

20% of all workplace injuries are sustained by young Australian construction workers (below the age of 25).⁸

The injury rate for young workers is **18% higher** than the rate for workers aged 25 years and over.⁹

Young male construction workers are up to **2.5 times more likely** to die by suicide than other men their age.¹⁰

Conversations about life, health and safety:

Social supports for young construction workers

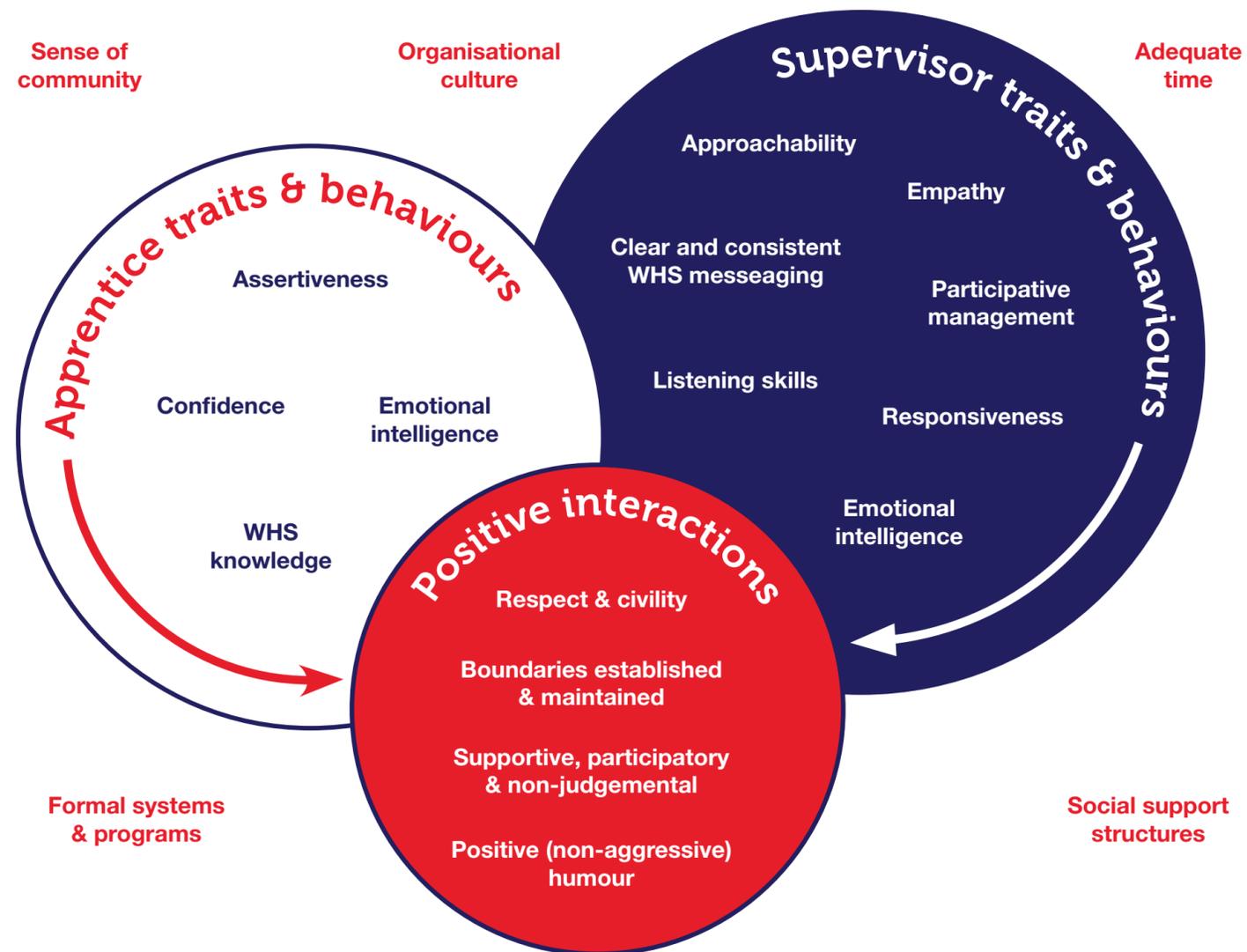


Figure 1

Background

Young workers (under the age of 25) experience a disproportionately high incidence of work-related safety incidents and injuries compared to older workers.¹ Young workers in the construction industry are also a high risk group for psychological distress and poor mental health.²

Sometimes young workers' vulnerability to work-related injury is explained in terms of developmental characteristics and risk-taking behaviour. However, young workers' injury experience is actually more strongly associated with the type of work being performed than with biological age³ and young workers' elevated injury rates have been linked to job-related demands and conditions, including time and production

pressures, damaged equipment, inadequate training/supervision and having limited ability to control the way work is done.⁴ The workplace social environment is also important and, in particular, the support of supervisors is critical to young workers' health, safety and wellbeing at work.

Learning how to deal with workplace safety risk is a key component of apprentices' socialisation into workplaces and to their trade/profession.⁵ More experienced workers, particularly supervisors, play an important role in facilitating workplace learning for apprentices, including in relation to safety. Role modelling and mentoring plays an important role in this learning.

Supervisors' communication with young workers is critically important to them feeling and being safe in the workplace.⁶ Yet, international research suggests that young workers are sometimes hesitant to ask questions or raise concerns about workplace health and safety because they perceive that they may not be listened to or, worse, that they will be subjected to ridicule.⁷

Our project

RMIT University's Construction Work Health and Safety Research Group is engaged in research examining how construction firms can best provide healthy, safe and supportive workplaces for young workers. This work is being funded by icare NSW under the [Injury Prevention in Construction](#) initiative.

The project is focused on improving communication between supervisors and construction apprentices in relation to workplace safety, health and wellbeing in order to support injury prevention in a high risk cohort in a high risk industry. During the first year of the project, 41 interviews were conducted (30 with apprentices and 11 with supervisors). The interview findings identified the characteristics of positive, open and supportive interactions between supervisors and apprentices, shown in figure 1. The data revealed both positive and negative examples of communication relating to safety, health and wellbeing.

What did we find?

The interview findings identified traits and behaviours associated with open and supportive communication between apprentices and their supervisors. These are shown in Figure 1.

Apprentices indicated they are comfortable talking openly about work health and safety when their supervisors are approachable, adopt a participative management style, are good at listening and respond quickly when apprentices request help.

You're never made to feel bad about anything. Like I said, on top of that, if you're at work and you have any concerns, or you need them to come down and explain a job or what things do, they're always - if it's not straight away, they're only minutes away. - male apprentice

Apprentices are also more likely to engage in work health and safety related communication when they feel they have a good baseline level of health and safety knowledge (often learned at TAFE) and when they are confident and assertive.

I've got all - like confined space training and things like that, that I've been asked to do tasks and I haven't been like pressured into it. It's more just me saying, 'Well yeah, I'll do it, but you just need to make sure that all the correct gear's here.' - male apprentice

Emotional intelligence, that is "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions", was important for both apprentices and their supervisors.¹¹

Some supervisors explained that, if they observe changes in apprentices' mood or behaviour, they initiate a conversation to make sure that the apprentice is okay. Some apprentices appreciated supervisors' concern and emotional support, while

others preferred not to talk about personal issues with their supervisors. Supervisors identified the importance of being sensitive and respectful of apprentices' preferences in relation to discussing personal matters that may be affecting them.

So if I can see there's something wrong and I think that might be - something mightn't be right, I'll ask them 'Is everything okay? You know, you're not your usual self.' I won't push 'em but I'll definitely ask because at the end of the day I'd rather ask the question than not ask the question. Some say, 'Yeah, I'm fine' but some will open up. - male supervisor

"I went into a bit of a depression stage a few years back, and he was always there for me, and with work he was very understanding; he knew that I could get back to my best, so he was - yeah, I could talk to all that's - about that stuff with him... He was just - if I needed time to myself at work, he allowed me to have that, and he was - if I needed to start later/finish later, he was happy to accommodate working around myself, which was really good at the time." - male apprentice

Some supervisors draw on their own personal experiences to empathise with apprentices when they become aware that an apprentice is experiencing personal difficulties.

...a kid with a divorce, my parents are divorced as well actually. And I sort of, ah, used some of my life experiences. He was going through a very similar situation - as what I did at the same age and I just sort of gave him my perspective on what happened to me when my parents got divorced. - male supervisor

Positive and supportive supervisor-apprentice communication is characterised by respect and civility. The results were mixed in relation to the extent that supervision is respectful. Some apprentices described their supervisors as being patient, non-judgemental and willing to take time showing them how to perform a task even if this took several demonstrations. However, other apprentices had observed workers being yelled if they made a mistake. Incivility and verbal aggression (yelling) were also reported in another recent study of Australian apprentices which linked such experiences to mental ill-health and apprentices' failure to complete their apprenticeship.¹²

...usually if I've made a mistake, he'll come along and say, 'Oh, look, like, that's - that's not right. This is the way to do it' and coaches me through it... like, he's - he's pretty calm. He just goes like, 'you've done it wrong. You'll need to redo it.' - male apprentice

Banter and joking are deeply ingrained features of worksite communication. Humour can relieve stress and create social cohesion in a workplace.¹³ However, in some instances, teasing can be seen as funny by one person while being hurtful to others. The apprentices dismissed humour as 'just a bit of banter' and suggested that, even if it is taken too far, it is not intended to make people feel bad and can be resolved by explaining it was 'just a joke'. However, research shows that, even when no harm is intended, mildly aggressive humour (including teasing) can produce negative mental health impacts.¹⁴ The interviews revealed that female apprentices are often the targets of on-site banter. While female apprentices join in with this banter and accept it as an inevitable part of working in the construction industry, the sex-based nature of worksite humour can have the effect of 'othering' female apprentices.¹⁵

Well, it was - it was kind of bad, but if you don't have a sense of humour with the boys in this industry you generally will not get along with them. ... Like they will somewhat hurt you, like rattle you in a way, but then at the same time you're like 'I'm going to hear this for the rest of my life from other people.' - female apprentice

In the next stage of the research, the interview findings will be used to design a program aimed at improving the quality of communication between construction supervisors and apprentices. This program will be delivered to apprentices engaged in the Master Builders Association (NSW) Group Training Scheme and their supervisors. The impact of the program on apprentice-supervisor communication will be evaluated.

The full report findings can be viewed at the [Construction Work Health and Safety Research @ RMIT project webpage](#).

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