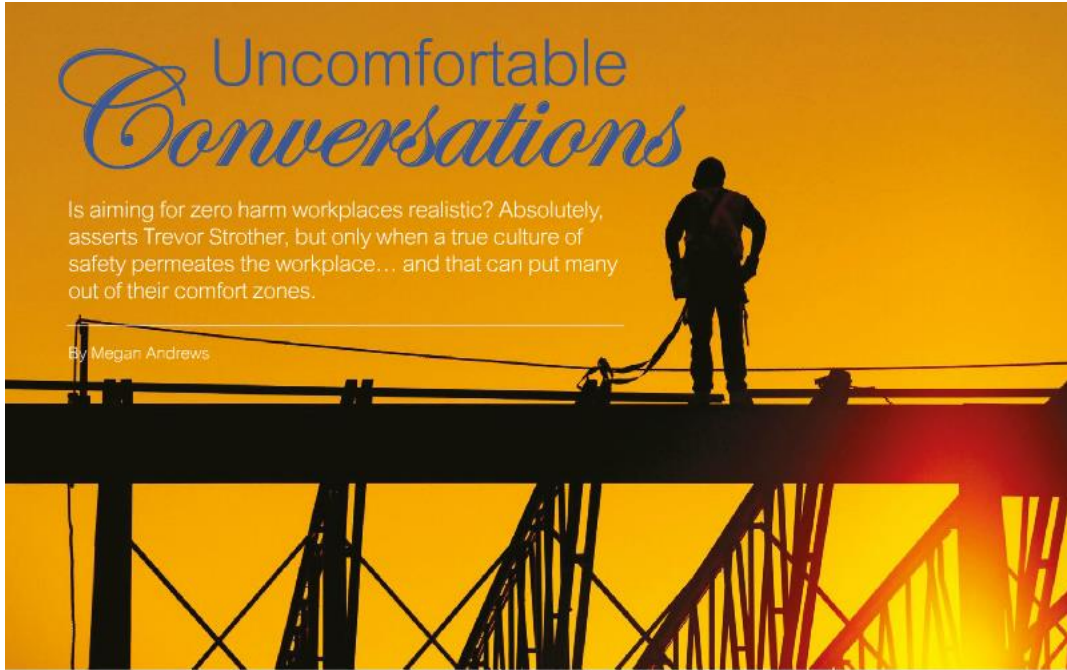


Uncomfortable Conversations

Is aiming for zero harm workplaces realistic? Absolutely, asserts Trevor Strother, but only when a true culture of safety permeates the workplace... and that can put many out of their comfort zones.

By Megan Andrews



Workplace safety has come a long way, however, incidents still occur.

Trevor Strother, founder and director of Performance Leadership Consulting, thinks many organisations are lulled into a false sense of security with audits that note improvements to Total Recordable Incident rate and confirm compliance with legal safety requirements.

"We often view safety independently of other organisational functions," he says.

Trevor's 30 years' experience developing and implementing organisational change strategies (the past 15 years working globally on safety culture) has taught him that "safety should be mainstream, no different from any other function".

The mining and petroleum industries are well known for their commitment to safety and making great strides in safety improvement. They are often leaders in taking up safety initiatives, such as encouraging workers to stop work and speak up if they feel something is unsafe. But in practice, that can be difficult.

Lack of confidence to stop the job, fear of slowing down work (with potential impacts on bonuses) or unfavourable responses in the past when a supervisor has been alerted to a potential hazard, can all affect a worker's

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comfort levels when it comes to safety.

"Safety needs more than compliance," Trevor explains.

"Good relationships, teamwork and leadership that develops people and provides clear direction is essential."

These are some of the skills needed to instil a safety culture and developing them also improves other aspects of a worker's performance – so there's multiple earnings from the one investment.

So what of the zero harm concept, the incident free workplace? Will it ever be a reality?

There's some debate around the concept and Trevor estimates 20 percent of workers believe it can happen, while 40 percent don't know if it can but are willing to do what they can to achieve it.

"Around 20 percent say it never will happen and are not prepared to give it a go – they're the ones who shouldn't be in your business," Trevor says.

Getting in the way

Trevor says there are two major obstacles when it comes to safety and both relate to compliance and culture.

First, is the extent to which a workplace culture supports safety compliance. A concept that's become popular in recent years is a stop work authority, empowering workers with the responsibility to stop work when a perceived

unsafe condition or behaviour could result in a dangerous event. Trevor questions the degree to which many workplace cultures support the concept.

Secondly, is the focus on compliance itself. This can create a perception that all an organisation needs to do to achieve a 'safe' workplace is comply with the regulator's requirements.