

Francois Barton: It's time for New Zealand workplaces to aim for a better and more thriving future, for all of us.

Today marks Workers' Memorial Day.

This day is a commemoration of the tragic reality that we continue to live in a world of work where people get killed because of the job they do. Unfortunately, this year is no different to last year's or others previously. Families, friends and work colleagues around New Zealand are grieving the loss of their special people – on our farms, on our building sites, in our forests, at our ports and on our roads. Not statistics, but preventable, avoidable and sad loss.

As well as today being Workers' Memorial Day, it is also World Day for Safety and Health at Work - and this year's theme is *act together to build a positive culture of safety and health*.

You can't argue with this, but my nagging worry, is that we see this as yet another well-intentioned slogan, encouraging us to "care more and try harder", rather than a meaningful call for something different.

The last decade has seen a massive increase in effort, time and money invested in "health and safety" – yet workers continue to be seriously injured and killed at work in unsurprisingly predictable and sobering numbers. Trying harder isn't working. We need to demonstrate "care" by trying smarter.

Smarter means re-framing our efforts in workplace health and safety –from focusing on obligation and compliance, to focusing on how we develop cultures that enable good work design, where people and businesses can thrive. These are cultures that focus on creating 'better work', not just 'better workers'.

I believe that the current realities of Covid fatigue, skills and workforce shortages and mental health headwinds make now the perfect time for this shift.

The last two years have shown us what our businesses, our leaders and workers are capable of. We have dramatically changed big parts of how we work – previously thought impossible. We've learned about hidden skills and talents in our businesses and through our supply chains that have helped us flex and respond to uncertainty. And we have re-learned that our physical and mental health are fundamental to the capacity of our businesses...without it, nothing happens.

Five key mindsets keep surfacing from my discussions with the CEOs and senior leaders across New Zealand hopeful for a better future, for a better "normal". Almost universally, these leaders believe:

1. that mentally and physically healthy people deliver better work,
2. skilled people and supply chain partners are an investment rather than cost,
3. that the "return on investment" in systems, capabilities and technologies is measured in better work for people, and not just increased production,
4. "work flexibility" is more than simply working from home or the office, and can include a whole range of other "flexibility elements",
5. improving work means engaging and working with their people – through valuing and fostering strong relationships and high-quality connections.

As we start to imagine a post-pandemic future, let's do better than just "get back to normal". "Normal" in 2019 meant flatlining workplace fatalities, stalled productivity, skills shortages and mental health crises.

We've proven we can make huge change and adaption to how we work when we need to. So, let's imagine and go after something better for our businesses and people.

Leaders that work with their people to make "work better" give themselves the chance to attract and retain good people, create a mentally healthier place for their teams, increase their businesses' ability to flex and respond to the next inevitable challenge, and will unlock more effort and capability from those in the business and supply chain.

To me, that feels like a fitting start to honouring the working people we've already lost, as well as a genuine step towards *building a positive culture of safety and health*. It also feels like a future worth working for.

I see many Forum leaders already starting down that path, which is why, as a movement of more than 400 CEOs, we continue to play a collective leadership role in promoting and supporting a thriving, resilient and productive New Zealand.

Francois Barton is Executive Director of the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum. The Forum has 400+ members who are CEOs of large New Zealand businesses or businesses operating in high-risk environments – www.forum.org.nz