



SAFETY, TALENT, AND THE LOST ART OF CONVERSATION



If the average person thought about ‘safety’ in asset intensive businesses like ports, they’d probably think about guard rails, rule books and check lists. When people think about ‘skills’ they probably think of classrooms and assessments.

All of these characteristics have their place. But the sessions at Ports Skills and Safety’s excellent 2022 Member conference revealed a perhaps unexpected but critical common characteristic of success – communication. The power and benefits of talking (and crucially really listening) to colleagues, to peers and to other organisations and external stakeholders.

In short – the art of conversation.

On the safety side, dialogue and collaboration was one of the four common themes that emerged from an insightful session with other heavily asset intensive and safety critical sectors – chemicals, rail, and steel. We’ve tried to summarise the four themes in the graphic left (in addition to Dialogue and Collaboration others being Safety Systems, Culture and Leadership and Good Data).

Reflecting on Dialogue and Collaboration, there was a sense common across the sectors on the panel that both looking within organisations but also outside to learn the lessons from challenges but also tap into a broader pool of good practice. But it’s not just the quantity of the dialogue, it’s the quality. Is there good, active listening taking place – particularly from feedback from



colleagues undertaking the work? And, crucially, do organisations have the right behaviours and culture not only to ‘permit’ challenge but go further to proactively encourage challenge, listen, and carry through on the results of the challenge.

Key characteristics of better safety management

FROM A SELECTION OF SAFETY CRITICAL ASSET BASED SECTORS, PSS MEMBER CONFERENCE 2022



More broadly it was a welcome development to hear from and reflect on the experience of other sectors. Yes, we're all somewhat different but the commonality of challenge and opportunity to learn was really striking and valuable.

Dialogue and communications also featured in the discussion about skills and, more broadly, human capital.

As a sector we've got a strong record of commitment to skills (such as apprenticeships) and developing and promoting colleagues. But we face challenges as we, across the sector, seek to renew and development our human capital base. We need to replace highly skilled colleagues who are reaching the end of their careers. We need to do more 'lifelong learning' work to help colleagues evolve their skills and competencies. We need to attract and / or develop people for the new competencies required by a future port which is more digital, automated, and sustainable. And we need to improve the diversity of our sector, truly being a sector for all.

These are undoubtedly big challenges, but we're starting from a good base with a real desire to evolve. In fact, one of the key findings from recent research into the skills needs of the sector is that there are pockets of good practice dotted around the sector.

So better communication and conversations should play several important roles in improvement. Dialogue can help us join up the pockets of good practice, so we have a sector wide picture of what good looks like and what's required. Dialogue between employers and trade unions should be, as laid out by Nautilus the maritime union, a key tool in delivering better outcomes for all. And communication with the world outside ports is essential to build a better understanding of the modern ports industries and the great employment opportunities it offers.

As the old advert said, 'it's good to talk'. And Port Skills and Safety, and events like their conference, are key catalysts for helping the dialogue and collaboration flourish.

TIM MORRIS

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The logo for UKMPG (UK Major Ports Group) is displayed in a bold, blue, serif font. The letters 'U', 'K', 'M', 'P', and 'G' are all in the same font style, with the 'U' and 'K' being slightly larger than the other letters. The logo is positioned on the right side of the page.