



Whitepaper

Focus: The X factor for Safety in the Workplace

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Authors

Nick Randal is the founder of Nick Randall Leadership Development. Nick is a highly sought-after leadership trainer. Nick holds a M. Ed, B. HM. Dip. Phys Ed, Health Ed Cert, Diploma of Management, and Cert IV Workplace Training & Assessment. With over 36 years of expertise and 8000 training workshops and seminars worldwide, Nick delivers cutting edge educational, leadership, team-building and coaching programs; all of which are customised and tailored for each individual company. Nick is renowned for his interactive and lively presentation style, that captures every group at every level. His unique ability to engage and make knowledge relevant not only becomes work-changing, but also often becomes life-changing. His training courses develop a dynamic culture, a culture that every company seeks.

Dr Ron Cacioppe is the founder of Integral with over 45 years' experience in leadership & organisation development in Australia, Southeast Asia and the United States. He holds a BSc, an MBA and a PhD in leadership development & change. Ron was a Professor of Leadership at the University of Western Australia and has taught at Macquarie, Curtin & Murdoch Universities and was visiting professor at the University of Richmond. He is the author of several books his organisational behaviour textbook covering leadership, team and organisational behaviour was the bestselling textbook in the field in Australia and New Zealand for four years.

Lost Focus

There are so many distractions in modern life that increasingly, we are suffering from an impoverishment of attention (Goleman, 2013).¹ Teens, the leaders of our future, in the early years of this decade, their monthly text message count soared to 3.417, double their number a few years earlier. The average teen sends more than a hundred texts messages a day, about ten every waking hour.

In the face of a constant and diverse range of stimulation the ability to focus had never been more important. In today's world, at any given moment, we are subjected to a constant barrage of information. This has consequences in every aspect of life. One such consequence is that it can be a cause of a lack of safety both at home and at work.

One study of a thousand drivers injured in accidents found that about one half said their mind was wandering just before the accident; and the more intense the disruptive thought, the more likely it was that the driver caused the accident (Calera, 2012).²

Safety and productivity are the major concerns of every organisation in Australia. In the construction industry every project faces a constant evaluation the number of safety incidences that occur. In addition to the human cost of having a safety, incident there is a productivity cost dependent upon the severity of each incident.

The construction industry has a work environment that is hazardous and requires constant safety vigilance. Despite the construction industry having developed a very systematic and rigorous system of policies and processes, there are still safety incidences occurring at an alarming rate. These range from simple safety breaches to fatalities. It seems logical that one such cause is a lack of focus by the individual. Logically, if the employee is not focussed then the safety processes they are meant to follow can be made ineffective.

Focus: the Missing Element

Is there a missing element in the array of safety processes that employees are asked to follow? Perhaps safety programs have missed an important factor in not paying more attention to the importance of focusing and providing skills for the individual to develop their focus. Improved focus also affects the quality of workmanship.

Focus can be defined as the cognitive ability to channel an individual's attention to a single task and be fully absorbed in it without disruption. Selective attention is an essential part of the focus process.

The education system does not teach people how to focus. The ability to focus is learnt indirectly by the person applying themselves to the school teachings. Hence organisations recruit people with different abilities to sustain focus. Furthermore, corporations do not take into account the ability of the individual worker to sustain

attention in jobs that range from menial and boring to high demand and high challenge. A random survey of thousands of people found mind wandering most frequent while they were working, using a home computer or commuting (Goleman, 2013).¹ It is logical to suggest that this could be a cause of a safety incidence.

Sustained attention is the focus on one thing or activity for a long period of time. The construction industry has many examples where it demands their workers to have sustained attention.

A Focus Safety Program for the Construction Industry

With the need for the addition of focus in safety in mind, Nick Randall developed an intervention program aimed at reducing the number of safety incidences that were caused by a lack of focus.

The program consisted of a two-day leadership workshop for supervisors. The supervisors and senior managers had to drive the ongoing focus program so leadership skills were seen to be essential. This workshop built the participant's confidence and expertise in addressing workers behaviours that were not safe, especially reviewing their ability to focus as a leader. At the end of the workshop each supervisor was asked to commit to helping support the planned intervention.

Groups of workers with their specific supervisors were then required to attend a one-and-a-half-hour workshops where workers were introduced to the importance of focus, and given exercises to help develop their ability for sustained focus no matter how simple or how complicated the task.

The participants were taught concepts and techniques in:

- Awareness of distractions and how much time spent in mind wandering
- Mindfulness techniques to come back and focus on the present
- Emotion intelligence self-awareness and skills
- Short exercises to demonstrate the value of emotional self-regulation

Participants found these sessions interesting and very practical. They also saw that these skills were relevant to their personal lives.

These focus workshops were followed by Pre-Starts, which were used as a medium to remind the workers of the importance of focussing. This intervention ran for three weeks, and entailed short exercises at the end of each pre-start to emphasise the importance of focussing.

Role of Sponsors

Most importantly senior managers played significant roles in this intervention in that their presence at pre starts and their emphasis on the importance of focussing

showed the workers that the senior leadership of the project really cared to help build the right attitude, behaviours and culture with an emphasis on the importance of staying focused and present.

Program Outcomes

Success of the program was measured by analysing the safety statistics forty days before compared to forty safety days post intervention. The table below shows the decrease in safety incidents and the categories of the incidents.

Program Outcomes: pre-post comparison of Incidents			
Event Type	# Events prior to Intervention ⁱ	# Events after Intervention ⁱⁱ	% Change ⁱⁱⁱ
Health & Safety	14	10	29%
Infrastructure	13	2	85%
Environment	13	1	92%
Other	1	0	100%
Total # Incidents	41	13	68%

The number of incidences dropped post intervention from 41 to 13, a total per cent decrease of 68 per cent. This resulted in savings in no loss of downtime, and increased productivity. The return of the investment of money and time spent was well worth the benefits experienced.

ⁱ # Events prior to Intervention: means the count of the total number of recorded safety incidents in the forty six day period immediately prior to the training intervention, by event type.

ⁱⁱ # Events after Intervention: means the count of the total number of recorded safety incidents in the forty five day period immediately after the training intervention, by event type.

ⁱⁱⁱ % Change: means the percentage change in the total number of recorded safety incidents.

Key Factors

In summary, the success of this ongoing program occurred as a result of:

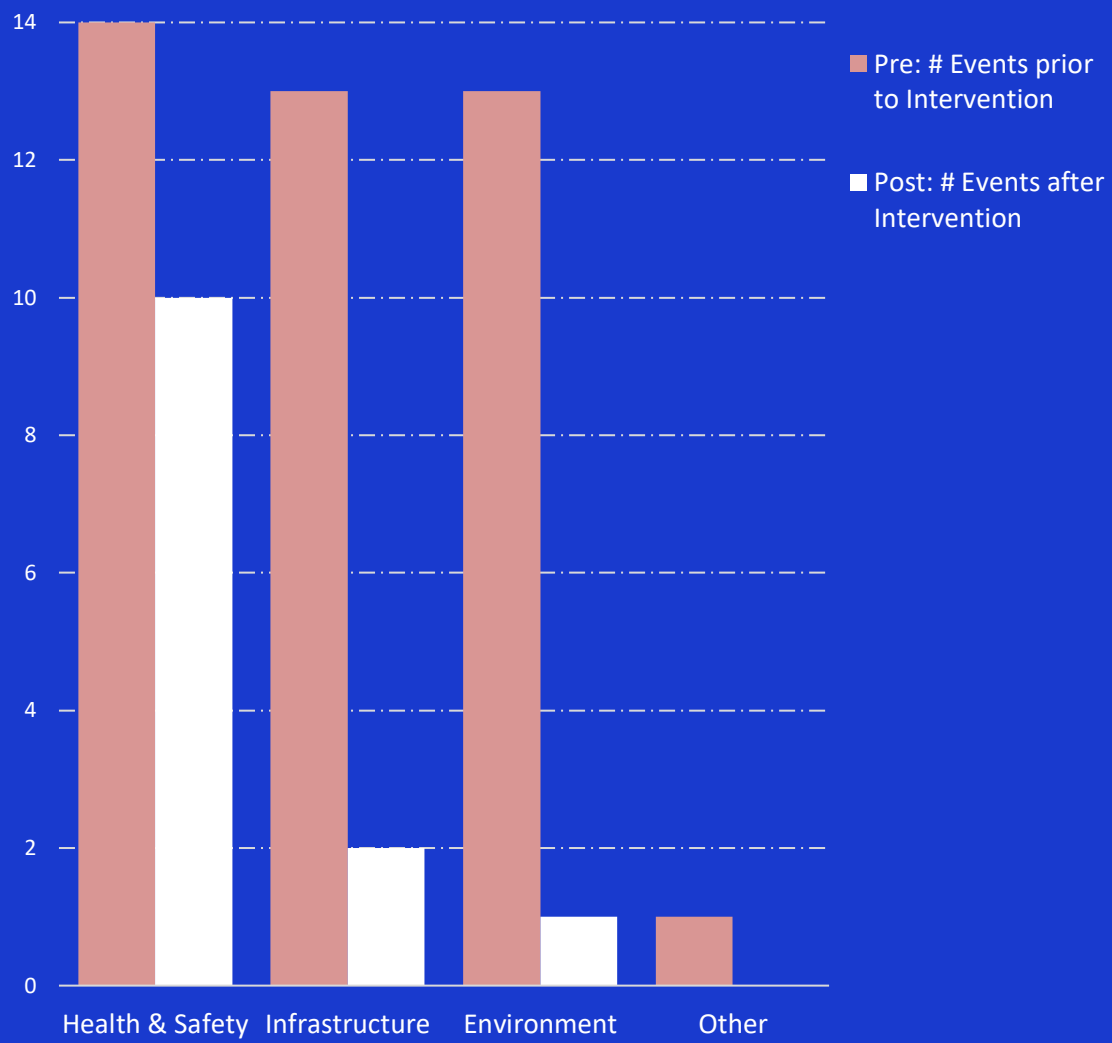
1. The support shown by senior manage to the supervisors in encouraging an increased awareness and ability to focus.
2. The opportunity to allow specific supervisors the time to engage in a leadership program. This emphasised their ability to empower their teams to focus no matter the simplicity or complexity of the task.
3. The one and a half hour workshops showed workers the importance and skills of focussing on the task in hand.
4. The ongoing emphasis on focussing at pre starts so complacency didn't occur.
5. Having a skilled facilitator to teach and guide focus skills so that the supervisors and workers were empowered to successfully apply focusing techniques to their workplace.

This program showed that focus could be a vital 'X' factor in the safety equation.

Focus also is a fundamental factor in leadership and the success of every organisation. As Daniel Goleman states:

“Leading attention requires these elements: first, focusing your own attention, then attracting and directing attention from others, and getting and keeping the attention of employees and peers, of customers or clients.”

*Daniel Goleman*³



References

¹ Goleman, D. (2013) *Focus, the Hidden Driver of Excellence*, HarperCollins, New York.

² Calera, C. (2012) *Mind Wandering and Driving Responsibly Case-Control Study*, British Medical Journal, December 13 online.

³ Goleman, D. (2013) *Focus, the Hidden Driver of Excellence*, HarperCollins, New York (page. 213).