

**Presentation to  
Tasmanian Minerals Council  
1999 Occupational Health & Safety Seminar**

Bob Mellows  
Cornwall Coal Company N.L.



Reproduced with the kind permission and assistance of Bob and Leone Mellows. This paper or any part of this paper may not be reproduced for commercial purposes.



## 1999 OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY SEMINAR

### CORNWALL COAL COMPANY

#### **Introduction**

Cornwall has achieved an almost unbelievable record in safety performance over a 7 year period with a workforce of 80 – 90 people. The measure of how hazardous an environment is not necessarily measured by accidents. It maybe just an indication of how well controlled.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> May 1999, all surface operations including open cut mining by contractors, raw coal transport by contractors, coal processing and administration by our own employees and periodic maintenance and other contractors achieved 7 years no LTI and this still continues.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> July 1999, Blackwood underground achieved 4 years no LTI (*Lost Time Injury*) with only 2 in the last 6 years, 5 of those LTI free. This run unfortunately finished on 2<sup>nd</sup> September with an injury at the coal face.

Apart from no LTI there has been very limited light duties with more being given for injury away from work than for injuries at work.

Leigh and I will each give our perspectives on the changes and how they have resulted in this achievement.

*...Leigh Spilsbury - Presentation*

#### **Bob Mellows – Presentation**

We probably don't differ greatly from many others when it comes to our continuing efforts to deal with physical hazards and set in places appropriate standards.

In considering hazard awareness, the one aspect often overlooked is the human factor and a person's state of mind (i.e. the attitude and emotions)

Leigh has mentioned the involvement of people making a safer workplace. That involvement has as much a bearing on safety as the changes made, and the changes made in themselves, have an impact on people that affects their emotions and attitudes.



By being involved, you can sense in Leigh's comments an appreciation of recognition of their worth, and hence a feeling of being part of the operation and not just a tool to be used. With it comes a commitment.

With commitment and involvement, changes are made which have an impact in the efficiency of operations through suitability and reliability of equipment. People have a job to do. They in fact need very little input from Management to do that job, rather they need support and facilitation. When they can't do their work because of unsuitable equipment, breakdowns, unavailable materials, untrained people etc., they become frustrated and this is expressed in various ways depending on the personality. Typical negative responses are throwing things, damaging equipment and abusing other people. It is easy to see how these emotions can result in accidents. Stress and strong emotional states lead to injury. Therefore, as people are given the freedom and resources to improve their own work environment, the changes in morale, attitudes and emotions have a greater impact on safety than the changes themselves.

I believe it has been the human factor that has had the greater influence in accidents than the actual physical working environment and there has been a parallel evolution and development of relationships between management and employees over the last 8 years in particular, along with the focus on direct safety management. This was not done with safety in mind, but has changed the atmosphere to enable the involvement Leigh referred to.

The needs of employees at all levels have driven our working arrangements. Some are:

1. Four day week 35 hrs/ 5 days for those wanting to.
2. Shift working. Full time dog watch, some full time day shift and some full time afternoon shift, some rotate day shift and afternoon shift. Most are doing what suits them.
3. Working crews. Small crews consist of 7 consistent members.
4. Flat structure. Regular contact at all levels.
5. Flexibility on Annual Leave. Most are able to take it when it suits them.
6. Recognition of Family needs. Sick leave arrangements, home injuries.
7. Highly qualified workforce.
8. Involvement in decision making. Safety and Consultative Committees etc.

These factors assist in contentment with work and long employment times including Managers – both factors affecting safety. This may have some downside in bringing in change but we have grown together.

Efforts have also been made in management style. Stress must be recognised as a major factor in accidents, and the approach of managers and supervisors can make a



big difference in stress levels. Either expressed or implied unrealistic expectations or the means of conveying expectations and responsibilities have a bearing on the stress a person feels. Even self imposed expectations can cause stress when those expectations can not be achieved.

It has therefore been our attempt to communicate in a positive, supporting and encouraging way, coaxing and leading rather than in the negative way of blame, criticism, demanding and imposing upon people. The aim is to build people up and give them more confidence and acceptance, and recognise their efforts rather than their achievements.

People have responded by taking more responsibility, having a greater input and showing interest in all aspects of the operation and as such, along with the improved training are given greater freedom in their own work.

Stress is reduced. Greater contentment in the work environment and the practical changes that develop, all work together to create a safer work environment.

It is important to realise the need for each employee to consider the impact their actions and communication methods etc. have on their fellow workers. Every time you ridicule, abuse verbally or criticise one another, or even go off at no one in particular it affects the way others feel and creates the environment for accidents to occur. Support and encouragement, understanding of each other, and patience with one another's weakness and failures will go a long way in reducing accidents.

With our recent accident, I believe, no coincidence that it occurred in the crew with the most internal conflict.

Our workplace still requires a lot of work to achieve the Standards required by Codes of Practice etc. We also have much to do with relationships. However I am greatly encouraged and proud of my people not merely because of what they have achieved but because of what they have become as people, and I am excited by the great potential I see in them for the future.