

The Hon Julia Gillard MP

Minister for Education. Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations

Minister for Social Inclusion. Deputy Prime Minister

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Speech

Address to the Federal Safety Commissioners CEO Forum

Federal Safety Commissioners CEO Forum Melbourne

INTRODUCTION

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the people and the people of the Kulin nation. I pay respect to their elders past and present.

It's a great pleasure to be here today with you – the leaders of the building and construction industry – for the inaugural Federal Safety Commissioner's Chief Executive Officer Forum.

Thank you for the invitation.

This forum will discuss ways to improving Occupational Health and Safety in the building and construction industry. I commend everyone here for your commitment to lifting the OHS performance in this crucial industry.

When we think of Australia's economic growth of recent years, we tend to think of the mining industry, but the contribution of your industry is also immense.

It employs nine per cent of the entire workforce¹; creates some of our most important infrastructure, like hospitals, schools and roads; and it has an annual turnover of around \$62 billion².

But it isn't all good news.

THERE IS MORE TO BE DONE

Tragically, lives are still lost, one as recently as a fortnight ago. Stories of loss are a solemn reminder that there is more to do. Everyone in the industry feels shocked and saddened when a life has been needlessly cut short.

2005-06 figures show the fatalities incidence rate in the building and construction industry twice as high as the 'all industries' rate³.

Over the same period, the serious claims incidence rate was the fourth highest of all industries⁴. This equates to 39 employees a day sustaining a serious work related injury or disease requiring one week, or more, off work⁵.

It is a sobering to realise there were 30 notified fatalities during the nine month period from July 2007 to March 2008⁶. That's 30 deaths in 36 weeks.

Alarming, this is the worst performance since 1 July 2003⁷.

Such incidents need not, and must not, happen.

We need to acknowledge that such incidents are happening too frequently and that we need to do as much as we can to lower fatality and injury rates.

I know that this is a key focus for all of you and I hope that this forum will achieve our shared goal of ensuring that workers go home safely at the end of the day.

I trust that today you will be able to draw a line in the sand. By bringing together a motivated, inspired group of leaders to discuss this important issue, you are working together to ensure Australian workers can return home to their families and friends after work each day.

You are all in this room today as leaders of your organisation and the industry. You come from different locations all around the country. Some of you work in small businesses. Some of you work in multinational companies.

However you all have one unifying attribute – you can make a difference – by creating a real and sustainable safety culture in your organisation and industry.

HUMAN CAPITAL

Yours is an industry that – more than any other – relies on human capital.

With such a large human investment you need to get health and safety right. People should not die or be injured in the course of their work.

A good safety record will help you attract the best and brightest young people to a career in the building and construction industry.

We need to attract and retain skilled workers, and to do this we don't just need satisfying jobs with adequate resources and training, we need safe work places.

That is why we all need to commit to a real and sustainable cultural change.

CHALLENGE

Today you are being challenged to do better.

Examine your own beliefs and attitudes towards safety.

For example:

- How do you set the standard in your organisation?
- How do you communicate and collaborate to improve OHS?
- How do you promote health and safety, not just in your own companies but across the building and construction industry?

If leaders like you can plan, implement and adopt best practice OHS as part of your culture, it will set the wheels in motion for the cultural change that is necessary across the building and construction industry.

All change depends on strong leadership.

I understand the many stakeholders in the building and construction industry will not agree on all matters.

However, I challenge you all to commit to real and sustainable change in OHS during this forum.

Go away at the end of today, knowing you have committed to a culture of safety in your own organisations, as well as across your industry.

I know many of you are from ‘the bigger end of town’ and that you will already have innovative and proactive OHS programs in place. For you, your challenge is to share your knowledge with the smaller players that make up the majority of the industry and that are often your subcontractors.

Everyone – whether they are a head contractor, subcontractor or employee – needs to be working safely.

Subbies are a critical part of the industry. But do you communicate, supervise and engage with your subbies in the same way as your employees? Can you do more to make their safety a priority?

You need to make sure that they too can return home to their loved ones at the end of the working day. As the leaders of companies, you can change the way they do their work. You can influence their safety management systems and teach them how to do their work safely.

These are valuable skills they can take with them to future jobs. If every head contractor took the time and effort to improve their subcontractor management, safety on worksites would be drastically improved.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

As a major client and provider of capital, the Australian Government will only do business with those who demonstrate a high regard for safety.

The Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner is continuing to work with government agencies to ensure our own culture changes, so as clients we demand the best OHS on our sites and we build this into our own processes.

While I am on the topic of the Office of the Federal Safety Commissioner, I would like to take this opportunity to announce Ms Helen Marshall as the new Federal Safety Commissioner.

Many of you would be aware that Helen has assumed the duties of Federal Safety Commissioner since June this year.

Over the last 12 months Helen has worked as the Deputy Federal Safety Commissioner. During this time, Helen has successfully promoted OHS within the building and construction industry through participation in a number of industry events and forums. I'm sure you will join me in welcoming Helen to this role and providing her with the support and collaboration need to continue to improve the industry's safety record.

OHS REFORM

While this is not a topic for today's forum, the Australian Government is committed to achieving harmonisation of OHS laws within five years.

Too often we see a 'culture of compliance' in industry, where regard for safety is only seen as a legislative requirement. A 'tick the boxes' approach you might say.

Governments can act as a catalyst for change, but without the engagement and commitment of industry, we can't make a sustainable difference. We need industry to be part of solution, and more importantly, to want to change.

We want to work with you to achieve our shared goal of improving safety for all Australian workers in the building and construction industry.

Working together will be the key to building a safety culture, not just in your industry, but in all industries.

CHARTER

Your commitment to the Charter sums up the aim of today's forum.

Safety must be a value, not just a priority. We shouldn't talk about safety as simply a 'number one priority' but rather as a deeply held value that remains constant throughout the business. This is the cultural change we need to bring about.

CONCLUSION

While I recognise many achievements have already been made in your industry, there is still a lot more that can be done.

There is still an urgent need for cultural change, to stop workers being killed or injured in workplace incidents.

While governments, and the Federal Safety Commissioner, can act as a catalyst for change, we are not the ones on the ground, on building sites, each day.

That is why I am so encouraged to see so many leaders of the building and construction industry gathered here today, committed to driving this cultural change.

I know you will use this forum as an opportunity to discuss how we can continue to improve the industry's OHS performance and I urge you to commit to the Charter and lead the way.

Because safe business is good business.

Thank you.

Footnotes:

1. *Australian Safety and Compensation Council, Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2005-06, July 2008, page 42.*
2. *Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1301.0 – Year Book Australia 2008, Construction. July 2008.*
3. *Australian Safety and Compensation Council, Construction Industry Fact Sheet 2005-06, page 1.*
4. *Australian Safety and Compensation Council, Construction Industry Fact Sheet 2005-06, page 1.*
5. *Australian Safety and Compensation Council, Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2005-06, July 2008, page 42.*
6. *Australian Safety and Compensation Council Notified Fatalities Report July 2007 – March 2008.*
7. *Data dates back to 1 July 2003.*

Media Contact:

media@deewr.gov.au

Seán Marshall
National Research / Policy Officer
CFMEU National Office
(02) 8524 5800 office 0407 785 843 mobile