

Bad language

It may seem a hazard too far, but *words* can be dangerous. TUC head of safety Hugh Robertson explains how latest HSE-speak could seriously hurt you.

For something we use so much, words are an incredible tool. Using a word wrongly can lead to someone being really hurt or offended. Politicians also use words to try to soften down a concept. We find that civilian casualties in war become "collateral damage" and protesters become "militants" and privatisation "outsourcing."

The strength of language to carry ideas was really taken up in the 1960s by the women's movement which began to challenge the use of words like "chairman" and "policeman" to describe both men and women in the role. They showed that using a masculine word helped preserve these as male preserves as they conjured up an image of men.

But the use of language is just as important to the Hazards movement, as employers, the government and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) try to change how we think through the way they use words.

To show how words are not neutral, look at the word "accident." It is a word that we have probably used since we were children and fell down in the playground or broke a cup. It is also the word that most people use to describe any incident that leads to an injury at work.

Yet four years ago the *British Medical Journal* said the use of the word "accident" was "inappropriate" and would no longer be used in its pages. It argued that "most injuries and their precipitating events are predictable and preventable." It added that by using the word "accident" we were encouraging victim-blaming and reduced support for those who survived.

No accident

The vast majority of what are termed "accidents" are not a result of chance or unpredictable events, they are the result of management failings or negligence.

The use of the word "accident" to describe when a worker is injured or killed hides the fact that often this is a result of a criminal act by the employer. In

many cases, where these incidents lead to a death, they are not "accidents" – they are manslaughter.

Words are being used to change the way we deal with health and safety.

Since the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act (H&SW Act) we have been pretty clear that employers have to remove the risk from hazards,

It was just a self regulated accident



There was a strong business case for your injury



or at least reduce them "as far as reasonably practicable."

However in the last couple of years someone seems to have moved the goalposts. In this year's *HSC Strategy for workplace health and safety in Great Britain to 2010 and beyond* we find that the goal is no longer about removing risk. The goal now is about "managing risk". This may seem to be pretty innocuous, but to me it represents a major sea change.

"Managing risk" is a concept that is totally alien to the H&SW Act. **The role of the HSE must be about removing hazards.** Unless we challenge this new management-speak we will find that safety reps, who have long argued that we get rid of hazards in the workplace, will find that they are being told that HSE policy is that so long as a proper safety management regime exists, that is fine.

Business talk

Linked to this is the use of two other new phrases that we see a lot. The first is "business case"; the other is "impact assessment".

I keep on hearing about how we should make the "business case" for safety.

Basically protecting workers health is a moral issue. It is wrong to kill and maim people.

This is nothing to do with the fact that employers may, or may not, save money by not injuring us. We need a workplace smoking ban because hundreds of people are killed every year due to passive smoking (*Hazards* 82). Not because pubs and clubs may find that their clientele might actually increase if they stopped customers polluting the air with a foul-smelling carcinogen.

The same applies to the concept of "impact assessment". Every consultation that comes from either the government or the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) on safety has a large section entitled "impact assessment"; this is code for "is it going to cost more money than it saves?"

I believe that HSC has a duty to introduce new regulations where there is evidence that these regulations will reduce injury or ill-health. If it costs more that it saves then that is irrelevant. The H&SW Act is clear on this, and the focus on "impact assessments" rather than looking at the impact on

It's risk management, not safety, stupid



Unions? Prefer "Stakeholders" myself



Work can be too safe, you know



human lives and health is a huge retreat from the principles the Act was built on.

It also gives the wrong messages to employers who have a duty to take action where there is a risk. **The courts have ruled that "reasonably practicable" does not mean "easily affordable," and it certainly does not mean cost-neutral.**

Stakeholders everywhere
The last buzzword I want to let off steam about is "stakeholder". Health and safety has always been about workers, employers and government

working together. That is what underpins the whole structure of HSC.

In recent years, however, the tripartite approach to health and safety has been undermined by this new concept of "stakeholders."

Stakeholders are basically anyone with an interest. It can be professional associations, trade associations, consumer groups, pressure groups, consultants, even academics. So workers' involvement, rather than being a major part of the health and safety culture, becomes diluted as one of a dozen different voices, each

one given the same weight.

I am sure that you can all think of many other examples of this new safety-speak that is creeping in. The point is that it is not just about words.

It is about the thinking behind them and what they represent, and to me, they are about helping to pave the way towards **a new corporate profit-centred approach to health and safety where unions and safety representatives are seen as irrelevant,** and "self-regulation" - to use another buzzword - is the order of the day.

UK 2010 safety strategy

Numb and dumber

The Health and Safety Commission and Executive taste for vacuous management-speak has reached new levels of incoherence, according to top occupational health thinkers.

Commenting on this year's *Strategy for workplace health and safety in Great Britain to 2010 and beyond*, occupational health professor Andrew Watterson of Stirling University, said: "The language is horribly familiar to those bombarded with the empty phrases of many recent government policy papers.

"The strategy will 'involve everyone' and 'draw on stakeholders'. It will be 'pro-active' in managing health risks, 'share the vision,' 'be sensible,' 'develop new ways of working' and 'focus on our core business'."

Watterson adds: "The HSC does not present itself as a champion for occupational health advances but rather as an apologist for an ineffective government. It lacks humanity but has mastered the latest meaningless business jargon."

Ex-HSE occupational doctor Morris Greenberg's February 2004 *Lancet* editorial on HSE's *Strategic thinking - work in progress* discussion document and the new 2010 strategy noted: "As an exercise in communication... the discussion document fails, with a numbing style and the use of such phrases as 'inspire our traditional stakeholder... goal setting system... prioritise our interventions'."

"These problems might have been overlooked if the content of the document had been more informative; however it does not provide the data to confirm how much further forward HSE's existing strategy has taken the HSE, nor does it quantify the order of future demands or the facilities that would be required to meet these demands."

HSC chair Bill Callaghan, though, thinks his latest HSC strategy is "ambitious, but realistic, focusing on managing risks and not eliminating them."

The strategy for workplace health and safety in Great Britain to 2010 and beyond. HSC, 2004. Free from HSE Books or online:

www.hse.gov.uk/aboutus/hsc/strategy.htm

Morris Greenberg. *Occupational health and safety proposals: 2004-10*, *The Lancet*, volume 363, no. 9410, pages 673-674, 28 February 2004.

Strategic thinking - work in progress, HSE, 2003. www.hse.gov.uk/consult/disdocs/strategicthinking.pdf

TOO LITTLE VISION, TOO LITTLE ENFORCEMENT

TUC is not the only organisation concerned by HSC/E's latest communications. In written evidence to the April 2004 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into the work of HSC/E, general union GMB says our safety watchdog is too focused on "goal-setting" rather than real, enforceable laws and "does not enforce the law effectively."

It adds HSE's terror of being labelled "over-zealous" means it ends up being "weak and ineffectual." The new HSC "2010 and beyond" strategy presupposes HSE will do less and without the checks and balances in the current tripartite - unions-employers-government - system, it says.

The Centre for Corporate Accountability (CCA) submission says the safety watchdog has opted to try and persuade employers to be safe where its own research shows enforcement is the most effective strategy.

A summary of CCA's evidence to the House of Commons select committee investigating the work of HSE and HSC, says the shift away from enforcement "contradicts overwhelming international and HSE evidence that it is inspection, investigation and formal enforcement that works best." It adds that "HSE's continuing focus on the 'business case for safety' has been shown to have little impact in motivating employers."