

1.4 Safety Can't be measured - Andrew Townsend

The RIBA are developing these ideas to help the creative professionals to achieve 'CDM Differently' in a proportionate and practical way as proposed by the CDM 2015 (and 2007) Regulations.

The Case for Safety Differently

Andrew Townsend's thought provoking ideas on health and safety are captured in this inspirational book He states in the prologue:-

"I still have that need to understand how to make things happen. How does something work? But health and safety is different. It is a paradox. It is about making things not happen. Learning by experience and safety are mutually exclusive concepts. Safety is not tangible; it cannot be measured. What is measured is the absence of safety - they are called injuries, incidents and ill health.

"Safety" is talked about as if it were a physical or social entity that, by implication, can be studied in the same way as a physical or social science. At its best, the study of safety is about understanding that, as time progresses, rates of failure decrease and about trying to interpret the processes involved. At its worst, the study of safety is used to chauvinistically justify a particular way of doing things to the exclusion of others; improving failure rates are used to imply success by association without the

admission that there might be other explanations. In the absence of tangible objective measures safety is "measured" using subjective surrogates. These surrogates have all the appearances of the precision of measurement associated with physical sciences or engineering. Without adequate training in the disciplines of measurement ordinary members of the public, managers and the working level safety advisors may gain the impression that safety is a "science" and conforms to immutable physical laws. Nothing could be further from the truth; the original research upon which much of today's safety management is based is at best fragmentary; at worst it is spurious. Yet the original assumptions made in the management of safety have been in existence for almost a century. They have had time to embed themselves in the minds of industry and the safety profession; to challenge them now is almost an act of heresy. Reading the language used by its adherents and acolytes safety has assumed a quasi-religious status. It has its own language and conventions which only serve to elevate it to beyond the understanding of mere mortals. The study of safety also is incomplete in the sense of no one knows how it all fits together and whether or not if how it fits together is changing with time. This book is intended to empower middle and senior managers and members of the public with

the knowledge of just how complete or incomplete the under-standing of health and safety is; it is intended to encourage them to demand evidence to support whatever they are being asked to do. It takes at least six months of walking a construction site twice a day before the workers on the tools trust you with what they really think as opposed to what they think you want to hear. One day one of my fitters remarked 'too much safety makes you unsafe'. When I asked him to explain he described that the safety requirements we had placed upon him prevented him from doing what he was good at and what he had been trained to do. Inhibiting his ability to exercise judgement and skill was in itself unsafe. Where was the evidence that all the restrictions placed upon him actually worked? It was at that point that I realised I was enforcing a dogma for which I had not seen the source data. It was at that point that curiosity got the better of me and I tried to find out what really makes safety work. It was another 25 years before I could answer that question."

