

SAFE+

MAKING HEALTH AND SAFETY WORK

Assessment Approach

A JOINT INITIATIVE DEVELOPED BY

WORKSAFE
NEW ZEALAND | MAHI HAUMARU
AOTEAROA



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Overview of SafePlus

SafePlus aims to help lift the performance of workplace health and safety in New Zealand businesses. It assesses how well a business is performing against good practice health and safety requirements, and provides tailored advice and guidance on how to improve.

Key Elements

SafePlus has three key elements. Continuous Improvement is integral to each.



LEADERSHIP

Leaders in a business are in a unique position to have a major influence on health and safety. Leaders set the conditions in their businesses, control the resources and have a large influence on the culture. All these components contribute to the level of safety and health in a business. Leadership is also an expectation of the legislation which includes a focus on 'Officer' responsibilities. For these reasons SafePlus has a strong focus on assessing the perceptions of workers to how well leaders display safety leadership in their business.

WORKER ENGAGEMENT

Research has consistently identified that worker engagement and participation in health and safety has a fundamental impact on the health and safety performance of a business. The more workers are able to participate in decisions impacting on health and safety, the better the outcomes. SafePlus focuses on the mechanisms in place for worker involvement in health and safety and the perceptions of those in business as to how those processes are working.

RISK MANAGEMENT

To protect workers from both short and long term harm, a business needs to have effective processes in place to identify, assess and control both health and safety risks. SafePlus assesses how a business identifies and manages health and safety risks, by looking for evidence of risk management processes in place, knowledge of those processes within the business, and by looking in depth at how three specific health and safety risks faced by workers are managed.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

A successful business needs to be constantly assessing how well its systems and processes are operating, looking for what is working well, and what needs improvement. This is as important for health and safety as it is for other business processes. SafePlus specifically looks for evidence of continuous improvement processes in leadership, risk management and worker participation and seeks feedback from managers and workers as to how well continuous improvement processes are working in practice.

The Assessment Approach

The SafePlus Onsite Assessment and Advisory Service uses a diagnostic and evaluative approach to engage with the business to understand the practices, behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, values and ‘culture’ within it. The approach identifies and assesses what influences the business’s health and safety performance, and measures the performance against the good practice requirements of SafePlus.

The assessment uses information gained from interviewing people throughout the business at all levels, observing behaviours and conditions in the workplace, and supplementing this with a review of business processes (where applicable). The intent is to build an accurate picture of ‘what is actually happening in practice’ and why, as opposed to the theory or what is ‘supposed to be happening’ according to written procedures. While some documentation may be reviewed during the assessment the assessment focus is not on a detailed documentation review.

Fundamental to the assessment approach is engagement with people at all levels of the business – including at the governance, senior leadership, operational, management/supervisor, worker and contractor levels. This enables the assessment to identify similarities and differences from across these perspectives, and to better understand the root causes and influencers of behaviours, culture and performance, rather than just identifying and describing the practices and issues found.

This is a qualitative approach. The assessment and recommendations made and the improvement advice given, are based on evidence from the interviews, discussions, and observations. While assessors are considering such information sources they are also seeking to explore and factor into their assessments

some of the underlying influencers and drivers that are behind the answers to their questions and behaviours, practices, perceptions, cultures and conditions they observe.

A key feature of the assessment approach is that it is flexible, and can respond to issues that emerge during the assessment process, rather than following a rigid assessment path. This approach enables assessors to check and test responses made by people throughout the business and evaluate different sources of evidence. It also allows assessors to dig deeper and ask follow-up questions if necessary rather than being constrained to ‘sticking to the script’. Likewise, some issues may be found to have more significance than initially thought and so can be explored further during an assessment. Several risks are identified with the business to provide context for testing risk management within the business. These are then explored at different levels of the business to give a deeper and richer picture of what is happening.

The assessment is not a paper-based audit of a business’s compliance with health and safety legislation or management or quality assurance standards. The triangulation of the perceptions and views of people in the business, observed practices, behaviours, and business processes (as legitimate evidence of performance) is quite different from traditional workplace health and safety programmes. The latter often have their main focus on compliance with documented management system policies and procedures, and minimum legal compliance requirements, and an over reliance on what these documents say should be happening.

The assessment provides the business with greater insight and understanding into the health and safety ‘culture’ and ‘values’ in the business, how the business aligns with what ‘good health and safety performance’ looks like (as described by the SafePlus performance requirements), and what it needs to do to improve its health and safety performance.

Example of the assessment approach in practice

CASE STUDY 1

Assessing: Senior leaders visibly demonstrate their commitment to health and safety through their actions

Senior leaders in one organisation were asked how they demonstrated their commitment to health and safety in a way that people in their business would recognise. They advised that they had made a commitment to visit a work site at least once a month to look at health and safety onsite and to talk to workers specifically about health and safety. Such an expectation was also built into their performance plans.

The business also maintained a 'health and safety dashboard' which showed the number of senior leader site visits each month. The dashboard indicated these visits were actually occurring more frequently than the targeted number.

Assessors then talked to several site managers who confirmed that they did get visits from a senior leader approximately every month. They also noted that the senior leaders were looking at the incidents that had happened onsite and asking the site managers to outline the corrective actions that had been taken in response.

The assessors then talked to groups of workers at each of the sites visited, and all confirmed that they do see the senior leaders arriving for site visits about once a month. However, they also noted that the leaders were generally only meeting with the site managers and then leaving. None of the staff spoken to could recall a senior leader walking around the site and talking with the front line workers. The workers were disappointed not to have a chance to engage with the senior leaders' while they were onsite to share their experiences.

This mismatch of viewpoints was brought out in the assessment. While there was a system in place to promote senior leadership engagement with workers, and demonstration of their commitment to health and safety, the system was not seen by some as being effective and having the desired result. Senior leaders thought they were doing the right thing, but workers felt ignored and unengaged.

To help the business improve the assessment recommended that the business provided guidance to managers on what effective worker engagement and participation looks like and specific risks to focus on in conversations with front line workers. Doing these things would greatly increase worker perceptions of senior leaders' commitment to health and safety and engagement with workers and improve senior leaders understanding of front line workers.

CASE STUDY 2

Assessing: Worker engagement in the management of change

One business asked assessors to specifically look at manual handling issues as they had noticed a recent increase in strain/sprain injuries.

The company's management of change process required workers to be involved whenever modifications to machinery were being considered to help identify potential health and safety risks. Assessors were advised that management of change was always on the safety committee's agenda and that any proposed changes to equipment or work processes were discussed with employee safety representatives.

Assessors could see this item on safety committee minutes, but noted that there were no specific examples of changes over the last two years. When questioned on this, managers explained that there had been no major changes during this time, so there was nothing to report.

When talking with front line workers, however, they had a different view. They noted that a new production line that had been installed the previous year to replace an older line. The workers on the new line felt that it has caused major manual handling problems. The working position on the new line is much lower than on the old line, which meant that workers had to constantly bend and stretch to perform their tasks. A number reported sore backs due to the constant bending. While watching the workers on the new line, the assessors could see that much of the work required workers to frequently overstretch to reach items, and bend for extended periods when working on the line.

The assessors felt this was significant and raised it with management. When reviewing how the management of change process had been handled when the new production line was being considered, assessors found that the matter had not been considered at the safety committee. Senior leaders indicated they hadn't seen the need to use the management of change process to formally consult with workers because they felt that they were essentially replacing 'like for like', and so didn't see this as a 'change'.

The assessment found that the new production line had introduced a significant manual handling risk into the business. A number of recommendations regarding the employee engagement process, risk assessment in the management of change and monitoring of pain/discomfort were highlighted in assessment feedback to the company.

CASE STUDY 3

Assessing: The business strives to continually improve health and safety practice and performance

A fast-growing business identified its forklift operations as one of their key risks.

Assessors found that its senior leadership had a clear commitment to health and safety, with senior leaders regularly emphasising the need to reduce injury rates. However, senior leaders were concerned that incidents and injuries were still occurring with forklifts.

On observing workers undertaking their roles the assessors observed a number of high risk behaviours were occurring, including forklifts driving at speed and narrowly avoiding crashes. Visible collision damage to mobile plant and equipment was also apparent.

Assessors also noted that messages to workers were being communicated via large TV screens, noticeboards, and in team meetings. However, a clear focus on such messages was on striving to achieve production targets and the potential rewards for doing so (eg bonus payments). Rewards were usually given to recognise workers with high levels of productivity.

Assessors talked to workers to explore the reasons behind the observed high risk behaviours. Workers reported that most of the messages they heard from senior leaders were related to production targets. Workers still felt that they thought health and safety was important to the business, but they also noted that unsafe behaviours were often tolerated by managers, and by the workers themselves. Almost universally workers reported that there was an acceptance that taking risks (such as driving operating forklifts at speed) was acceptable to meet production targets. Spread of work was considered the number one priority.

The assessment found that senior leaders understood that mobile plant was one of the company's key safety risks, but only had limited awareness of how this the risk was actually being managed in practice. There was also a high tolerance of risky behaviour at the supervisor and worker level and most performance recognition messages to workers were about meeting or exceeding production rates.

While production rates are important, this should not be at the expense of workers' safety. The assessment identified a mismatch between the expectations of senior leaders for a strong health and safety focus, and the messages that staff were actually receiving. The assessors, therefore, made recommendations and provided guidance to the company about:

- how senior leaders could better monitor how key risks are managed
- how the culture of risk acceptance in the workplace could be changed, and
- the need to balance the content of messages to staff so that optimising production does not have to mean compromising worker safety.

CASE STUDY 4

Assessing: Engagement: The business communicates effectively

A business had developed a site audit to monitor health and safety management at its various sites. Assessors noted that site managers used the audit to compare their progress against each other. This was fostering competition across sites to achieve the highest audit score each month. However, when interviewed, site managers noted that the audit scores did not always give a sound reflection of how well site risks were actually being managed in practice.

Over time the senior leadership had also come to believe that the focus on the total scores were detracting from recommendations being made in the audits and didn't represent a true reflection of the state of health and safety management. The fact that almost every site was achieving consistently high audit scores was out of line with senior managers' perceptions of what was really happening onsites.

In response, senior leaders decided to make some changes to the site audit process, and to stop publishing the audit scores to try and stop site managers focusing too much on the audit score.

However, when speaking to site managers assessors found that they were frustrated that they no longer received their site safety audit scores. They felt that this removed the sense of achievement and recognition from the audits. Site managers were also disappointed that senior leaders had decided to stop publishing the scores without discussing the issue with them.

The assessment found that the business could make significant gains by improving the communication and consultation process around decisions on health and safety matters.

Although senior leaders had reservations about the site audit scores, they had not appreciated the motivational impact the audit scores had on focusing site managers on health and safety performance. On the other hand, some site managers had not fully recognised the impact that artificially high scores had on senior management's confidence in the audit.

The assessment found that a more consultative approach could have found a middle ground and improved the audit process, so that the business:

- took advantage of the motivation driver that recognition of good health and safety performance can have on site managers
- ensured the site audit focused on accurately assessing how well key risks are being managed, which would provide senior leaders with a clear picture of what is working well, and where improvement is needed at a site level
- ensured that all parties have confidence in the site audit tool and the benefit it can provide.

CASE STUDY 5

An example of a well Performing/Leading business that engages with and empowers its workers and representatives

A construction business has recently worked hard to engage with its worker safety representatives and wanted to test how successful they had been as part of their assessment.

The assessors found that the business had engaged extensively with its workers and contractors to develop the best structure for giving workers a strong voice on health and safety in the business. Assessors were provided with evidence of meetings and communications, and our engagement with people at all levels of the business supported this.

The structure that was agreed on involved workers at each main site choosing a worker health and safety representative who could communicate well with workers and contractors. Worker reps were provided with training and specific times to engage with the workers they represented. The names of the representatives were communicated to workers (including contractors).

The business has the 'traditional' health and safety committee to oversee safety management at the site and organisational levels, but also supplemented this with an informal safety breakfast every few months involving the worker safety representatives and the CEO.

Workers spoken to were very positive about how they and their representatives were involved in health and safety matters, and the access they had to worker safety representatives.

The CEO reported the breakfast meetings gave direct unfiltered access to what the health and safety issues were at the workplace, and helped keep 'the finger on the safety pulse'.

The worker representatives reported high satisfaction in their roles, and felt that they had been empowered with the ability to influence positive health and safety changes in the business.

People at all levels of the organisation reiterated to assessor's that this engagement process had a positive impact on:

- worker engagement
- identifying safety risks, and work-related health risks
- health and safety communication, and
- quick resolution of health and safety issues.

The assessors also saw a number of examples where the use of worker representatives input in decision making had improved the management of risks.

The triangulation of information from interviews, workplace observations and records of decisions and meetings clearly demonstrated to the assessors that the process for worker engagement in health and safety was working well in this business, and allowed the assessors to confirm the business was at a performing level in this part of the employee engagement requirement. The assessors asked the company if they could use the approach used as a good practice example for other businesses.

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