

A framework for collaboration

What should the framework for collaboration look like to genuinely change the culture around safe work in the Australian formwork industry?

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By Michael Sugg, chief executive officer, Formwork Industry Association.

I was asked a similar question as part of a panel at the recent Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) Show in Sydney. Panel members were discussing this question in relation to working at height in construction. All very relevant, considering that height related incidents in our industry are a major cause of injuries.

My research uncovered some interesting points on the subject of ‘collaboration’ – something that is essential if change in culture and improved safety is to happen – as well as a tool that was referred to as being critical for success in the 24 recommendations outlined in the *Building Confidence* report by Peter Shergold and Bronwyn Weir. So, in this issue I thought we would look at the research findings and how we, as an industry association, are working towards changing the culture around safe work in the Australian formwork industry.

Collaboration requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach involving various stakeholders. A suggested framework for collaboration would involve the following:

1. Stakeholder identification and engagement

Identify and involve all relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, industry associations, formwork companies, workers, unions, safety regulators, safety consultants and educational institutions.

Over the past three years the Formwork Industry Association (FIA) has worked tirelessly in developing relationships with key stakeholders. Each stakeholder provides unique challenges, but collaboration with each is key if change is to occur. Safe working environments in the construction industry require better collaboration than we have already and as the only industry body for formwork in Australia, it is our role to advocate for change to improve safety and send workers safely home to their families.

2. Research and data gathering

Conduct thorough research on the current state of safety in the formwork industry. Collect data on accident rates, near misses and common safety violations. Regularly analyse safety data to identify trends and areas that need special attention. Share these insights with industry stakeholders.

Government departments make their decisions based on data. Yet surprisingly there is very little data available specifically on formwork. It would be great to have specific formwork related data on incidents and common safety violations, so we can advocate on specific safety issues and design specific safety awareness education programs. Looking at data in the wrong way resulted in the Federal Government subsuming the only formwork qualification into carpentry, which had massive ramifications. The FIA successfully campaigned to have this reviewed, and we are in the process of establishing a new formwork qualification for the industry. The FIA has also requested specific formwork data from the regulators, so that we can assess and identify trends and areas that require safety training.

3. Regulatory compliance and enforcement, safety audits and inspections

Strengthen and enforce existing regulations and standards related to formwork safety. Ensure penalties for non-compliance are sufficient to deter unsafe practices. Regularly conduct thorough safety audits and inspections of formwork sites. Provide feedback and recommendations for improvement.

Collaboration is essential if change in this area is to happen. We all know the culture that exists in our industry. If this is to change, collaboration across various stakeholders is key. The FIA is working hard with the regulator and government to ensure regulations and standards are fair and easy to follow and understand. The collaboration with industry and the negotiations with the regulator to re-write the proposed NSW Formwork Code of Practice resulted in a far better document and whilst not perfect, provided a much better result for all. The WHS laws impose a high standard, and the regulators are extremely active in investigating and prosecuting safety breaches. FIA is advocating rewards for those operators who have and maintain compliant work practices.

4. Education and training

Develop and implement robust training programs for formworkers, supervisors and managers.



Include modules on safety procedures, hazard identification and emergency response.

Whilst the regulators’ role is to enforce compliance, a key role of industry associations is collaboration with stakeholders on education and training, to produce ‘meaningful and relevant training’ and compliance under the WHS Act. Formwork specific training has been a major discussion point over the past four years and the lack of any education and skills pathway has held the industry back. As we have written in past issues of *Inside Construction*, the FIA has developed a new skills and education pathway to improved safety within the Australian formwork industry, and the new *Safe Formworker Program* is becoming an essential tool for every formworker.

5. Safety culture promotion and incentives for safety excellence

Foster a culture of safety by encouraging open communication, reporting of hazards and participation in safety initiatives. Recognise and reward safe behaviour and establish awards and recognition programs

for companies and individuals who excel in maintaining a safe work environment.

This is an essential part of a change in safety culture, however, many simply pay ‘lip service’ to it and very little is done. Whilst the regulators call out bad practice – and we are seeing a growing rise in prosecutions and fines – we additionally need to look at a program that rewards good behaviour. The FIA is working on an industry accreditation program that highlights those companies that do employ a good safety culture. Construction companies are keen to collaborate with us on this program when looking at their tender process to identify formwork companies with good safety practices. They understand too well that improved and good safety practices also lead to good quality and productivity.

One thing we all have to remember is that cultural change takes time and sustained effort. We need to regularly review and adapt the framework based on lessons learned and evolving industry needs. Collaborative efforts will be key to making lasting improvements in formwork safety in Australia. ■

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