

Skills Highway Award: Countdown

Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229801382>

When Countdown discovered some of the staff at its Auckland meat plant couldn't complete leave forms or time sheets correctly, read internal job ads or, in one case, even read their child a bedtime story, the company knew it had to do something to help.

The initiative it launched was one of three numeracy and literacy programmes delivered to 80 staff in 2015 and 2016. These were so successful, Countdown has brought the three programmes together under the umbrella of The Literacy Project, which it plans to roll out to any of its 18,000-plus team members who need extra support in this area.

Progressive Enterprises, a subsidiary of the publicly-listed Australian company Woolworths Limited, operates more than 185 Countdown supermarkets, four distribution centres, one meat and seafood manufacturing plant and a support office, making it the country's largest private sector employer.

Its literacy and numeracy programme began when three of its sites decided to tackle communication challenges resulting from the number of staff with English as a second language or cultural barriers arising from the different ethnic mix of the teams.

At the meat plant and the Auckland National Distribution Centre (ANDC), 94 per cent of staff identified as Pasifika, Māori, Asian or Indian. The third site, the support office, has a different ethnic mix and a smaller percentage of staff needed help with literacy, however some team members perceived their language skills were holding them back from applying for more senior roles.

The meat plant partnered with The Learning Wave to deliver a course to 31 team members in 2015, which focused on health and safety. While the outcomes were positive, delivering the learning modules to this many participants created logistic problems so in 2016, the programme was delivered to a smaller group, enabling more support to be given to those taking part.

Course content was also changed, with material produced to cover better team member communication, document completion and checking understanding of instructions. The course booklets included several 'characters' of Samoan, Tongan and Cook Island descent used to reinforce learning.

The ANDC opted to work with Aspire2 Workplace to deliver a literacy programme to three career levels (operators, lead hands and team Leaders). Senior leaders at the centre identified that the training needed to be implemented across all reporting lines to effect the change desired and impact the drop in morale and performance issues caused by historical communication differences.

At the support office, HR had identified a handful of people finding communication a challenge due to their language skills but all had Language, Literacy and Numeracy Levels that were too high to qualify for TEC funding. Countdown partnered with The Literacy

Professionals to offer a fully funded in-house programme focusing on business communication and were surprised when they had applications from more than 35 staff wanting to take part.

Countdown supported the programmes by transferring more than 2,500 labour hours to learning across 2015 and 2016, and having senior leaders closely involved with the courses. At The Meat Plant, where the company knew class training would be challenging for some because of a history of learning problems at school, Operations Plant Manager Riki Kerikeri was invited to open each programme. Riki is of Māori descent and carries an incredible amount of mana within the team. He talked about his own learning journey, how he wished he'd had similar support and how proud he was of the team taking a step towards personal development. He offered support throughout the programme, provided catering, spoke to participants 'on the floor' to check in with their learning and encouraged other leaders to do the same.

At the ANDC, Operations Manager Amanda Hutton, a member of the senior leadership team, presented at the first of all group learning sessions and offered on-going support and flexibility around shifts to ensure training was completed in work hours.

As part of graduating, participants in the programmes at all three sites conducted a presentation of their learnings to an audience of managers at all levels.

Leadership Development Specialist Jenny Gunn says as well as gains in Language, Literacy and Numeracy levels across participants in the courses, one of the biggest changes noted has been the improvement in confidence and engagement. "While this is a personal benefit, we believe it's had a major impact on performance," she says.

At the meat plant, prior to the 2015 course, 78 per cent of participants had been made aware of work needing to be redone. After the course this dropped to 57 per cent. The number of participants who had been absent from work dropped from 78 per cent to 50 per cent, and those reporting near-miss incidents increased from 37 per cent to 50 per cent.

At the ANDC five learning participants were promoted within four months of completing the programme, and Gunn believes the course contributed to a holistic culture change, which has seen participants set up 'communication working groups' that meet monthly and have ownership of team meetings, events and communication noticeboards.

At the Support Office, results have been based on manager feedback, which has noted improvements in motivation, attitude and verbal and email communication, and increased confidence.

For the employees, the programmes have been life changing.

"Before this programme I couldn't read to my kids for more than two minutes; now I not only read to them for longer but they read along with me!" - Danny Aviata

"The course helped me to become more confident when speaking with management. I also learnt how to solve problems with others without letting emotions get in the way. This has helped me when dealing with my kids too. I have been promoted from a DC Operator to a Lead Hand." - Anna Fakatava.

