



SPOTLIGHT ON OUR LEADERS

Leading the leaders

Michelle Henderson was named 'Leader of the Year' at the 2019 annual Safeguard awards. We spoke to the Chief Operating Officer at PowerNet about her safety leadership style and a unique initiative she's led to lift leadership capability within the organisation.

What has influenced your approach to safety leadership?

Michelle recalls the time early in her career at the NZAS smelter in Southland when she was asked to be the independent investigator in a work incident.

"There's something very impactful about going to the hospital and meeting a victim's wife and young children in the hospital corridors, it really grounds you."

Michelle credits the influence of great safety leadership at the smelter early in her career. *"It was an amazing incubator for thought and safety leadership, so I was hard-wired from a young age to value safety as a crucial ingredient for success."*

After spending 17 years at NZAS in roles from Operations Superintendent to Business Improvement, Michelle moved to Queensland in 2010 and later to Western Australia where she held large infrastructure roles, culminating as the General Manager for Asset Management, responsible for engineering standards and governance for 15 mines, 4 ports and a rail network.

Coming home to New Zealand to take up the role of COO at PowerNet in 2016 felt like the right move for Michelle. *"PowerNet had some great safety initiatives happening, and it was a chance to be part of helping NZ Inc as a brand to be safe, as well as successful."*



Coaching by Kilometre

There was already a strong safety leadership focus at PowerNet but Michelle wanted to lift the pace of improvements in health and safety, especially to the frontline. *"One week every two months my distribution manager and I would travel to our field depots for site visits and team briefings. We recognised there were opportunities to extend this experience to other frontline leaders and to lift leadership capability across the board. We thought, wouldn't it be great for our frontline leaders to see what we see during these visits? Could we put people in the car with us on our site visits so they can see other frontline leaders in action?"*

Michelle and her team first trialled the concept of Coaching by Kilometre with one supervisor with great success. Yet there were logistical and practical barriers to overcome – including one frontline leader per week would mean it would take 11 years to include all 37 leaders. So, they refined the idea and also included two frontline leaders at one time. *"It's not just an opportunity to see other teams and depots in action, but we spend many hours in the car travelling – providing another layer of leadership coaching. It means every leaders' observation and experience is valued, whatever their level in the business. It is essentially safety coaching beyond the classroom – a form of free, internal vocational training."*

It wasn't always easy getting the frontline leaders to get involved.

"Often it took the first full day, and then an overnight stay as a group before boundaries were broken down and the benefits started to shine through."

As a company PowerNet has now put 25 out of 37 of its frontline leaders through Coaching by Kilometre, and it's continuing to grow.

How did it help?

The results of Coaching by Kilometre speak for themselves. PowerNet's LTI severity rate has dropped from 200 days lost in October 2016 to 70 as of March 2019. But the results go further.

“We’ve had frontline leaders going back to depots telling their colleagues they have to get involved as they’ve learnt so much from the time on the road, that it was an opportunity to see us leaders as real people, and that it was the best on the job training they’ve ever had.”

As well as that, PowerNet's annual staff survey has seen a larger than normal positive response to the question 'Does the company support the health, safety and wellbeing of our people?.'

Extending the programme

“We’ve now reached a tipping point of sorts, and we want to extend this programme. From here on in other leaders will be helping to run the programme, travelling with our frontline leaders during the regular depot visits.”

How could this model be adopted for other companies or contractors?

Michelle describes the programme as easily scalable for other companies, or those running a large contracting base and looking to run something similar through their supply chain.

“Instead of taking your employees, or frontline leaders on the road for a few days around different sites, take a leading hand from each of your contracting companies. If you were to put a plumber, a builder and an electrician in a car with two leaders from your organisation for 48 hours and take them around some of your sites so they can see what you see, the return on investment will be extremely high.”

Michelle's tips for leading your leaders

- » Maximise your time in the field by including your frontline leaders or contractors, and at the same time lift leadership in health and safety across the company
- » Ask them – do you see what I see here? Provide them with a different perspective
- » The absolute core is care. Everything comes back to that. If you care enough, you'll get to the right point.



Leaders make a difference

The Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum inspires and supports its members to become more effective leaders on health and safety. The Forum has more than 350 members, who are CEOs or Managing Directors of significant New Zealand companies.

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