



Adam Carruthers:

What does it take to build a strong safety culture on a construction site? It's more than just hard hats and checklists. It's about creating an environment where everyone looks out for each other and safety is part of the everyday conversation.

Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Adam Carruthers:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. The podcast where safety isn't just a policy, it's a culture. I'm your host, Adam Carruthers, and in this episode we're talking about what a positive safety culture looks like, why it matters so much, and how any crew, big or small, can start building one from the ground up. Whether you're an employer, supervisor, worker or safety rep, this is a conversation that could change the way you think about safety. Today we're joined by Tracy O'Brien, whose career has taken her from swinging a hammer in residential construction all the way to leadership roles in some of Canada's biggest firms. She has worn many hats: project manager, division manager, consultant, adjudicator, and now even as the Health and Safety Manager for Tomlinson in the Ottawa area. Tracy brings a wealth of knowledge, a love of problem solving, and a unique perspective on how construction keeps evolving. Welcome, Tracy. It's great to have you here with us today.

Tracy O'Brien:

Thanks so much, Adam. I'm happy to be here.

Adam Carruthers:

All right. So let's gear up and get right into it. So Tracy, let's start with the basics. How would you define a positive safety culture in the context of a construction project?

Tracy O'Brien:

That's a good question because positive safety culture I think has been bantered around quite a bit lately and it's one of my personal projects that I'm working on right now within my current company, Tomlinson. I really feel that a positive safety culture needs to be self-sustaining and ingrained and consistent as an environment so that it's a norm, not the exception. It should be educational and supportive in its environment and followed and adhered to by management and workers. It's also a key component in project planning and execution. And ultimately it should be creating an environment that allows all employees to speak up and say something when they see something that needs to be corrected or considered and not fear reprisal or the fact that they're just going to be dismissed.

Adam Carruthers:

Couldn't agree more, Tracy. Now, in your experience, what makes safety culture such a critical part of the success of a jobsite, not just from a safety perspective, but overall for that project performance?

Tracy O'Brien:

In my world, and I hope the industry's safety is Mastercard. Like it's priceless. A safe site is clean, it's organized, it's planned, it's maintained. And when we think about safety, one item that we should be thinking as well is that goes hand in hand with productivity and quality. When we think about a safe site, the site logistics have to be considered, including the common areas, vehicular traffic, garbage bins, lay-down areas, temp power, site fencing, pedestrian safety. Separate scopes of work shouldn't be stacked on top of one another. This is part of our planning. We follow the company rules on worker training and site orientation and fill out the proper safety paperwork prior to starting the work.

When you factor safety in along with quality, you have a better chance of doing the work once and doing it right. It reduces your chance of close calls, injuries, and shutdowns. When you shortcut safety to gain productivity and an incident happens because...You're losing hours and/or days, which means the equipment isn't working, the workers aren't working, and now you have maybe an irate owner or general contractor who will want twice the amount of paperwork reviewed and approved to get the work started again. You've expended your political capital and it takes time to earn that back. But most importantly, you've compromised the safety of your crew. Someone likely just got hurt and now is off on lost time, which could be a WSIB claim and/or modified duties. My favourite one is "blitzit"—that's what I call the Ministry of Labour now—they could be involved. And all that time that you think you've just saved, you've lost.

Adam Carruthers:

I agree. If we did stuff right the first time, we'd save so much time, energy, and money by making sure that it's done right the first time, people are safe the first time, and we're not having to go back, redo things, deal with injuries, replace unfortunately injured workers on the jobsite. It's a really good point to talk about. Now, are there any clear signs or indicators that you've seen that can tell you that a site has a strong safety culture that's already in place?

Tracy O'Brien:

Yeah, I always take a look when I first arrive on the jobsite. First impressions are everything. Are your flaggers in place? Are they holding their signs correctly? Are they facing the traffic? Are supervisors and workers wearing the appropriate PPE? What does the housekeeping look like? Is the site fence straight, connected without gaps to allow entry? Is the signage installed on it? One of my favourites is also the site trailer. When you walk into it, is it a hot holy mess, or is it nice and clean and organized? The safety board, does it require documents to be updated, or is it current? When we take a look and we check in with the workers and operators and supervisors, do they have any concerns? Have they been addressed, or are they just out standing and no one's listening?

I've seen some great jobsites and I've seen some poor jobsites. An example of a poor jobsite was when we stepped onto it, and that's the hot holy mess that I was just talking about. Gaps in the site fencing.

Meanwhile, we were in a residential neighborhood, kids were there, we had a very big deep open hole. The safety netting within it was torn so a full body could fall through it. The site trailer, I'm pretty sure somebody was living in the site trailer, Adam. The shoes, the mess, the stink. Oh my God. Then I found out we were renting it to the sub and that got even worse. So when you take a look at all of that, then we had a snowfall and there are materials everywhere and they were outside of the fence.

So you've got all of these trip hazards now. Picture a stop sign on the ground and how greasy that can become in a snowfall. that's not a strong safety culture. But we turned it into a positive because we brought back all of the site team, including the subs, and we did a walk around of that site and asked them from a point blank just staring in, "Tell me, do you think that that gate is secure?" The answer was yes. And then I walked right through it and they were like, "Okay, maybe no."

And then as we kept going around and you kind of kept doing those types of observations, it was amazing to watch the switch happen with the workers and the supervisors to realize that everything that they had taken for granted, because they were staring at it every single day, that they just didn't see those hazards anymore. And now these observations that weren't phrased as an attack or coming at them trying to bully them or do something to get them to do the work positively, but just making them actively think about it just changed their mindset, which was that became a positive outcome.

Adam Carruthers:

I like that. Really talking about the dangers of becoming complacent in an industry that is so high risk and just how having a different perspective can really open up people's eyes, in terms of they've seen it every day, they don't recognize the hazard and maybe because they're missing something. So really good to get those people involved, which is great to lead to the next thing, talking about how safety culture doesn't just happen. You need leadership, it's shaped by leadership. So how important is it for the supervisor and the site leads to monitor those behaviors and how can leaders go beyond just enforcing the rules and actually inspire their crews to value that safety personally?

Tracy O'Brien:

Yeah, I think it's really everything. How do you orientate and educate workers or subs about a company's safety culture and then have the supervisors and management not follow it? It's completely demoralizing for the workers. If the supervisors and management don't believe that the company's health and safety culture or don't believe in it, why should the worker care? Better yet as a worker, maybe now I think that you really don't care about the workers that work for you as well. So it's interesting. I've been on two different jobsites and I've watched two different CEOs come onto it. And the first one, the CEO came walking in his suit, tie, and leather shoes. I don't feel like that was PPE...That wasn't PPE friendly.

And the superintendent didn't even bat an eyelash, yelled at him to get off the site, and when he PPE'd up, he was welcome to come back on. He did not care that that was the CEO. And you know what happened? That man did a 360 and back off the site he went and he put on his PPE and he came back. Number two example, the CEO comes walking on, partial PPE. He got told that that was not acceptable, and he didn't care. So now as the workers are sitting there watching that and as the safety specialist or coordinator was sitting watching that, how do you enforce PPE when your own manager or

management, how about leader, doesn't follow those rules? So it becomes quite difficult and I find it just exceptionally sad.

One way that I know that we've been going about it in some... I've been talking with some companies is if you can't get management buy-in, how do you promote a positive safety culture? And I believe there's more than one way to do it. I think you can also do it from the bottom up. When the workers care, the voices of the workers are so incredibly powerful when they band together. You send the message to leadership that this is important, you are important and that they need to comply and abide and help support you in those endeavors. And that's another way to do it, push on up. I always feel that there's always more than one way to solve a problem. Push, pull, drag, blow it up if you have to, but there's always a way to get a safety culture to have a change.

Adam Carruthers:

I agree. We talk a lot about management leading from the top and something that I've had to learn over 20 years is sometimes we do something that's called "servant leadership", where it is the workers helping to set the example. Whether they should or not, that's a conversation that can be had another day, another time. But at the end of the day when we talk about whose safety is the most important, it's our own, followed very closely by those around us. We all want to go home safe. We all have something to go home to, whether it's family, friends, pets, the new movie coming out, the new game coming out, whatever it is, we all have a reason that we want to go home.

So unfortunately sometimes we see that where workers have to take that first step and say, "This is not okay. I need to exercise my rights, my right to know, my right to participate, my right to refuse unsafe work." But at the same time, we can also look at as a worker, "What can I do to help?" But we can't let management and supervisors off the hook. There's legal responsibilities that they have in the workplace. So when we talk about that, we talk about engagement. How can construction teams encourage workers, supervisors, subcontractors to participate in those safety conversations and to take ownership of the culture themselves regardless of the position that they have within the organization?

Tracy O'Brien:

I think there's so many ways to encourage conversations outside of normal PSIs and toolbox talks. You can incorporate safety activities into your project or company kickoff meetings. This year we recently hosted a series of games called Safety Survivor. We even had the little Survivor theme song going on with it. And then we had a series of events that focused on key elements, some of it related to COR®, some of it related to how can we just do better on project planning? And it was amazing to watch. Each table was a team and they all got into it and everybody was trying to raise their hand saying they finished first. And there was some really good feedback and thought processes that went into it. You made it fun. So it was something that it wasn't a chore or a task.

We've also had several companies who host safety rodeos. You can do a health and safety reboot, host facilitated sessions with the workers to discuss what does the current health and safety culture mean and how can we move it to a future state? Where do they think the gaps are that we could do better? And it's always amazing to me the feedback that you get, especially if you can have it in a very honest environment where they don't fear any repercussions for speaking candidly. In other words, what do the workers hope the company will do in the future to better health and safety? Some companies have put

together worker groups that meet regularly, discuss health and safety outside of the joint health and safety committees. I think that's a very valuable tool too.

I believe one company calls it a worker's voice where workers are voted in to participate in this type of a committee and the companies need to make sure that they grant time to the workers to be able to participate. We also have, you can engage workers in the creation and review of your job hazard assessments. So your hazard analysis, your safe job procedures, your safe work practices. They're the people doing the work every day and they're going to have great insight in the gaps on the paperwork and it helps to get that employee engagement buy-in.

Adam Carruthers:

That's excellent. If we don't have that worker engagement...In my experience, in 20 years, it's been hard to get that worker buy-in. But the more that you can involve workers, you can talk with them openly, honestly, have those communications, I have found over 20 years that workers tend to be more engaged, more involved, more willing to do the stuff that we hope that they're going to do, that we've documented on paper that they're supposed to do. But by having them involved, they're part of the process itself. Now, when we talk about workers, we talk about supervisors, we talk about subcontractors, the conversation always seems to come back to trust, trust and communication in that safety culture discussion. So how do these elements play into how safe people actually feel on the site? How do they act on the site safe and how do they follow that on the site when it comes to the trust in their communication?

Tracy O'Brien:

I think the communication piece is twofold. Sometimes there's a lack of consultation in the field and there's also a lack of communication with the field on operational changes. I like to call it the "ivory tower syndrome". The closer you are to the head office, the clearer that messaging and communication is. And then as you start going at arm's length or longer outside and past that office, the messaging starts becoming inconsistent. So sometimes messages don't make it to the field. It makes the supervisors and workers feel like they don't matter. So if you can't communicate with me, why should I trust you? And the messaging, depending on what it is you are trying to message, it's that game of telephone. All of a sudden as the message comes along, it gets blurred along the way. So it has to be consistent. Workers want to understand expectations and outcomes and we need to provide that to them.

Adam Carruthers:

I agree. The more we can communicate with workers, the better that we can have that understanding. And we've seen it time and time again where exactly like you said, the further away we are from the central point of communication, the breakdowns we seem to have happen more and more. We've seen companies that have gotten on board and where they've had that communication streamlined where regardless whether you are two feet from the CEO or 200 kilometres from the CEO, the messaging is the same, the expectation is the same. So it's good to see that. It's good to hear that companies are expanding how they're communicating, they're getting more involved, which is excellent. It's going to be beneficial for everyone in the long run.

Now one of the hurdles that we see is hazard reporting. Near-miss reporting from workers. It's one area though where a strong safety culture can really show for an organization. So how do we create an environment where workers can feel comfortable when they see a hazard, when something happens where nobody got hurt but something could have, how do we promote a culture where workers can feel comfortable sharing near miss reports hazard reports, things they've seen in the workplace?

Tracy O'Brien:

Yeah, that's a really good question. When I think about when I first started in this industry, if you even mentioned a close call report to a superintendent, they would lose their minds on you and say, "Don't you even talk about that. I'm not submitting one ever." And their thought process was, "Nobody got hurt. So why am I reporting this? And I don't want anybody monitoring my jobsite and asking me questions because I reported a near miss, and I don't want to be penalized on my bonus because I've reported on this near miss." So there's a real stigma around close-call reporting. And I really feel like as an industry that we need to overcome that. People feeling that reporting near misses is a black mark on their supervisory abilities, and that's not true.

Near misses can identify trends in types of work that require correction. It can tell you how the labour force is doing during times of extreme heat or cold or during times of pressure to get the work done. It helps management correct activities so that we don't repeat that near miss. And I'll give you a story. I remember working on a job, and I went to enter a room where I knew electrical work was ongoing. I think we had some drywallers in there as well. And when I walked in through the doorway, I walked in and stopped just to survey the room, and a heavy electrical wrench just fell past my shoulder and hit the ground. And I'm talking like big mechanics type wrench. And all I could think of was it just needed to be an inch over and it could have shattered my collarbone.

And the superintendent was on my other side and I looked at him and I said, "That's a near miss. That needs to go into the report." And that gentleman never did it. He refused to enter any of that. And then I looked at him and said, "Why is there no signage on the doorway identifying that there's overhead work? Why is this area not cordoned off from the inside so that people don't use this exit? And lastly, is there not another way that we can ensure that tools are not falling from the sky?" All of these different things that we could have had a conversation about, and part of the planning aspect of it, was completely missed and the person felt that it wasn't even their responsibility to correct it, and they were the supervisor.

Adam Carruthers:

And it brings me to a thought and we teach a lot in our supervisor courses and our JHSC courses, there's a theory out there that the more near misses you have, the more likely it is that you're going to have a first aid incident, which means the more likely you're going to have a medical, which means the more likely you're going to have a lost time, the more likely you'll have a critical, the more likely you'll lead and end up with a fatality. So when we talk about the importance of near-miss and hazard reporting, it's not about getting people in trouble. It's about looking at the fact that there's a situation we need to deal with, that in your situation, in your story, you talked about that wrench fall and right beside your shoulder, and if it had been two inches one way or the other could have shattered your shoulder.

A couple more could have been a strike to the head, right? It could have been something even more serious. So that culture of trying to make sure that workers are understanding that, "Hey, you're not going to get in trouble for near-miss reporting, you're not going to get in trouble for hazard reporting." For supervisors, it's making their overall job a lot easier when they're able to have instead of one set of eyes, have all these different sets of eyes on the jobsite identifying potential hazards or something that could have seriously injured somebody if it had been slightly different. So it's a really good message to share about why it's important to have near miss reporting. And like you said, have those conversations before and encourage that.

Now when we talk about culture, we also need to talk about new workers and our subcontractors, right? People that may not be familiar with policies, procedures, the expectations of the general contractors, as they work their way through. So how do we bring them into the fold and make sure that they align with our company's health and safety policies, procedures, and values?

Tracy O'Brien:

I really feel that a new worker program is an excellent tool to ensure that key skills and knowledge are taught to new workers. I can't talk about that enough. It ensures that we have supervisors monitoring these new workers and observing how they're working and helping them acclimatize to the company rules and how we do things. Once that skill and knowledge is demonstrated consistently, they can graduate from the program. Depending on whether the person is actually new to the company or new to the industry, it can be very quick, or it could be over the period of a year or even longer until they demonstrate those skills and experience. I support the green hard hat program. I think it's also a visual symbol.

So if I think about supervisors on site, if I think about operators, truck drivers, anybody. Any of that moving equipment, it's a visual to those operators and drivers that I have an inexperienced person, and I need to be keeping my eyes on that individual because they may not know that they're stepping into a hazard, such as my swing radius, stepping into my blind spot, any of the above. You become more observant about them because their inexperience might put them in harm's way. And these types of programs when they're well executed and communicated to the worker, it really matters. And I think that it really helps them engage into the health and safety aspect and helps promote a positive safety culture.

Adam Carruthers:

Very well said. Now we obviously need to talk about the elephant in the room: not every crew is eager to embrace change when it comes to health and safety, especially when it comes to the practices, the stuff that they've been doing for so long. And one of the hurdles I've always experienced when I'm going out and saying, "Hey, we have a new policy, a new procedure, new guidelines," is you get that saying of, "We've always done it this way. I've never been hurt in 20 years." How can we get around those attitudes of the, "We've always done it this way"?

Tracy O'Brien:

Yeah, change is always hard, but I think there's been a real shift in safety attitudes with the introduction of COR® and owners making it a requirement that you have COR® certification in order to work for

them. We also saw a big shift in the Ottawa market with the introduction of light rail and the more stringent safety requirements to work on those projects. Nobody ever would've thought to start wearing sleeves and gloves full time. They just weren't the norm. But light rail had so many companies touch on that project and the policy was enforced so that it became mainstream to adopt that PPE, even when those companies left the project, because they saw positive feedback from the workers on how it helped them.

The big general contractors in town are also a factor on continuous improvement of health and safety. They continue to bring in new policies, like most of them adopted the glove policy after that light rail project. We also are seeing right now several of them adopting the four-point chinstrap, Class E, Type II hard hat, and they're requiring that in order to work on their sites. Some companies use that GC policy to drive change within their company because if the big GCs are mandating it, then we must also follow it in order to work for them. And workers tend to generally adopt those types of policies easier when they see that it's tied to being able to work.

But to implement those safety changes, the supervisor has to buy in first. If they don't believe in that change, they're not going to ensure that the workers are following the change. And the attitude of "we have always done it this way" doesn't necessarily mean that it was the right way. And showing workers the benefit of new safety practices generally goes a long way too with the adoption problem.

Adam Carruthers:

I like that. One of the benefits, especially when you're a manager, somebody in authority, advice I give people is "explain to me the 'why?'". Why do we need to put the chinstraps on our hard hats? Like you said, some of the big players in the auto market are now moving towards. Why do we need to wear gloves now whenever we're on a construction project? Rather than just saying "do it", explaining, "Well, we want to wear the gloves because we want to ensure that you're not going to get a cut or a laceration. So the company has invested in cut resistant gloves. And we have found that with the cut resistant gloves, we can reduce laceration injuries to your hands by X percentage," whatever it might be.

And I found that by encouraging people through the why rather than just telling them to do it, you have those opportunities, like you were saying, of getting people to believe in the programs, which always goes a long way as you work your way through. Now on the flip side, can you share a time when there was a strong safety culture that helped prevent an incident or changed the outcome for the better?

Tracy O'Brien:

Definitely. So I was lucky enough to be one of the people that worked on the Winnipeg airport, and during that time we were hit by a microburst. And basically a microburst is very similar to tornado type winds, but generally without the funnel. The damage was huge. I was sitting there watching out the window, this huge roll, bundle of rigid insulation that somebody had craned up to the roof, and it was rolling like a tumbleweed in slow motion across the rooftop. And I thought, "What is happening right now?" And then it picked it up and flung it off the roof into the nearest parking lot. Minutes earlier, the roofers were up there and they observed the storm clouds and called it a day. It would've been a horrible moment because they would've been tossed off that roof for sure.

It lifted a 60-foot trailer right off the supports, and there were people in it having a meeting and dropped it on the ground. Blueskin was ripped off the building. Miscellaneous construction supplies were running or flying around like projectiles. And the worst part was when I stepped outside the door to go and take a look and see what the commotion was about, a three-story granular wind funnel came up in front of me, and I was sitting there staring at it and I was like, "Holy crap." It was just absolutely amazing. I was working with a tile company out of Toronto who'd flown in that day for a meeting and they decided to walk back, and I saw those storm clouds rolling in and I said, "Hey, how about I give you a lift?"

But of course the new airport's being built beside the old airport and they were like, "No, we're just going to shortcut through." Well, I think they regretted that decision because the poor project manager, as they were walking, two sheets of half-inch plywood lifted off the ground and started spinning on either side of him. And the next thing that ends up happening is the plywood comes together and hits him on both sides of the body. It ended up breaking his collarbone and his shoulder bone. It was horrible. Let me tell you though, out of all of this horrible pieces that I'm talking about, what the positive was, I heard an air horn sound. Radios went off about the storm, and I was standing in the doorway on the superintendent and health and safety side, and I watched all these individuals like clockwork come running out of their offices with the slickers and radios in hand.

And I whipped open the door for them and out they went, and they all went off to do their assigned tasks in this type of an emergency event. People were assigned to systematically work through the floors of the building to clear the people. First aid was given to those who required it. Others were dispatched to tie down loose items and keep the travel path clear for emergency vehicles. Others were dispatched to direct the emergency vehicles in because our entry was super complicated. It was not a good outcome for my visitors who, by the way, swore they were never coming back to Winnipeg. And I can tell you they did not come back to Winnipeg, but it's a moment that's burned in my memory of an emergency response that was just so well executed.

Adam Carruthers:

And I think that's also a good example because I can almost guarantee what you saw wasn't a one-off. It was likely practiced, it was probably drilled, it was probably trained. A program in place is one thing, but educating the workforce, building that culture as we work our way through so that if something happens, we have that much more preparation, and people are that much more confident in their ability to execute anything that is expected of them depending on the circumstance. Now finally, I want to talk about how can you measure whether your health and safety culture efforts are actually making a difference? And what could leadership, senior management, supervisors, what should or could they actually be looking for in the workplace?

Tracy O'Brien:

At the end of the day, I believe in continuous improvement. So it starts with setting annual health and safety goals with real metrics that are tangible and can be measured. Safety stats are an excellent way to help you identify your safety goals. And don't set a weak goal. It doesn't send positive messaging to the field. I'll give you an example. Reduce sprain and strain injuries. Well, where's the metric in that? Where's the incentive? There's nothing tangible to it. The goals also need to be communicated to

everybody in the company. And management needs to regularly monitor the goals to learn if the goal is tracking to be successful. If it isn't, what can be done differently for a positive outcome?

And make sure that these goals as you're working their way through them through the year are being communicated back to the workers so they can see how they're doing. We need to make sure that safety stats are used also to help create job hazard analyses and our safe work procedures, and possibly even new policies. And after a new policy or procedure has been implemented, monitor those safety stats so that you can identify what's working or maybe that wasn't fully adopted or it needs a revision or a new communication. So it's definitely, at the end of the day, I think that that is definitely one of the items that you can do to help measure your safety culture efforts. But safety culture efforts never stop. And that's why I think it's a continuous improvement process.

Adam Carruthers:

Couldn't agree more, Tracy. We don't stop with just one thing with safety. We always need to look for those further improvements. And this conversation has been eye-opening for me with even 20 years of experience myself with some additional things that can be taken back for participants that I train on a regular basis of how can we continually improve our safety culture?

So that wraps up our conversation on building a positive safety culture in construction. Today we heard about talking with leadership, setting the tone, setting an example, making safety a shared responsibility across the entire crew as we work our way through not just the supervisor, not just the employer, not just a worker, not just a sub, but everybody working together. We explored how open communication, worker involvement, trust being essential in keeping safety front and centre on the jobsite.

And perhaps even more importantly, we were reminded that a strong safety culture, it's not overnight. It's something that we have to work day by day, honest actions, consistent actions, those conversations, and a commitment to sending everyone home safe. So I'd like to thank Tracy for sharing wealth of knowledge, experience, developing health and safety and the culture. Tracy, it was a pleasure having you here on this conversation with us today. I want to say thank you for everyone for tuning in. If you would like to get in touch with us at the *IHSA the Safety Podcast* or have any topic ideas you'd like us to cover off and discuss, we encourage you to reach out at us at podcast@ihsa.ca. I have been your host, Adam Carruthers, and remember, safety culture isn't something you have. It's something you live.

Announcer

The *IHSA Safety Podcast*. For more episodes, tips, and all things safety, go to ihsasafetypodcast.ca. Thanks for listening.