

Mining safety: Zero harm is achievable in our lifetime with holistic buy-in

4 July 2017

Mining Review

The announcement of the 2016 health and safety statistics by Mineral Resources Minister, Mosebenzi Zwane, provoked wide-ranging comments.

Many of these shared a safety theme – and concern that, despite a commitment to zero harm, and the reduction in the number of fatalities year on year, there was for 2016, only a nominal improvement.

The year on year improvement, seems to have stalled. A review of the number of fatalities since 2012 indicates that between 2012 (112 fatal accidents), 2013 (94 fatal accidents), 2014 (84 fatal accidents), and 2015 (77 fatal accidents), there has been a significant downward trend in the number of fatal accidents.

The question therefore is why this trend did not continue in 2016 and, for that matter, in the first month of 2017 (four fatalities).

It seems that there are two primary contributing factors which are distinguishable, but should be treated holistically.

The first is an attitude towards health and safety.

Until the desire or motivation to comply with health and safety standards and procedures, and act in the best interests of fellow workers, is internalised, the approach or behaviour towards health and safety, is concerning.

It seems that the current approach to health and safety is externally driven – if an employee believes that they will not get caught out, a “go around it” approach is adopted towards compliance with standards and procedures.

A good example is an employee that drives to the mine, far exceeding the speed limit, and then complies with the speed limit on the mine, because of the greater prospects of being caught out and penalised for non-compliance to the mine speed limit.

Internalisation of behaviour means that an employee will comply with the speed limit on the way to the mine and on the mine because it is in the interests of health and safety of all

employees to do so, and not because they may be caught.

The second reason is the significant impact that the disruption to the “mining rhythm” has had as a result of mine stoppages, restructuring programmes, retrenchments, and placing shafts on care and maintenance.

The impact on crew members who know one another intimately cannot be underestimated.

The absence of crew members and the changes to the supervisory structures can create a vacuum which impacts on the approach of the crew members to health and safety.

The impact of instability created by political, commercial and employment insecurity undoubtedly has an impact on health and safety, and it is essential for all stakeholders in the mining industry to work together to address these underlying causes.

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