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# Building on the positives

Robert Long March 07, 2013



So little has been devoted to discussion about imaginative solutions, motivation and creating change in Canberra's construction industry. Photo: Katherine Griffiths

## Change in construction requires more thought.

There have been many claims made in recent times about the culture of safety in construction in Canberra. Words such as "toxic", "worst in the country", "bloodshed" and other extreme and emotive language have been used. Without entering into debate about data collection methods, reporting periods or "regression to the mean", it is strange to hear these constant negatives and yet so little mention of much positive, imaginative or creative by way of possible solutions and learning.

The tragic stories of loss and permanent injury must be told, and the cost for loved ones ought not be devalued. However, over recent times there has been so little discussion about safety ownership, learning and motivation to safety.

It is as if the constant stating of negatives will somehow make things improve. It is as if policing and punishment is the only method known to change behaviour and culture. Despite all that has been spoken about problems and entrenched cultural

dysfunction, so little has been devoted to discussion about imaginative solutions, motivation and creating change.

The common approach to cultural transformation is through proclamation, systems and manipulation. At the time, it sounds straightforward. The culture is exposed and declared "toxic", decisions are made, an investigation takes place, compliance is sought and policed and a program for improvement is put in place. Meetings are held and initiatives follow, care and attention is given and resources are dedicated to change processes.

This approach is best labelled "cultural change by seduction". But it rarely works. The trap of culture change by seduction is certainly the challenge for the construction industry in Canberra, indeed, for the industry nationally.

The advent of the Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner serves as an example of why culture change by seduction doesn't work. The OFSC was created with the mandate for culture change in construction yet imposes yet another layer of system complexity to the mix. Culture change requires cultural solutions, systems are simply an artifact of culture.

The Getting Home Safely Report targets the word "culture" throughout its pages yet commits very little space to its definition. If one defines culture as systems, then one will view solutions to cultural issues as more systems. If one defines culture as behaviour, then one will view solutions to cultural problems as behavioural modification. If one defines culture as leadership, then one will view solutions in a "top down" method.

If the culture of building and construction in Canberra is as culturally toxic as suggested, then such a problem requires cultural solutions. For the past six years Human Dymensions has been conducting surveys at all levels of the construction industry in Australia, including more than 700 workers in Canberra.

The survey uses keypad technology and is time-limited, so as to capture implicit "gut" knowledge. Implicit knowledge is the knowledge a worker uses in the field and in the moment, rather than the slow-thinking mindset used in responding to systems. Results from the survey show that the attitudes and values common to workers in Canberra are prevalent in all other jurisdictions.

So, despite all claims by some regarding trends in data in Canberra, the attitudes to safety in Canberra are no worse than other jurisdictions in Australia. While injury data is important, it is not a cultural measure. The constant fixation in the construction industry in Australia with injury data simply creates a "calculative" rather than a "generative" mindset.

Cultural lag measures such as rushing and hubris and lead measures - such as positive behaviours, safety observations, safety walks and conversations - serve organisations better in their quest to develop a culture of safety than the fixation on lag indicator data.

So, as the ACT government and the construction industry begin to implement the recommendations of the Getting Home Safely Report what will be done to make sure that the 28 recommendations of the report are not just more of the same? Can we only think of systems solutions to cultural problems?

Will there be space for some imaginative and creative responses to the current dilemma in construction? Will as much energy be given to learning and motivation as to policing and punishment? Let's hope that the key stakeholders can come together to ensure that this current blitz on safety is not just more cultural change by seduction.

Dr Long, executive director of Canberra consulting company Human Dymensions, is author of Risk Makes Sense, Human Judgment and Risk and, For the Love of Zero, Human Fallibility and Risk. He is currently working with the Master Builders Association of the ACT in delivering the award-winning PROACT program to a number of building and construction organisations in Canberra.

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