

BUSINESS

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Business leaders put safety first

Health/safety

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STEVE BARTLETT

The Telegram

Jerry Byrne admits his company used to have the worst safety record in the province, with a staff of 10 or 12 averaging 30 to 40 lost time accidents a year.

But since centering on safety in August 2003, Byrne said D.F. Barnes has gotten its act together through the hard work of employees and the guidance of the Workplace Health, Safety, and Compensation Commission (WHSCC).

The St. John's fabrication firm's staff - which has grown to 321 - hasn't incurred a lost time accident in 781 days.

"I think that is our greatest achievement and (our managers and employees) will all tell you the same thing," said Byrne, president and CEO.

D.F. Barnes has also taken its safety record to the bank. Byrne expected that reduced compensation premiums because of the improvements would mean an extra \$500,000 on the bottom line this year.

Given these benefits, it's not surprising Byrne was one of 30 business leaders from across the province who signed the WHSCC CEO Leadership Charter Tuesday.

In fact, he spoke on behalf of the executives after they penned their names to the document.

He talked about D.F. Barnes's experience. Although he clashed with the commission as it tried to help improve his record, he said the statistics were undeniable.

"We were a disaster waiting to happen," Byrne told the crowd.

By signing the charter, the CEOs committed to reaching, maintaining and surpassing a health and safety record like D.F. Barnes boasts.

Promotional material referred to it as a pledge "to achieving breakthroughs in occupational health and safety performance."

Shawn Skinner, minister of Human Resources, Labour and Employment, called the signing of the charter a "new dawn, a new era for the commission."

He said the CEOs are committing that workplace health and safety is paramount.

He also challenged the business people to lead by example and to help the province become recognized as one of the safest places to work in Canada.

The charter originated when Joe O'Neill - the WHSCC's acting CEO - saw a presentation by Duncan Hawthorne of Bruce Power in Ontario.

Hawthorne spoke about the need to elevate health and safety across Canada and thought it best to encourage CEOs to lead the charge.

Working for the province while attending the speech, O'Neill wasted little time in getting the initiative going at the commission.

He noted that the province has already gone from having one of the worst safety records in the country a few years ago to owning one of the best now.

He hoped the signing of the charter and the commitment of CEOs would take workplace health and safety "to the level where it is a fact of life."



Earl Ludlow of Newfoundland Power signs the CEO Leadership Charter for occupational health and safety Tuesday. "Photo by Steve Bartlett/The Telegram"

He noted nine people from this province died because of workplace accidents last year and that he would like the number to be zero.

Miller Ayre, publisher and general manager of The Telegram and group publisher for Transcontinental Media, Newfoundland and Labrador, said it was clear from the support of the charter that members of the province's business community are concerned about creating a safe workplace.

Noting Transcontinental's commitment to maintaining high standards of workplace health and safety, he was delighted to be able to support the initiative.

So was Byrne.

"I'm a strong believer in this one," he said in an interview following the event.

"It's been a journey of immense proportions, an amazing journey. We're still only an accident away from something serious, but at least you are doing everything you possibly can to try and prevent it from happening."

The signing of the CEO Leadership Charter is intended to become an annual event.

sbartlett@thetelegram.com

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One Columbus Drive - P.O. Box 5970

St. John's - Newfoundland and Labrador - A1C 5X7

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