

GENDERED BEHAVIOURS AND SAFETY — THE STORY SO FAR

A year ago, Dr Dean Laplonge, lead gender studies researcher at Factive cultural research consultancy, wrote an article for MineSafe introducing the idea of a link between gendered behaviours and safety. He argued the importance of taking this link into consideration as a means of driving better safety on mine sites. What has happened since then? How far has this debate moved along? Here, Dean updates his thoughts on gendered behaviours and safety in the mining industry. What do you think? Send contributions to this discussion to the Editor at RSDComms@dmp.wa.gov.au

Last year's safety roadshow series run by Resources Safety took up the topic of gendered behaviours and safety as its main theme for discussion. Travelling to Tom Price, Kalgoorlie, Bunbury, Newman and Perth, we were able to engage with about 400 mining personnel to gauge their thoughts on how "toughness" affected their workplaces.

The final report concluded that while there were some incredibly motivated and strong-willed individuals working in mining, many felt they were controlled by a culture of aggression, dominance and hyper-masculinity. Many more felt it was important to act like this to survive. What the workshop participants hoped for was the development of an industry-wide culture in which difference was more willingly accepted and where compassion was more evident.

In response to the discussions we had in the roadshow workshops, Resources Safety is developing resources to give employers ideas on how they can address issues such as sexism, homophobia and aggression in their workplaces.

In July this year, I presented the keynote speech at the New South Wales Minerals Council's OHS conference. I have given numerous talks and presentations on gendered behaviours and safety over the past year, but this was by far the largest crowd. I feel it is fair to say that the issue of gendered behaviours in the mining industry has finally been recognised. It is surely now considered an important topic of debate.

But after the debate, what then? What actions are being taken to address the impact gendered behaviours might be having on safety?

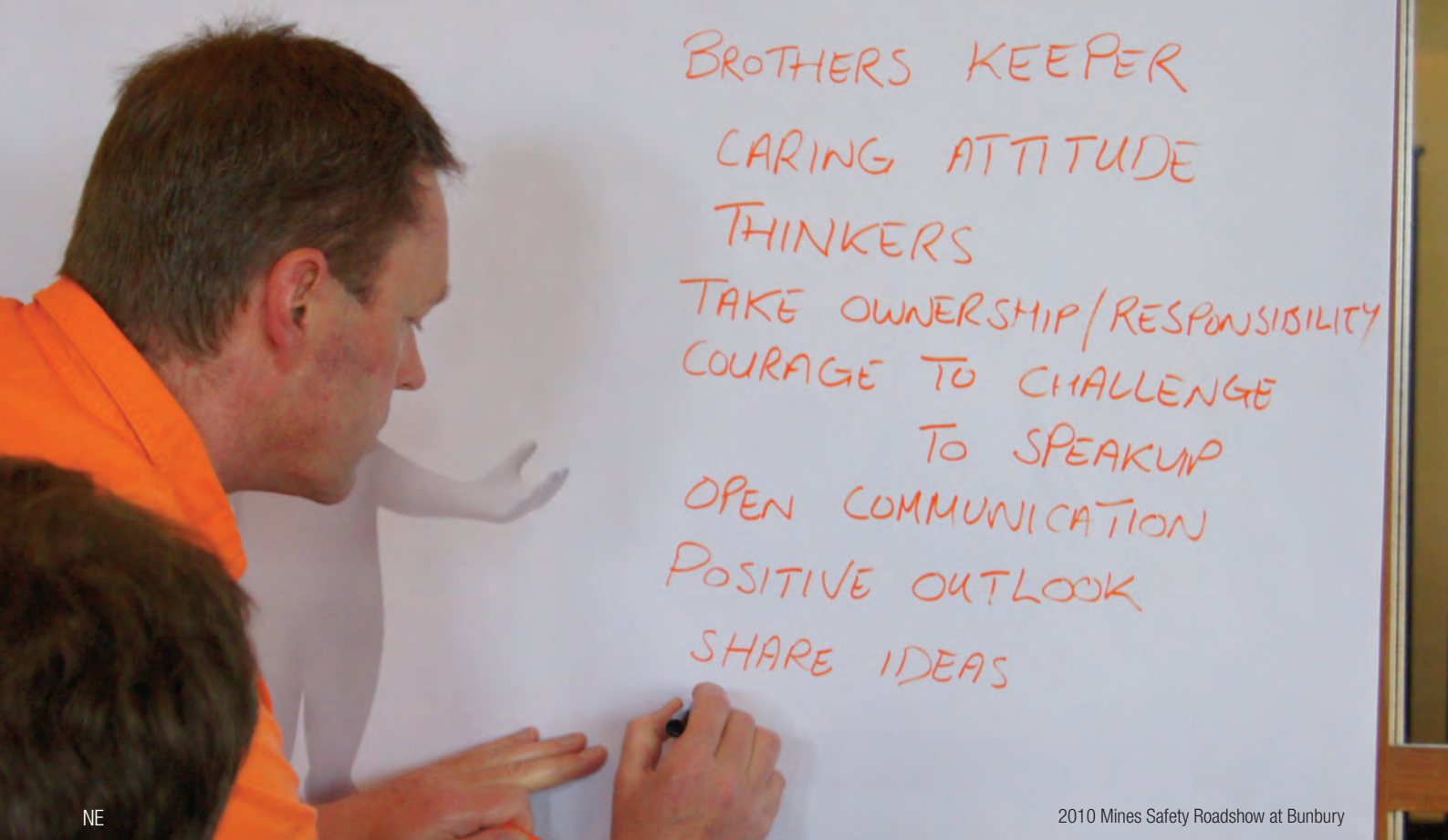
Despite my fears that it might happen, we have as yet seen no attempt by private consultants to offer quick-fix solutions to complex gender issues. This is not to say it won't happen. I still believe it could be highly tempting for an organisation to develop and offer such an approach. It would no doubt make them a lot of money. But any attempt to "fix" gendered behaviours by locking people into a classroom for a two-hour training session will fail. It will also have a negative impact on the overall debate.

There has been some talk about the natural eradication of risk-taking behaviours by men due to the influx of women into the mining industry. Who hasn't heard the story of the female truck drivers who took greater care of their vehicles, resulting in fewer injuries and less wear and tear on the tyres? It is almost becoming a legend in its own right! But we need to be extremely careful here. We should be wary of assuming that all women do not take risks and that we can rely on women to sort out issues associated with gendered behaviours. The belief that a greater number of female employees will naturally "tame" our men is misguided. It assumes that all women are always soft and gentle, when this is clearly not the case. It also allows us to skirt around the issue by refusing to look at the existing behaviours of men while we wait for the wonder women to come in and clean things up. If this isn't an example of sexism in action, I don't know what is!

In brief, I would say that there has been a slow response to the debate in terms of direct action by mining companies. I was recently encouraged by the advice of a man who has decades of experience in the industry. "Don't give up", he told me. "If you were trying to get us to build something big and visible, we would all be there alongside you. Then we could all step back and say, wow, look at that huge thing we have built! But you are dealing with cultural issues, the unseen, the unnoticed. It is not masculine to be interested in that!" The fact that he had made this link between gender and where we are willing to focus our efforts inspired me.

On reflection after this conversation, I have come to the conclusion that there are three main reasons why there has been little direct action on the part of mining companies to address gendered behaviours that affect safety.

The first is that when we are talking about gendered behaviours and safety in the mining industry, we are primarily talking about men. And when men are asked to think about gender, they tend to get



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2010 Mines Safety Roadshow at Bunbury

nervous. Recent wider social debates about gender have resulted in better opportunities for women in the home, in the workplace and on the streets. As the position of women has changed, so too have the expected and permitted behaviours of men. Some men may therefore see any focus on gender as leading to a reduction in their rights, their power and their dominance. I once heard a mine manager announce to his exclusively male leadership team that he wanted 30 per cent of their positions occupied by women within five years. You can imagine the look of terror on their faces. The one thing this manager didn't consider, however, was that one of those positions might actually be his! My point is that when it is primarily men who are being asked to approve of any work that involves gender and when this work involves looking at the behaviours of men, resistance is likely to be actively shown or covertly practised.

The second reason is because of confusion over where gender fits in the workplace. There is certainly no natural space for it because it is not something we consider important to the everyday workings of a mine. Whenever gender becomes an issue, it is usually something to do with women, so it is handed over to human resources, where we assume they know how to deal with "that sort of thing". But the link between gendered behaviours and safety has less to do with any corporate policy on diversity or inclusion, and more to do with the way safety personnel and crews in the field approach safety. Despite a recognised link between gendered behaviours and safety, it is extremely rare to find anybody working as a safety specialist who views safety through a gendered gaze. Training in safety just doesn't consider gender so we are not used to including it in the development of everyday safety practices.

The third reason is a lack of clearly defined resources to address gender issues. We have to be utterly honest here and admit that we actually don't know how to address issues related to gendered behaviours with absolute certainty. The mining industry tends to be an industry that likes absolutes, at least when it comes to plans that are expected to deliver precise outcomes within defined timeframes.

It is a very masculine thing to believe we know where we are going and what will be the results. But when it comes to dealing with gendered behaviours issues, this is never going to be on offer. We are always dealing to some extent with the unknown. Any willingness to investigate gendered behaviours in the workplace must take this uncertainty and lack of resources into account.

In conjunction with my colleagues at the University of New South Wales, I have now developed a few methods for responding to gender issues. As we have trialled these, we have been amazed at the differences in attitudes to gender issues we see at different worksites and among individual work crews. We are also challenged by the array of gender-related issues that we have to deal with. Development of the responses draws on existing notions of gender auditing and action research. In applying these concepts to the mining industry specifically, we hope to encourage mining companies to investigate seriously what it means to be a man working in a dangerous environment when contemporary cultural meanings of what it means to be a man encourage — and perhaps even dictate — risk-taking behaviour. And we are learning as we go.

I am convinced that the issue of gendered behaviours and safety is not a passing fad; it is of vital importance to this industry, as it is to any industry in which there are high percentages of men working in dangerous environments. We know that men engage in more at-risk behaviours than women. We know that masculinity demands men take risks in their daily lives to show how truly masculine they are. Australian masculinity, in particular, approves of risk-takers who can show their heroic strength. We cannot erase the link between what it means to be a man and taking risks. We also know that the Australian mining industry has an employee ratio of about 85 per cent men to 15 per cent women. These pieces of knowledge put together are surely good enough reason to take this issue very seriously. If we were aware of any reason, other than gender, why 85 per cent of our workforce was more at risk, I think we would be responding much faster than we are.