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# Better health and safety

To a stronger future

*Rob McColl*





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## About the author

A leader in the health and safety industry for over twenty years, Rob McColl firmly believes that “understanding and using simple, up-to-date health and safety practices, can improve the worker connections, industry reputation, and bottom line profits of any company!”

Rob’s background as a registered nurse has given him a unique insight into how businesses should approach health and safety, taking ownership of the ethos, “firstly do no harm” and operating a business in an ethical manner. This concept is one of the guiding principles of medical professionals.

In an operational sense, this means that a business should jealously guard its good reputation. The public must perceive that it is honest and trustworthy and the company must show that it cares for its workers and the environment. In recent years, huge importance has been quite rightly placed on the importance of customer service and good marketing; however, a happy, positive and productive work force can be underestimated.

Early in his research, Rob realised that the more a company sticks to the basics and focuses on key fundamental tactics, the faster and easier the results will come.

What are the results of better health and safety?

- ✓ Gain Control of Your Organisation’s Safety
- ✓ Boost Worker Connection, Productivity, and Morale
- ✓ Reduce Absenteeism
- ✓ Easily and Correctly Handle Safety Concerns
- ✓ Increase Profits by Managing Risk
- ✓ Improve Industry Reputation

Rob is a regular contributor to magazines and websites, a keynote speaker, a founder of Total Managers of Risk Limited and Avid Plus Limited

Rob’s keynotes and workshops are a perfect fit for group events, corporate keynotes, and team retreats. Meet Rob at: [www.avidplus.co.nz](http://www.avidplus.co.nz)



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## Chapter one: Three steps to a stronger future

Today – unlike ever before, health and safety is critical to your business. All stakeholders are far more interested in your health and safety performance.

What would be different in your business if you knew how to set up systems that created a safer environment for everybody, increased the morale of your workers, and made you stand out in your industry as a leader in today's health and safety movement?

The bottom line, no doubt, would be increased profits!

You can achieve these goals by focusing on the health and safety of your workers and, in turn, make a positive impact that will benefit them and you.

The real meaning of “health and safety” is so often misunderstood, companies can't always figure out what they are supposed to do. However, the problems of risk and risk management in business have a long history. In 1950, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly adopted a definition of occupational health:

“Occupational health should aim at: the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations; the prevention amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities; and, to summarise, the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job”.

With this definition in mind, companies that begin to focus on the many benefits health and safety provides for their workers will soon realise a positive impact on the bottom line as well. How can this happen? First, businesses must put in place strong health and safety guidelines. Next, they must encourage their workers in a positive way to follow them. The end result will be a healthy, safe and effective team, working productively for a stronger future.



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## The Top Three Steps

### **Step 1: Know your risks.**

Too often companies don't have a clear understanding of their problems. You need to first learn what the issues are. Of course, some problems like accidents and increased absenteeism due to sickness and injury are obvious. Other problems are subtle and you need to work harder to identify those. How do you accomplish this? As a health and safety auditor, I see so many companies with poor risk registers. I believe simply because they have never put in the effort to form a clear view of what all their risks are. Work out your key risks and develop a plan to deal with them.

### **Step 2: Involve your workers.**

Who better to know the problems than your workers? They often have a better understanding of what health and safety means and how they are affected. Consult them, but don't be afraid to ask the hard questions and by all means, listen to their answers. When your workers are actively involved in the problem solving and decision making, they have a strong buy-in to implementing the solutions. I see so many businesses that underestimate the insight which workers have into workplace issues.

### **Step 3: Write meaningful goals and objectives.**

After you have worked with your workers to identify the gaps and develop solutions, you and your worker team can write meaningful goals and objectives. What do you want or need to accomplish and how are you—all of you—going to accomplish these goals?

Don't over simplify the objectives and if you need it, get some help to write meaningful objectives.

Once established, work out meaningful ways of communicating them.



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## Chapter two: The process

To get started on this three-step process, set up a brainstorming session with your team. Step 1: Identify your problem and Step 2: Involve your workers, go hand in hand. Effective managers learn to rely on the skills and expertise of others and this includes considering workers' frontline experience in the issues that face them.

Time and time again I have seen how open workers can become when they are talking directly to me. Each is able to speak about areas of their competency. All of them are touched in slightly different ways by customers and by every other aspect of the organisation, so getting their input on this – taking them into a room, doing a focused brainstorming – brings about a dynamic change.

In the past we have just thought that if you tell people what you want them to do and push information into them, then somehow you will change their energies, but that approach is often counterproductive.

I strongly believe in the need to involve workers in all aspects of health and safety issues. What makes them feel good about doing the work that they are doing? By getting them to see health and safety in a positive light, you have a better chance of really changing their energies and improving the effective breakthrough.

When you keep your nose to the grindstone, you don't look up for the bigger pictures. Too much of your day may be spent on worrying: how do I build this and how do I build that? How do I move the company in this particular direction? Sometimes you miss the larger issue.

### **Build a Team - Why worker buy-in so important?**

You want to develop a community of workers who believe in your vision of health and safety. You want your workers to develop and share a culture in which health and safety is important and integral to their daily lives.

People often work in a way that models other workers—the guys that 'know the ropes'. But what if these people flaunt the rules? Besides being poor role models, they would be endangering their own lives as well as the lives of others. You need managers to turn the heat on these people. Hold them accountable.

Cast a positive light on safety measures. Show your workers the advantages of working in the right way. Show how these measures benefit the workers first. In



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turn, these measures will improve productivity which, in turn, will improve profitability. Encourage your workers to see that positive safe work practices will provide them a pathway to growth. What is good for the company's bottom line is good for them!

I still see so much health and safety material focused on what not to do, even showing pictures of what not to do!

What tools can you use in your company to guide your workers to positive acceptance and implementation of health and safety guidelines? The key is to begin with small steps.

### **Write Simple Objectives**

With your workers, develop simple objectives. In the beginning, write goals that can be quickly and easily achieved. Through this initial success, everyone will feel a part of the health and safety culture you are trying to establish. The small steps become great building blocks to achieve more complex and larger objectives.

When your workers work together to compose these goals, provide them with some guidance. Tell them that an effective objective should (1) clearly define the nature of the work to be performed and (2) provide methods for measuring the success of the task.

Explain that these objectives should begin with strong verbs and objects to specify what is to be done. The measurement should provide clear criteria for success.

#### **Example 1:**

By the end of December, identify two ways to decrease absenteeism by 5 percent for the next calendar year.

The verb "identify" and the object "ways to decrease absenteeism" provide a simple clear goal. The measure "5 percent" is a quantifiable way to determine success and "by the end of December" and "the next calendar year" establish a time frame. Remember the focus is on positive so avoid statements involving the reduction of negatives such as accidents. Also remember:

The more complicated an objective, the less likely it will succeed.



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### **Example 2:**

Identify and map three quality control procedures within the Production Department. Each procedure must reflect input from all four divisions and use statistical analysis to establish criteria for success. Procedure 1 should be implemented by the end of the first quarter; procedure 2 should be implemented by the end of the second quarter; and procedure 3 should be implemented by the end of the third quarter. All procedures must be supported with documentation for both implementation and analysis of results.

Too much is happening in Example 2. Remember the motto “keep it short and simple.” If necessary, break long, complicated objectives into two or three different objectives that are manageable and attainable.

After you and your workers have written your objectives, review them to see if they are clear to all stakeholders. Be sure the objectives can be measured. Connect them to attainable deadlines. Giving a time frame helps everyone understand what needs to be done by when.

An added benefit to this process is that you have taken the burden off your management team, your president, CEO, or even yourself! More importantly, you have empowered the workers in a way that just helped the company so much more.

### **Hold Regular Meetings**

One practical way to put this into action is to hold regular meetings. During these sessions, you or your managers can accomplish quite a lot of team building and provide positive reinforcement. For example, ask key people to provide an update on what they have been working on. Involve as many people as time will allow. How are they progressing on their goals? Get feedback and accept it with an open mind. Provide encouragement by spotlighting improvements and positive changes.

For example, a construction company identified the need to keep construction jobs simple and free of injury and began a series of monthly meetings. Topics from these meetings would then be discussed by workers in open forums throughout the various construction sites.

From these collaborations, workers and managers could resolve troublesome issues, such as bothersome and time-consuming paperwork. Not only have accidents declined but the company is currently receiving a significant discount on its annual ACC premiums.





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By providing an accepting and encouraging culture at work, you are enabling all of your workers, and not just management, to share the load of responsibility for health and safety across the company.

You may be surprised at the way these meetings and their opportunities for shared feedback lead to more open conversations across all ranks. These open conversations can really illuminate ways to improve the health and safety programme.

### **Be Positive**

Never underestimate the power of the group's mentality in the workforce. Some of you may have encountered a troublemaker or a militant who, by a negative comment or poor attitude, can chip away at the morale of the whole group. Luckily, I find the opposite to be true as well. One or two positive workers who support a positive focus on health and safety can raise the morale of the group. These heroes can become effective among their co-workers and by their example and attitude can prompt great improvements. Some of a company's problems, such as absenteeism, can be reduced, which in turn leads into productivity and, of course, profit.

With open communication and positive reinforcement, you may find that your company has a warmer, family like atmosphere.



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## Chapter three: Learn from others

A key to improvements in health and safety performance by many companies I work with is their attitude to learning. They are not assuming an attitude that they know it all and have all the answers. They understand well that – you don't know what you don't know.

### **Work out what's best practice and do it**

Today I see best practice as being a much broader view of health and safety as compared to basic legislative compliance. It is about developing a positive company culture. Top performers practices include:

- ✓ Being interested in the health and wellbeing of workers
- ✓ Being prepared to support people
- ✓ Supporting communities

A number of clients I work with barely have an identifiable health and safety system; it is so imbedded in everything they do. These businesses have incorporated their concern in their mission statements and put into practise effective measures to promote and maintain the well-being of their workers.

Many companies have adopted a worker-friendly business model that accomplishes three goals:

- ✓ Create a safer environment for everybody
- ✓ Increase the morale of your workers
- ✓ Makes the company stand out as an industry leader

Recently a client contacted me very excited, he had just been told by the Project Manager of a major construction company that they would never get another job from that company – so why be excited? The Project Manager had demanded that my client's workers work on a scaffold which they had concerns about. When it was noted that at the ladder access there was no safety tag the workers had refused to climb onto it and stood firm despite being harangued by the Project Manager.

My client, following an unsuccessful discussion with the Project Manager had contacted the CEO of the construction firm who supported my client's workers stand and was going to follow this up with the Project Manager. Conflicts like this are



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unfortunate on a construction site but here was clear evidence that after significant time and resource workers were taking responsibility for themselves and each other.

They had the faith in their employer that he would not compromise workers standards and I believe his “workers first, customers second” strengthened his position with his workers.

These companies are not isolated examples; you will find a great number of companies who take care of their workers. As a result, the workers feel valued and tend to stay. In some companies, you can find generation after generation working for the same organisation.

Small businesses to large conglomerates may have to approach the instruction and training differently, but no matter the company size, all can become stronger with effective and efficient health and safety policies.

Some new companies experienced exponential growth when they focused on building the processes inside of the company. As soon as the workers realised that the company was interested in their best interests, they in turn wanted to push for the growth of the company.

So instead of being focused on counting the number of accidents or monitoring the lost-time injury rate as a way of determining company performance. Look to be supportive and health and safety can have a positive impact.



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## Chapter four: Overcome objections

You probably are not surprised that some workers view health and safety in a negative way, often as something forced on them by an employer. Perhaps this viewpoint comes from a low level of trust. As a manager or owner, you should be prepared to counter these objectives.

*Objection: "My manager doesn't really care about me or my safety and health. They are pushing me because the government is pushing them."*

Reply: Acknowledge that the company must abide by rules and regulations to be fully operational; however, these rules and regulations have come about to protect each individual's health and safety.

The positive messages begin at the top. When managers present explanations in the right context, workers are more likely to accept them.

Some companies may see health and safety as an expense brought on by government rules and regulations. They are being forced to spend money and see it as a drain. I am sure this thinking again leads to a negative attitude about health and safety.

*Objection: "The company spends too much money on health and safety measures when it could give me a raise instead."*

Reply: No doubt, these health and safety measures take money but this is money well spent. Not only is the wellness of the worker protected, so is the bottom line. A raise will do a worker no good if the company is not in operation. Think of this money as an investment, not a drain. The company cares enough about its workers to provide for the workers' well-being.

*Objection: "I don't have enough time to spend on all this. I have deadlines to meet."*

Reply: I understand that you feel pushed by your deadlines. I have felt the same way with all my daily tasks, but I've found that these meetings don't take very long and they are very productive.

By showing empathy, you can not only make the worker feel better about the objection but also you can overcome the protest.



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### **Get over it – just do it**

This is a bit of a family motto – a concept we live by. The first and probably most important secret of doing a great job of your health and safety is the secret actually to a lot of things: Just get started! There is no simple and quick way of doing a great job but if you don't get started you will never get there.

Be positive. Stop buying into all those excuses about it being too hard or too complicated. It doesn't matter that you don't have all the answers (you probably have some.) You will be surprised just how much you do know and what you can achieve.

The sad truth is that there will always be the “knockers” – those who will knock everything you try to do, but because you are striving for the health and safety of all your workers, look for achievable objectives that will make a difference. If possible, work on something tangible that can be seen by workers as an achievement. Too many companies work away at their computers writing fancy procedures, flash forms and complex safety software that doesn't convert to much out on the shop floor. The managers wonder why they haven't got the support of workers. The answer is simple: the worker simply doesn't know what's being done. They can't see it and they can't see how it's going to make them any safer.

Start with small steps and build with successes. You can turn those doomsayers around. When these objections are handled correctly, you are one step closer to improving worker morale...and productivity...and profit!



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## Chapter five: Safety tips

Let's look at a number of different health and safety tips that will guide you, your workers, and your company to a stronger position of profitability – emotionally, physically, and financially.

- ✓ To be successful in integrating health and safety into the workplace, your management must be on board.
- ✓ Select the right person in your company to be the driver for health and safety.
- ✓ Management must provide leadership and take responsibility to achieve results.
- ✓ Worker representatives for health and safety must be proactive, assist management and be a voice for workers.
- ✓ You review your financial accounts once a year; do the same with health and safety!
- ✓ Health and safety should be an integral part of your business and not stand separately.
- ✓ Include health and safety as one of the many key performance indicators to assess managers.
- ✓ Develop a training system that will have a positive impact on quality and productivity by ensuring workers are working in the way you want them to.
- ✓ Emphasise that the concept of accident investigation is not to apportion blame but to ensure the accident doesn't happen again.
- ✓ Accident statistics should provide meaningful information, highlighting opportunities for improvement.
- ✓ Be careful when rating your hazards. Remember even a trip over a cord can end up with a broken leg.
- ✓ Improvements only happen when your workers become involved.
- ✓ Change the culture. Take ownership for your health and safety first; then your workers will buy into it.
- ✓ Focus on effective leadership by setting clear roles and responsibilities and having effective monitoring.
- ✓ A key concept for making health and safety successful is to set up a structure for your health and safety system which means that it can continue to improve and grow.



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- ✓ Reviewing performance turns your system into a cycle of continuous improvement.
- ✓ Get workers involved by communicating your vision to them and getting their input.
- ✓ Expect the same from contractors that you would from workers. Set clear expectations. They also should be part of the culture of health and safety within your company.



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## Chapter six: Establishing a health and safety culture

By following the three steps - identify the problems, involve your workers, and write meaningful goals and objectives - you will begin to establish a culture of health and safety, no matter what size your company is.

Eventually, your workers will come to appreciate this culture, especially if they feel they are being supportive. Once this has happened, I have seen a number of companies reduce the number of occupational mistakes, reduce absenteeism, and increase productivity. Generally, having a healthier workforce makes for a more profitable company.

A culture of health and safety also reduces direct costs, such as ACC premiums. A number of clients over the years have seen increases in their mass production and their profits which have led to paying significantly lower ACC premiums.

How do you build a culture of health and safety?

1. Understand what health and safety really is. A company can't move in the right direction without having a clear target.
2. Know where the risks are as a company and what exactly needs to be improved.
3. Align your team to understand and accept the changes.
4. Create a simple but direct plan, and allocate that plan to the right people.
5. Use effective measurement tools so you can accurately chart your results. Everyone wants to see the numbers. Never assume you're moving in the right direction and everybody in the organisation should just follow you. Have tools for accountability.

### Results

As you set this all up for your health and safety plan, make sure it is designed to grow your bottom line instead of being a drain on your revenue. You also want your plan to boost productivity and morale in the workplace. Once your workers see that you care about them when you enact this plan, they will come to work to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem. They may enjoy coming to work to be part of this family; a caring group of people.





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How can you be sure your company's health and safety plan is effective and your workers are serious and sincere about their well-being and the company's well-being?

First, be sure you know what the problems are. Many companies think that they are not having accidents, but really the answer is that many things are going on that you may not be hearing about.

Create an atmosphere of trust. Ensure that your workers are prepared to tell you about what may be going wrong. Establish what areas need to be improved and move in the correct direction of change.

Finally, acknowledge change. See what is better now. See what is different and provide positive feedback. Change can be scary but once workers embrace the concept of health and safety for all, they will help themselves and the company becomes stronger.

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