



QUT research assistant Vaughn Sheahan and Dr Herbert Biggs.

Study shows safety culture starts at top

Psychology

NATIONAL research on 14 leading Australian construction companies aimed at cutting the construction industry's three-times-the-average fatality rate is the first step towards implementing a national safety culture on work sites.

The research has produced Australia's first competency framework aimed at enabling managers and supervisors to create an effective, consistent safety culture across Australia's largest constructors, QUT project officer Vaughn Sheahan said.

Dr Herbert Biggs and Mr Sheahan, from the School of Psychology and Counselling, were part of a national industry, government and research team who conducted the research for the CRC for Construction Innovation, a Federal Government Cooperative Research Centre based at QUT.

The team's findings underpin *A Construction Safety Competency*

Framework: improving OH&S performance by creating and maintaining a safety culture that has been launched by the Federal Government.

"On average one person dies a week on Australia's construction sites and thousands more suffer serious injuries each year," Mr Sheahan said.

"This indicates that current on-site safety initiatives such as 'toolbox talks' need to be further developed to build a site safety culture.

"Safety culture is vital as it represents the organisation's values and beliefs towards safety. Workers' perception of these values and beliefs lets them know which behaviours will be rewarded, tolerated or sanctioned."

Construction workers' high mobility was identified as one of the main obstacles to implementing a consistent safety culture on all work sites.

"Up to 80 per cent of the construction workforce are subcontractors or sub subcontractors who move between companies, projects and sites, making

it almost impossible for one company to consistently influence the attitudes and behaviours that form the basis of a safety culture," Mr Sheahan said.

"By setting management and supervisor competency standards we can improve the consistency and quality of the safety message across the largest constructors and so change attitudes and behaviours within the workforce.

"This research adds something new because the sector has traditionally not recognised communication and leadership as integral to safety competency," QUT's Dr Biggs said.

"The research has enabled the practical application of these complex concepts into a format that the industry can understand and work with."

The report's project leader, John Holland group safety manager Dean Cipolla, said the fatality rate of the construction industry was five times higher than the mining industry.

- Niki Widdowson