



Briefing May 2009

National Leaders Forum on Health and Safety

Health and Safety and Our Youth

At a Glance

- ◆ Three simple things can make a significant difference when it comes to enabling young workers to take accountability for their own safety: orientation, training, and communication.
- ◆ Regulations mandating safety inspections for private companies can make a valuable contribution to health and safety, but they vary across provinces and trades.
- ◆ When students and champions were asked separately to use one word to describe what it takes to be a champion, both groups identified integrity, leadership, courage, and knowledge.

On February 4 and 5, 2009, health and safety champions from the business world gathered with young people in Calgary for the National Leaders Forum on Health and Safety. The Forum was a joint project organized by The Conference Board of Canada and the MySafeWork¹ initiative (formerly the Our Youth at Work foundation). On the first day, some 40 business leaders—all of whom are recognized as health and safety champions—participated in four community events aimed at raising awareness of the role our young people play in health and safety. The second day focused on the presentation and discussion of the business, legal, and union perspectives on accountabilities in health and safety.²

1 For more information, see www.mysafework.com.

2 The second part of the National Leaders Forum is the subject of a separate Conference Board of Canada briefing.

The community events brought a panel of business leaders/health and safety champions together with local secondary school students to discuss the need for Canada's youth to embrace health and safety. Those discussions also looked at how Canada's business leaders can help young people to become the health and safety champions of tomorrow.

Orientation, training, and communication enable young workers to take accountability for their safety.

Each event was held in a Q&A format and opened with a presentation by Rob Ellis, president and founder of MySafeWork. Ellis' son David died in a workplace incident in 1999 when he was pulled into an industrial mixer after a power surge, and Ellis' message to the students and business leaders was that three simple things can make a significant difference when it comes to enabling young workers to take accountability for their own safety: orientation, training, and communication.

Orientation entails showing new employees around the workplace and informing them—before they start working—about what could cut, burn, trip, or otherwise harm them. Ellis said an employer should disclose all the job requirements, and he urged students to avoid employers who do not care about them or their safety. Orientation gives employees a chance to explore their new workplace. It can be as straightforward as having someone show them around and point out potential hazards or dangerous sites and areas where one would need extra training or knowledge.

Training is more than just reading a manual or taking a course. It is about having a more experienced “buddy” to turn to when needed. It is more specific to the job (than orientation) and requires longer supervision and specific knowledge about the tasks to be performed.

Communication entails asking questions and getting answers. Ellis told the students he believed they would not tolerate the same kind of leniency (with respect to health and safety training) that people had tolerated in the past. “Your generation and mine will link together

and change things,” said Ellis. “Ask employers if they have orientation and training—not for me, but for your future [safety at work].”

BUSINESS LEADERS MUST ENGAGE AND ENABLE YOUTH

In the four Q&A sessions, students posed many questions concerning their health and safety at work. It became clear that the students took a real interest in the advice that Ellis and the panel of business leaders had to offer. Employers that strive to be attractive to this generation of potential employees need to be prepared to address their questions and concerns related to:

- ♦ the legal and regulatory environment;
- ♦ the health and safety culture;
- ♦ communication about health and safety; and
- ♦ the skills and qualities of a health and safety champion.

Business leaders also shared with the students what actions they personally take to improve health and safety in their organizations.

This briefing helps other business leaders to understand the unique point of view of health and safety champions and how they can successfully engage with the next generation of employees—our youth—to improve health and safety.

CHAMPIONS ACCEPT HEALTH AND SAFETY ACCOUNTABILITIES AND EMPOWER THEIR WORKERS

PROVIDING ORIENTATION AND TRAINING

Students were surprised to learn that in nine of the 10 provinces and in all three territories, workplace orientation has still not been made compulsory (although safety training has). Ellis suggested that—regardless of the legal situation—it was every worker's responsibility to be proactive and ask for orientation and training. The panel of champions agreed that training was a reasonable request of an employer's time. In any case, said one champion, it was important for employees to ask questions. If an employer makes light of these questions, employees should leave.

MOVING BEYOND COMPLIANCE

Regulations mandating safety inspections for private companies can make a valuable contribution to health and safety, but they vary across provinces and trades. Typically, there are inspectors for electricals, plumbing and heating, ventilating, and air conditioning—but not all types of inspections are mandatory. Champion companies realize that inspections are only a small part of making workplaces safer. One panel member emphasized that as long as the commitment is there, small companies can be just as successful as big corporations when it comes to health and safety. This applies irrespective of government regulation and inspections.

ELIMINATING UNSAFE WORK

One business leader cautioned that employees should not assume a job is safe just because they have been told to do it—and it is up to the workers to get the information they need to work safely, and to raise any concerns with others. The panel stressed that it is the role of champions of health and safety to make sure that employees do not use a piece of equipment until they have received the proper training on it.

Some students expressed uncertainty about their rights and concerns about the risks involved in refusing work that they deem unsafe. In Alberta, employees have a legal right under the provincial *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) to refuse unsafe work. A champion told students to tell their parents if they are fired for refusing to do a job they felt was dangerous, and then to take their case to the Ministry of Labour. In order to be able to refuse unsafe work, however, employees must first have all the necessary safety-related information. Ellis said two of his son's friends had been injured while working on the same piece of equipment that killed David but had never talked about it. The panel members repeated that it was incumbent upon the employees to continually challenge their employers on the question of safety.

A student asked whether a union could help when an employee felt uncomfortable about safety conditions or if the employer threatened to fire an employee who refused to work in unsafe conditions. A champion said

the worker should talk to the union's health and safety representative about the situation, because the union was legally mandated to act on its members' behalf. Union representatives said their job was not just about negotiating hours and wages, but about "getting every worker home in one piece." Workers were urged to call their union representative if they have concerns about safety in their workplace, or if they want to know their rights when it comes to refusing unsafe work. Employees in non-unionized settings were urged to contact the Ministry of Labour.

Ellis said two of his son's friends had been injured while working on the same piece of equipment that killed David but had never talked about it.

Students were curious to know what happened to a company that displayed unsafe work practices. In some jurisdictions, a company can be shut down if it ignores a warning to fix a safety problem. Legislative changes in Alberta over the past decade have led to an increase in liability for companies, workers, and unions. However, employers are not always well informed about this. Some sectors, such as the oil and gas industry, have policies in place that require operations to shut down while accidents are investigated and problems are addressed.

Students also wondered about the availability of compensation in the case of injury. Business leaders pointed out that the province's or territory's Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) provides injured workers with benefits, so that it is not necessary to sue the employer for compensation. Insurance typically protects employers from the financial impact of lawsuits.

When asked about the cost of injury, a champion said, "You don't want to make it about money. You simply don't want people off the job at home due to injury." Another added that champion employers also addressed the non-monetary effects of an incident on the employee's co-workers and family—for example, by offering counselling.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CULTURE

ERADICATE THE “ACCIDENTS HAPPEN” MENTALITY

Students challenged the business leaders by suggesting that it would be impossible to eliminate workplace accidents entirely because, in their words, “accidents happen.” Ellis said he had thought that once, but champions of health and safety convinced him otherwise. One champion said his company was working toward a goal of zero accidents, which had actually been achieved by some divisions already. Another champion recounted that, in an effort to get rid of the “accidents happen” mentality, a company he had worked for labelled accidents as “incidents.” The company reviewed all incidents to see what could be done to prevent them in future.

“To get accident rates to zero, you cut the rate in half and then in half again. You keep it up until it reaches zero,” said one champion. Champions noted that reaching the goal of zero accidents is achievable, but the process doesn’t end there—hard work is required to sustain that level.

MAKE IT ABOUT PEOPLE

One student said that despite asking all the right questions, her grandmother—an experienced welder—was killed when a new acetylene torch blew up because of a leak. The company did nothing for the family. She asked if companies should provide help to families in these situations. One champion said his company provided grief counselling for family and co-workers. Champion employers cared about people.

HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMUNICATION

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Ellis’ message to young employees was one of accountability through communication. He said they had to demand that their employers take accountability for their health and safety. Employees, he said, must ask more questions, such as:

- ◆ Has there been turnover on this job, and if so, why?
- ◆ If I will be working with unfamiliar equipment, will I be replacing someone more experienced?
- ◆ Will I get the training I need to work with the equipment safely?

Ellis recounted the story of a 17-year-old girl who attended one of his talks. She told him she had to close down her workplace alone at 2 a.m. and deposit the day’s cash at the bank. She said she felt very uncomfortable about the situation, but that she could not quit because she and her mother needed the money. Ellis told her to call her boss at 2 a.m. and tell him her concerns. “If you demand respect, you get respect. I don’t want you ever to be left alone again,” he told her. The girl later e-mailed Ellis to report that she had called the boss as promised. She did not get fired—and she never had to close up alone again.

To get the accident rate to zero, you cut it in half, cut it in half again, and repeat until it reaches zero.

Health and safety documents are legally required to be posted, and many companies have policies and procedures around health and safety communications in place. However, the most important information that needed to be more frequently communicated was the phone number of the person to call to find out more, said Ellis. Panel members agreed that it was a bad sign if there was no learning material at all about safety in a workplace. Ellis added that positive media coverage targeted at an adult population will bring the safety message into all Canadian households. A cultural shift will only take place when both young and experienced Champions openly discuss solutions to workplace injuries. Today these discussions are just beginning to happen.

EXPECT TO BE CHALLENGED

A teacher asked how students might go about asking for help if they felt uncomfortable or anxious about raising orientation and training or safety issues with their employer. Ellis said one student he knew wrote the question on a piece of paper as a reminder and guide for what to ask during a meeting. He suggested that any concerns a job applicant had could be written on a copy of his or her resumé and brought to the job interview, where the applicant could then raise those concerns with the employer. He also suggested that if employers say they do not have orientation and training, a student should tell them about this event and about the panel of business leaders who champion health and safety and believe strongly in the value of orientation and training.

One champion said students with safety concerns at work should talk to a manager, contact the Ministry of Labour, or speak to their parents, a teacher, or a local occupational health and safety organization. Ellis added that students could use online social networking services, such as Facebook, to let others know which places were good to work at and which were not.

Champions must push back to talk about safety when others avoid the topic.

Jessica Di Sabatino—Rob Ellis’ daughter and Vice-President of MySafeWork—said that if 160,000 seals were being injured in the Arctic, there would be a huge protest, while 160,000 young Canadians being injured at work was quietly accepted. Champion companies need to say, “We can do better than this.”

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A SAFETY CHAMPION

When students and champions were asked separately to use one word to describe what it takes to be a champion, the following characteristics were identified by both groups:

- ◆ integrity;
- ◆ leadership;
- ◆ courage; and
- ◆ knowledge.

Each panellist was asked to describe the qualities of a champion. The answers included:

- ◆ a willingness to participate;
- ◆ self-confidence;
- ◆ the ability to start the conversation about health and safety;
- ◆ an inquiring mind;
- ◆ unhappiness with the status quo;
- ◆ the ability to stand up for people’s rights;
- ◆ caring about the people they are responsible for;
- ◆ following through on promises; and
- ◆ pushing back to talk about safety when others avoid the topic.

In addition to such character traits as “compassionate,” “inspiring,” and “trustworthy,” the student audience also identified “responsible” and “perseverant” as important characteristics of a health and safety champion.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CHAMPIONS ACT AND EXPECT ACTION

In their discussions with the business leaders, students repeatedly asked what they did personally as champions to ensure their workers were safe.

WHAT A CHAMPION DOES

Corporate representatives said all their employees went through an orientation session and training before they started work. The orientation could be as short as one day, or it could be as long as three weeks for those working with complex and dangerous equipment. The orientation should cover workers’ rights and duties and corporate directives, and encourage workers to talk about those directives.

Champions also participate in outreach and information events. In a keynote presentation given on the second day of the National Leaders Forum, Ellis pointed out that the group transferred knowledge to 1,500 students who would not ordinarily have the chance to meet health and safety champions such as the 40 who participated.

Promoting Health and Safety in First Nations Communities

Rob Ellis asked a champion to describe the orientation and training issues he faces as a First Nations community representative. The champion said his community faced every possible safety hazard. He said there were a number of accidents and safety incidents before the community implemented orientation and training. First Nations communities had workers in a wide range of jobs, including public works, construction, retail, health care, education, sports, firefighting, and policing. He said that because of the rapid growth of First Nation communities, there were a lot of inexperienced employees. “We had to take a step back and stop what we were doing.” Once the community implemented orientation and training, the number of incidents dropped. In response to a question about changes among First Nations youth, a champion said, “It has required cultural change to get First Nations youth to ask questions, but it is happening.”

He encouraged other business leaders to take advantage of similar opportunities in the future. Although some students' questions are predictable, Ellis said, others can surprise and challenge leaders to rethink their health and safety messages.

Other personal actions mentioned by champions as being key to their roles included:

- ◆ showing that you care;
- ◆ taking personal responsibility for the implementation of safety systems;
- ◆ ensuring that health and safety messages reach their intended targets;
- ◆ keeping the door open; and
- ◆ promoting honest communication that encourages employees to express their health and safety needs.

WHAT A CHAMPION EXPECTS

The champions underlined that they also expected a lot from their employees, and that it was their responsibility to create an environment in which employees could meet those expectations. Employees should not assume a job is safe just because they are told to do it. It was up to the workers themselves to get the necessary information by raising their concerns with others. Jessica Di Sabatino noted that her fatally injured brother David had friends who had worked at the bakery, but rather than warn him that it was not a good place to work, they just quit.

When assigned a job, workers should ask what are the hazards in this workplace, how could they get hurt, and what should they do to avoid injury. An employee should not work alone if he or she is uncomfortable doing so. ("If you're not 100 per cent comfortable, that's the time to ask," said one champion.) People should not be working on or around equipment until they are properly trained.

"If you're not 100 per cent comfortable, that's the time to ask."

ADVICE—FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT

When asked what advice they could offer to the next generation of employees, the business leaders told the students to:

- ◆ develop a safety consciousness by inquiring about the risks associated with a particular task;
- ◆ develop a strong work ethic;
- ◆ respect oneself and others;
- ◆ be aware of the right to refuse unsafe work; and
- ◆ never risk one's safety.

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by *Bjorn Rutten*

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