

A tough issue to deal with

Angie Tomlinson, 9 June 2011

ON the surface mine sites appear harmonious and safe, but dig a little deeper and in some cases you expose homophobia, aggression and a culture of "real men" putting the safety of themselves and their colleagues at risk.

Research by Factive lead gender studies researcher Dean Laplonge delves into what it is about men working on mine sites that makes them take risks. It's a complex issue, and one not for the faint-hearted. Research into the area throws up some nasties counter to the goals and image the mining industry has been striving for over the past 10 years.

At the crux of the issue is the link between the way men are expected to behave and risk-taking. Whether it's a biological, genetic or psychological issue the conclusion, according to Laplonge, is always the same: men take more risks than women.

"Safety is all about taking care and protecting and slowing down and thinking. All of these things stand in opposition to the real toughness of real men."

"When we are born into this world and declared to be a 'boy', there are then a range of behaviours we are expected to display to show that we are a 'real boy' and later a 'real man'. If you look at the kind of man that is attracted to the mining industry, being a 'real man' is about not being soft or weak or effeminate or gay, or anything else that is too much like a 'girl'. So, to maintain this sense of real manhood, they must engage in behaviours that are not 'girly'.

"They must be tough, do tough things, kick things, bang things, think they can stop a moving vehicle or unblock a piece of machinery by giving it a hard bang. They don't need to rest or discuss what needs to be done. They just do it. Because if I just do it and I survive, well then I'm a real man. So, taking risks is very much a part of the way these men play out their gender."

That kind of cultural engineering is not the sort conducive to a safe workplace. "Safety is all about taking care and protecting and slowing down and thinking. All of these things stand in opposition to the real toughness of real men," Laplonge said.

Factive has done work with a number of mining industry companies, including BHP Billiton Iron Ore, Worsley Alumina and Nickel West. It was commissioned to put together a report for the Western Australian Department of Mines and Petroleum which threw up some interesting, but disturbing results. The report did show, however, a real desire for change within the industry.

"People are fed up with men acting tough at all levels in the industry. We have been able to identify with some of our clients that, despite what they might say on the surface, a lot of men are concerned about the increase in the number of women entering the workforce. They believe it will affect production and change the way they have to work," Laplonge said.

"We have been able to expose extremely harsh cultures of homophobia and aggression in underground mining workplaces. We have heard stories of individuals who know they have injured themselves simply because they were trying to be tough. We have heard from people who wish the workplace environment wasn't having such an effect on their behaviours at home.

"The real challenge now is for companies that have shown an interest in this topic to really commit to doing something about it. These are not easy issues. They are extremely sensitive and complex. But if they are genuinely committed to better safety, doing the same old same old is not going to work."

Factive works with mining companies in a number of ways to address the relationship between gender and safety, including awareness raising by getting senior management to understand the relationship between gender and safety; working with small crews to engage them in a debate; and working with HR to look at wider gender issues. "The more work we do in this field, the more complex it starts to get. We are seeing issues of sexual harassment, workplace bullying, sexual tensions, territorial disputes etc," Laplonge said.

Factive's methodologies are about engaging a workforce as they go about their daily tasks. "We don't pull them out of that space and say, right, now we are going to do a day's training on gender. We share their work with them and chat to them about why they do and say certain things, and see if there is anything that's going on in the group which might be supporting an existing notion of good masculinity, but which could actually be putting them at risk. We identify these things and work through them there and then.

"It's also important to have an overview of the organisation, to conduct a gendered behaviours audit at an organisational level, so the organisation can develop better ways of dealing with this issue before safety incidents arise."

A gendered behaviours audit involves working alongside key personnel, often from HR, to review documents, recruitment practices and organisational communications to see how they might actually be promoting "toughness" in the workplace which is actually working against safety goals.

A mentor program involves a researcher working and living with a crew for a short period of time, usually a single shift, to engage the men in discussions about the way they work and interact. "The mentor does not go in with a particular model of masculinity they want to promote. This kind of work is very much about seeing what's happening, giving feedback and then getting the men to give their responses to the

feedback. Usually a few issues will emerge which the men recognise as important but they have never been given the tools or language to address these issues before. They start to see how quite normal behaviours in the group might actually be putting them at risk."

After working with the Australian industry, Laplonge is currently working with the Canadian mining industry on his research, as well as establishing an international network between a Canadian university and the University of New South Wales where he is an associate senior lecturer.

Laplonge will be returning to Australia next month to present at the NSW Minerals Council OH&S conference.

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