

Name: Cavaghan and Gray
Union: Usdaw
Union role: Plant convenor,
Size: 1000
Sector: Food
Location: Carlisle
Issue: Health and Safety

The organisation and the role of the workplace representative

Cavaghan and Gray was incorporated into the Northern Foods group in 2000, prior to which it had been a family owned concern since the early 19th century. It originally specialised in bacon products, but moved into the ready meals market in the mid 1980s. It produces high quality products for firms such as Marks and Spencer. Union organisation is well established. The company employs 1,000 employees, 65 percent of whom are union members. There is a full-time union office and a union learning centre and members are served by 7 shop stewards, 10 health and safety representatives and 5 union learning representatives. The Usdaw plant convenor works full-time on union duties and has led innovation in health and safety.

The issue

The takeover by Northern Foods was accompanied by a restructuring exercise that led to the loss of 600 jobs and widespread investment in new automated processes. The company looks to ensure standardised use of machinery across plants and this has led to an increased drive from senior management for health and safety improvements. Whilst health and safety training was widespread, actual practice was a little 'patchy' and the active participation of staff was lacking. For example, it was not uncommon for staff to just 'walk past potentially serious cases of health and safety' issues.

A fact finding visit to another plant by the union convenor and various line managers found that an employee suggestion form had contributed to the detection of health and safety hazards. The union convenor saw value in adopting something similar at Cavaghan and Gray and a meeting was organised to agree the format of a new Hazards and Near Miss Form. The company's health and safety officers took the lead in the initial design of the form, but it was revised following union input prior to implementation. The forms are distributed across the shop floor for anyone to pick up, complete and post in strategically placed hazard boxes. They are handed in on the basis of anonymity and can be addressed to either the relevant manager or a health and safety representative. Significantly, once the relevant manager receives the form there is an expectation that they take action. Once an action is taken the forms are signed off by both the relevant manager and health and safety representative.

The union convenor played a key role in getting the form onto the shop floor and trialling and distributing forms through the health and safety representative network. For the first 3-4 months the forms were not completed as fully as required, and it was recognised that the biggest challenge to roll out and the success of the new forms was buy-in from staff and middle and lower management. Health and safety representatives helped to push the agenda forward, acting in an advisory capacity to line and middle managers and directing staff to the right form of words to use when completing the forms. This contributed to not only high levels of uptake in terms of form completion but also the embedding of Hazard and Near Miss actions as a natural activity of line management and shop floor work.

Once the process was established, it was disseminated back to Northern Foods as an example of innovation with regard to health and safety. This was recognised with an award for best practice at the annual Northern Foods health and safety meeting.

How we benefited from effective collaborative work

At a general level, the introduction of the Hazard and Near Miss Form has contributed to better employee relations at the plant, following the restructuring period in 2000. According to the union convenor, it is now possible to have a 'conversation with management over health and safety, whereas previously it was not so straightforward'. This is put down partly to the training and experience of the convenor and also the partnership approach that has developed. For management, the 'union is not seen as a threat anymore, but as a help'.

In more specific terms, health and safety hazards are now attended to with immediate effect. There has been a widespread exercise of repairs across the plant as a result of potential hazards identified by staff. For management, this has resulted in significant reductions in the severity of accidents and time lost as a result of accidents.

The safer working environment that has resulted for staff has impacted positively on morale. A survey a few years prior to the implementation of the form found that 70 per cent of workers claimed to feel unsafe at work. Survey data from one year after the introduction of the form show that staff perceptions of an unsafe working environment has declined to just 30 per cent.

The levels of buy-in from staff for the Hazard and Near Miss reporting process are now high. In the first year of implementation 2,000 forms were completed, followed by 4,500 completions in the second year and the most recent indicators show a further increase of a third. Perhaps more significantly, staff don't just complete forms of relevance to their immediate working area but for across the factory, and forms often detail that the hazard has been resolved by staff themselves.

Formal health and safety policies and processes are developing apace at the plant. Union representatives and management have joint health and safety 'walkabouts' and jointly plan audits. The plant is also starting to roll out a major new behavioural safety programme focusing on safe and unsafe acts. The target

is to train one in four staff as safety champions as part of this programme. The union convenor has a lead training role.

What would we do differently?

Both union and management representatives stated they would not have done anything differently, and claimed that the key challenges had been faced in an effective manner. The main challenge faced in terms of implementing the Hazard and Near Miss Form was buy-in from the shop floor and winning over some 'doubting managers', who took the view 'we will believe it when we see it'. Buy-in was ensured through the central role played by the union convenor and the health and safety representatives in assisting staff in the completion of forms and showing the wider benefits of the idea to management. Both management and union representatives are of the view that the innovations in health and safety could only have happened through a partnership-based approach. The spillovers from this have been significant; health and safety reporting is now regarded as a cultural part of working at the plant and a recognised feature of line management work.