allows any individual to feedback on good practices or areas for improvement. This means we are able to receive input by our own employees, supply chain and other individuals who contribute to the sites day to day running.

Empowering the individual is key to staying safe, and activities like those previously described are instrumental to letting staff know that their voices will be heard and ideas or concerns acted upon. Another way we instil this in our operations is through our Views of Operatives in the Construction Environment initiative – also known as VOICE.

This is a feedback tool we've developed over many years that is aimed at ensuring everyone on site feels they have a real input into the day to day operations. VOICE sessions take the form of relaxed get-togethers on site rather than in a boardroom, which we feel provides a more relaxed environment to make people more confident to voice their opinions. During the VOICE sessions, the agendas and resulting outputs are set by the nominated reps, meaning the items discussed and acted upon are driven by the staff. The agreed outputs are then published on "You said - We did" boards across the site in question to ensure everyone is aware of what action has been taken.

Historically, some organisations have paid lip service to employee involvement and engagement but for us it is an essential tool to improve safety and the ultimate quality of the projects we deliver. As a result of VOICE feedback, we have made various adjustments to our operations, including things as specific as improved head torches, to increasing the number of mental health first aiders; as well as introducing wellbeing additions such as providing vending machines, installing more cycle bays and helping community projects.

A big part of our ongoing improvement over the last few years has been the further refinement of our senior management engagement and the introduction of engagement discussions that use themed 'grab cards', which are delivered in the field and provoke healthy debate. The idea of the engagement discussions was informed by guidance from our operatives and supply chain teams, who advised people felt a lot more comfortable and at ease having discussions on their own patch. A wide range of issues have been discussed during these sessions, including risk perception, mental health and the people plant interface.

Our teams have risen to the responsibility we've given them to help improve safety on site, and it is important to recognise their continued contributions. Individuals whose commitment to health and safety goes above and beyond are rewarded with a monthly cash prize and donation to a charity of their choice, while there are on the spot canteen vouchers handed out as immediate recognition for exemplary behaviour. While our approach to safety incorporates new technology and advanced thinking, it would be remiss to overlook the continued power of a genuine thank you.

A number of years ago I was also extremely proud of being involved with the development of the HSE Leadership and Worker Involvement Toolkit (LWIT). Its creation was informed by a lot of research and learning from key industry figures - its use at Morgan Sindall Construction & Infrastructure has had a very positive impact on our work and I would encourage my colleagues across the industry to include it in their own health and safety provisions and promote it within their supply chains, especially given the amount of advice and free resources in there.

Everything that I've described has been an important change that improved both safety on site as well as the service we are delivering to our customer, and we continue to encourage our teams to keep us updated on any further interventions that may be required. Highways projects are often vast undertakings that rely on hundreds of workers across different shift patterns, and it is ultimately the collective team effort that will result in a safe and successful project - but what drives the team forward is the knowledge that each individual's opinion is valued and listened to.

This piece originally featured on the Safer Highways website