

THE CFA'S EXPERIENCE IN OHS SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

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BACKGROUND

Country Fire Authority (CFA) is a large and diverse organisation that has a workforce of both career and volunteer members. The workforce is made up of 59,000 volunteers, 750 support staff and 425 career firefighters with 1240 fire brigades across the state of Victoria. This organisation protects approximately 2.5 million people and attends 61,560 calls for assistance annually. Whilst CFA is seen as providing emergency assistance at fires, car crashes and chemical spills to name a few, the role of this organisation is much larger. Another key area it focuses its attention on preventative strategies within communities to ensure community safety is maintained.

With such a large and diverse workforce it can be easy to fall into the trap of “but we are different to everyone else”. Whilst the makeup of the workforce and the types of services provided may be different from mainstream jobs the issues faced in training and maintaining good standards in health and safety are not. We are bound by the same legislation and face the same requirements as any other organisation.

Traditionally a majority of the focus in training has been on “operational” aspects, which is vitally important. But, as mentioned the organisation is much larger than this with much broader requirements. The operational training is based on “Australian Fire Competency Standards” (AFC's), which are adopted, by fire services and land management agencies across Australia. In more recent times courses provided internally and by external providers have broadened the scope of courses available. Whilst this must be encouraged there are many traps along this type of path especially if outside providers do not understand the business.

THE ROLE OF TRAINING IN ORGANISATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY CULTURES

Reason (1997) identified that human beings contribute to the breakdown of technological system in two ways. Violations at the sharp end of the system are active failures whilst those which may be dormant for many years as latent conditions. Training is described by Reason as a latent condition and failures in training regimes may not be apparent for many years. It is important that safety training is not approached as the only answer to fixing your safety problems as discussed by Waring (1996.pg109) “*Typically, there is an expectation that training will always produce miraculous changes in behavior quickly and that accident rates will show a dramatic fall.*” The National OHS Strategy forms a positive approach by targeting people that hold decision making positions.

Training aims to change what managers see and how they respond to their world. Organisational culture (Robbins and Mukeri 1994) refers to “*shared values that is what managers see and how they respond to their world*”. Reason (1994) outlines that training is a key contributor to organizational health and safety performance by impacting on the cultural factors of commitment, competence and cognizance (1997).

The National OHS strategy outlines key roles for training over the next 12 years. Most importantly increasing the effectiveness of business operators and workers to manage OHS effectively. CFA’s current approach is consistent national priority action plan as a key component of it’s 3 year strategic plan. For CFA the need to improve the capacity of business operators and workers to manage OHS effectively is not only to improve the effectiveness of achieving health and safety targets, but also taking into account the geographical spread of it’s workforce.

CFA’s alignment of objectives continues through a number of measures. Not only does improved capacity and skill development occur for CFA’s workforce, CFA’s education and training programs assist Victorian communities. OHS Education and Information provided through CFA will assist to develop a better capacity of communities to address current and emerging health and safety issues outside of CFA.

One step forward is the wider integration of health and safety into professional training arrangements. Under a national program, CFA has two areas already addressed for fire fighters. However understanding the diversity of CFA’s workforce and the needs to provide relevant training to all aspects of the business it is currently developing and delivering OHS education and skills development programs for line managers, Incident Management Team personnel and Critical Incident Support Peers.

With the continual development of information and education programs, it has been identified that there have been a number of short falls within the quality and the desired outcomes. The following are two models currently in use in CFA.

INSTRUCTIONAL MODEL 1

The instructional model uses the provision of information in a face-to-face delivery style. It is expected that after short sessions of periods from 30 minutes to 2 hours that the information provided will create a behavioral change in participants. Often at the end of sessions students may ask questions and gain further feedback on the learning’s provided. Behavior change is seen as the meeting of relevant legislative compliance. Information selected for instruction is based on health and safety performance trends across the organization or where new legislation needs to be communicated.

Through little change in injury statistics, the lack of legislative compliance, and the need for continual support it is evident that this method is less than effective. OHS personnel find after instruction there is a need to provide ongoing information that would normally be considered as provided and retained by individuals. This observation is supported by

Horstmanhof et al (2000) who suggest “*there seems to be an expectation that WHSO’s will have the necessary skills and ability not only to acquire new skills and knowledge from training sessions, but also to be able to apply it to work situations and to transfer the new skills and knowledge to others in the workplace*”.

EDUCATIONAL MODEL 2

On the other hand, the educational model involves the selection or establishment of specific desired outcomes, the provision of information, opportunities for discussion during the information process and opportunities for skill development as well as continuing information support and mentoring. Desired outcomes are relevant competencies adopted from the Australian Vocational Education and Training System. Robbins and Mukerji (1994) define competency as “*the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the standard expected in employment*”. Competency is the product of training and experience” (p.11)CFA’s education programs aimed at managers and supervisors aim to increase the skills of people that impact directly on workplace safety – a target outlined within the National OHS Strategy.

CFA uses ongoing mentoring and advice to continue the development of practical skills and to improve confidence in ones own ability to manage OHS. This approach is confirmed by Horstmanhof et al (2002) who found that desired outcomes of WHSO training includes “personal confidence in ones own ability to function in the WHSO’s role”.

An example of strengthening the capacity of workers to manage health and safety is the education program aimed at CIS peers. The objective was to provide skills and knowledge to participate in consultation, identifying and implementing improvements – another target of the National OHS Strategy.

CASE STUDY 1 - INCIDENT NOTIFICATION TRAINING

To ensure legislative compliance within the organisation, it was identified that there was a need to ensure management applied the requirements of the “Occupational Health and Safety (Incident Notification) Regulations 1999”. The aim was to train all managers in the requirements of this legislation to ensure compliance occurred. The training sessions were focused on a single package being delivered to both senior and middle management personnel.

CFA’s health and safety department reviewed the legislation and developed a training package to be delivered to the target audience. Responsibility rested with the health and safety department to provide this training linking it into the newly developed “draft” incident notification procedures. This training was an attendance only training session with attendees being included on the organisations training database as having completed the session. At the conclusion of the allotted sessions, approximately 90% of managers had

attended and been trained in the requirements of the Regulations and the new draft procedure.

Lessons

In this case the “instructional model” was adopted to inform managers of legislative requirements. Issues that arose from this approach were:

- Lack of incorporation of case study techniques;
- Poor application of adult learning principles;
- Insufficient assessment of results; and
- Inadequate opportunities to apply effectively.

CASE STUDY 2 - DIPLOMA OF BUSINESS (FRONTLINE MANAGEMENT) - OHS MODULE

As part of an ongoing professional development program coordinated by the organisations learning and development department, a process to deliver the Diploma of Business (Frontline Management) in-house with a leading local university was introduced. A component of this training was a module on health and safety management. To assist in the development of a module tailored to meet the needs of the organisation whilst meeting the needs of the elements and performance criteria, it was determined that a member of the OHS department with a background in training would assist in the modules development.

It was felt that this was the most sensible way of progressing to ensure the relevance of the material to meet the organisations needs and culture. Over a number of months the module was developed as a joint partnership with the university and organisation ensuring all criteria were met. Material developed PowerPoint presentations, case studies learning activities and assessments on subjects. Specific notes were developed as well as sourcing other reference material both internally and externally to the organisation in the support of learning. A pilot course was completed with a review taking place to identify area’s for improvement to increase student learning’s. This occurred through observation by the lecturers and student feedback forms, which were completed for each individual session.

The first session was conducted at one of the organisations fire stations which provide an easy to access cheap facility for training. One area that failed to meet expectations was that of hazard identification and risk assessment with practical sessions being conducted at the fire station. Further sessions were conducted away from fire stations with the emphasis to “think outside the square”. Incorporated into this approach was to take students to major manufacturing facilities as part of the hazard ID and risk assessment training, this provided students with the opportunity to review risk controls in an unfamiliar environment.

LESSONS

In this case the “educational model” was adopted to effectively strengthen the capacity of students learning and application.

- By working closely with outside education providers a high level of understanding of the organisations culture and needs was incorporated into the material;
- Using environments different to the organisation changed the manner of thinking in students and heightened their level of learning;
- Poor mixes of experienced/inexperienced personnel;
- Maturity of some personnel;
- Prerequisite skills required undervalued; and
- Reason for attendance (motivation).

CASE STUDY 3 – CERTIFICATE III COMMUNITY SERVICES - OHS MODULE

As part of the organisations personal development program Critical Incident Stress Peers (CIS) were to be provided broader training, which was outside the scope of current in-house programs. A local education provider was contracted to provide the course in a distance learning format, which was combined with opportunities for clusters of students to meet and discuss learning and some face to face instruction. Understanding the principles of adult learning, the health and safety department grasped the opportunity to be involved with the development of course material. Upon review of material provided, it was evident that there was a failure to understand the organisations culture and workforce. This increased the focus of the health and safety department in assisting with further development of materials that would meet the needs of the organisation. Opportunities were also gained through this involvement to provide face to face training.

Reviewing the training information provided, it was identified that it was generic and did not meet the needs of the organisation or the students. No initial involvement with the creation of training materials occurred prior to the initial development of material.

LESSONS

Again, in this case the “educational model” was adopted to effectively strengthen the capacity of students learning and application.

- Just by getting an external provider in with considered expertise within the field does not necessarily mean that you will get suitable outcomes.
- Close coordinated contact with the provider and organization’s experts is essential from inception.
- Organisations need to ensure it has in place systems to consult with internal subject matter experts when considering the use of external education providers.
- Whilst an organisation may have a training and development department, other organizational departments often take on the role of setting up new educational programs in isolation to established internal training processes
- For workers, the amount of legislation and health and safety jargon. Potentially difficult to grasp from distance learning.

CONCLUSION

As a community based organization with emphasis in regional Victoria, CFA sees it's OHS education as essential in increasing the OHS knowledge and skills for all Victorians. Just as Horstmanhof et al (2000) purported, CFA also acknowledges that training is just a starting point for acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to be preventative, and to incorporate OHS as an integral part of business. The instructional model fails to adequately prepare personnel for the required tasks and adequately assess whether learnings have occurred. The educational model provides a greater ability to provide knowledge and skills to facilitate behavior change. By working closely with external training providers confusion with cultural conflict of learning materials can be eliminated at the source. The major benefits of this approach is a reduction in reworking of material, application of material in a language familiar to participants and ensuring alignment with OHS strategies. CFA identifies that there is a dearth information for OHS education. The need to apply adult learning principles will be essential if future skill development is to occur.

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