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The Missing Piece

SafeStart, a global brand with a strong presence in Australia and New Zealand, is changing the face of workplace health and safety.

Images by Scott Ehler

Working as an environmental engineer with Shell for 10 years ignited Cristian Sylvestre's dedication to safety, and his determination to push the boundaries of modern safety thinking. "Shell is very devoted to safety, with excellent, streamlined safety-management systems. It's great to have safety inductions, personal protective equipment, and even a culture of people looking out for each other, because when you're close to a hazard, these things can stop you from getting hurt. But then why are people still getting hurt? It was obvious there is a missing piece."

Indeed, this search for the missing piece has preoccupied

safety professionals for many years, with mixed results up until now. The most important breakthroughs in recent time have focused on human behaviour rather than containment of a hazard. Top-down safety approaches like safety leadership, senior management interventions, and behaviour-based observations have all tried to address the human end of the equation.

Cristian's back to basics view is instructive. "Ultimately, when a person gets hurt, they usually come into contact with a hazard, whether a moving object, a hot surface, or a slippery floor. First-generation safety management has focused on the hazard, which is a great first step: engineer away the hazard,

contain the hazard, or at least protect people from coming in contact with it. But this has its limits—you can't get rid of all the hazards from everywhere. Second-generation safety management, with a focus on the choices people make, was a necessary next step. When people feel it's okay to ignore proper procedure, some sort of intervention is often appropriate. If you see your workmate or someone on your team not wearing safety glasses when they're required, it has become accepted practice to say something rather than ignoring it, all in the name of helping out a mate. Safety culture in organisations grew out of this desire to define what sort of behaviour was generally considered acceptable." >

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What was still baffling to the profession, however, was that while these early attempts to get incident rates under control met with considerable success, achieving further improvements has proven far more elusive. “It was like we had hit a ceiling. Many people in the profession were starting to believe that there was really nothing left to tweak, that we had to accept some level of injury as unavoidable. Nothing drives an engineer like people saying things can’t get better.”

The key that will later unlock this next level of safety improvement came from Larry Wilson, a Canadian-born behavioural safety trainer who stumbled on the idea when he was conducting peer-to-peer safety observation training in the early 1990s. At the time, Larry was trying to convince people that the reason why they should do observations on others at work was the prevalent belief that in most cases, it’s the other person that causes the injury. Fortunately for him, the people he was training explained that most of their personal incidents, irrespective of whether they were at work, at home, or on the road, occurred when they were alone.

The result was SafeStart, a human error prevention program that is being used in more than 40 countries around the world. It was only a matter of time before Cristian, doing his own research in Australia, was to come across Larry’s work. Recognising immediately that this was the missing piece he was looking for, Cristian secured the licence for SafeStart in Australia and New Zealand in the early 2000s. Within two years he had completely refocused his successful but traditional safety-consulting business to concentrate on helping organisations implement SafeStart. His client list now includes some of the biggest names in Australian industry.

The secret was understanding that there are two aspects to behaviour. One is deliberate choice, the focus of second-generation safety. The



other, more prevalent as it turns out, and largely ignored until now, is simple unintentional human error coming from inattention. “At our training we try an interesting exercise that really opens people’s eyes. We ask who has ever burnt

their hands on a barbeque or stove. We ask that because we know that everyone in the room will put their hand up—and they do. We then ask two questions: ‘Did you know the barbeque was hot?’ and ‘Did you know not to touch it?’ Again,

predictably, the answer is always yes. People see right away for themselves that the biggest problem is not a lack of training or hazard awareness, or even a problem with the procedure. Sometimes we just make mistakes, and that’s why we get hurt.”

The answer then lay in understanding what drives human error. The fundamental finding was that there is a basic pattern to the way people get hurt, and that pattern repeats itself in almost all injuries, both on and off the job. When people are in one or more of four states of mind—rushing, frustration, fatigue, and complacency—the result is inattention, or to use the simple language of SafeStart, there is ‘mind not on task’ or ‘eyes not on task’, that in turn increases the risk of harm. Research has identified this pattern in more than 90 per cent of accidental injuries.

Cristian describes one of the key ‘a-ha’ moments in his training: “It is amazing what happens when we explain this to people. As trainers we watch heads nod, arms unfold, and stony-faced participants now sitting forward as they recognise the common sense in these insights. We then take them through a number of exercises where they reflect on their own experiences and those of other people to see if they can identify this pattern in play. It works every time. While we don’t promise that it explains every incident you’ll ever have, it does improve your chances of not having an incident by more than 90 per cent, and that’s an improvement anyone will take.”

The focus of the training is how to manage this pattern better than just relying on intuition. “It’s good to understand what it is we’re doing that leads to inattention and injury, but how do we change that?” The SafeStart techniques to reduce inattention and prevent injury are proving to be the ‘secret sauce’ that is having measurable effects on safety incidents in companies in Australia and overseas.

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A major finding of the research behind SafeStart is that the sense of order and safety we create by our all-pervasive safety systems actually makes injury through inattention more likely. When we feel safe, we’re far more likely to pay less attention and start operating in autopilot. As Cristian relates, “Anyone who has ever driven a car and arrived at their front driveway without being able to remember the last five minutes of driving knows all too well what autopilot is about.

“Reinforcing this issue is that inattention usually takes place without consequence. Once we feel so comfortable with driving, we pay less attention to it and we start to drive while using a mobile phone, then move onto texting while the car is moving, and usually there is no incident. We ‘get away with it’ so often, that the increase in risk goes completely unnoticed. And safer, more orderly environments make this inattention pattern more likely.

“The answer, of course, is not to dismantle current safety systems, but rather to teach personal safety skills that work within them to help people pay attention more often. The first skill is to help you instantly recognise the states of mind as well as the circumstances that lead to inattention, and use those triggers to bring yourself back to the moment. Participants frequently point to this one technique as the one that could save their life, particularly on the road where both rushing and fatigue-induced inattention are endemic.”

One of the drivers behind the success of SafeStart is its recognition that although work and home environments can be vastly different, the basic mistakes people make and the reasons they make them are identical, no matter the location. This led to their tag of ‘safety 24/7’.

Again, as Cristian describes it, “This emphasis away from work had three unexpected benefits. Firstly, it made a huge difference

to people’s engagement with the program. We find that most workers are resistant to safety messages, partly because they’re repetitive, and partly because they seem excessively bureaucratic. Unionised workplaces in particular can treat safety programs with distrust because, rightly or wrongly, they perceive another management ‘tick the box’ exercise that seems to focus on protecting the company from litigation rather than really helping people stay safe.

“But we find workers take to this new approach with renewed interest, because it is not specific to any workplace or industry. It develops skills that can be used everywhere, particularly while at home or while driving, where far more accidents and injuries occur. The second benefit with the 24/7 idea is the realisation that it benefits a business to ensure their people avoid injury at all times, whether they are on or off the job. Although an injury at work has obvious cost and disruption consequences, injuries off the job have absentee and replacement costs as well, which for key people can be very high.”

For participants who are weary of prescriptive workplace safety training, the major payoff is that these techniques can be brought home and taught to their families. A non-negotiable aspect of the SafeStart program is the ‘Taking SafeStart Home’ aspect, which includes a set of four DVDs and an online version of the course that can be used by the participant’s family members. From Cristian’s experience: “Even the old-school safety cynics can see the value in what we do when we show them how it can directly help the people they care about the most—their families. The hardened factory worker may think he’s doing okay, but he has a completely different perspective about his 16-year-old son who’s learning to drive. If helping people keep their families safer is what it takes to get people to start paying more attention, then everyone’s a winner.”

