



Westco Lumber Limited

SKILLS HIGHWAY AWARD WINNER



THE STORY

West Coast sawmill business Westco Lumber Ltd wanted to reinvigorate a culture of learning among its workers, recognising that an engaged workforce has been key to its success.

Bringing in outside training company Conquest Training Ltd in 2019 has led to key members of Westco's 90-strong workforce participating in a learning programme that followed an individual plan suited to their ability and need – and the results have already been impressive.

Westco has two sites on different sides of the Southern Alps. Ruatapu, about 20km south of Hokitika, is one of the few sawmills still operating on the West Coast, while further processing is completed in Wainoni, Christchurch.

The company has thrived as an independent operator despite some major challenges, putting a premium on innovative thinking, quality systems and looking after its staff through initiatives such as a profit-sharing scheme.

For many years, learning and development were a big part of the organisation but due to economic restraints, the focus waned over time.

Management acknowledged that within their teams were individuals who, for various reasons, had missed out on education and any sort of professional development. Staff were skilled in their roles but would benefit, both personally and professionally, from further learning opportunities.

Westco asked Conquest Training to reenergise the upskilling and learning culture, firstly inviting the training company to speak at quarterly “toolbox” meetings at both its sites, to highlight the opportunities ahead. It was emphasised that training sessions would be fun, educational and build upon existing skills.

An initial group completed a literacy and numeracy upskilling programme, then became its advocates, recommending it to their colleagues. As a result, Conquest is continuing to run programmes and one-on-one training sessions.

Conquest Training and the Westco leaders worked together to develop a programme that would benefit both the organisation and the team. “It was about improving company goals and targets and improving individuals as the key ingredient of that,” says Conquest Training Managing Director Nettles Lamont.

Developing communication skills and understanding conflict were high on the aims list, and it was agreed a focus on Westco, its history and sharing of information – especially financials – were critical, given the profit-sharing arrangement.

Staff were tested, and all had an individual learning programme tailored to their ability and need. Throughout the 12-week programme, the Conquest trainer updated and adjusted content to fit the learners’ needs in meeting Westco’s upskilling requirements.

The training began in late 2019 and was mostly completed just prior to the Covid-19 lockdown. Sessions consisted of a half day of group training, with one-on-one sessions later in the day for those who requested or required it.

Safety has to be a priority in the milling industry, so health and safety was to the fore. The training also aimed to improve on-site communication and decrease conflict through greater understanding of personality types and conflict behaviour.

Westco also wanted a greater focus on quality. Since the training, the quality assessment process has improved with quality testing being undertaken and closely measured.

With workers filling important roles in day-to-day production, Westco and Conquest worked together to minimise the impact of sessions on the business and ensure participants were able to attend during work hours.

“After sessions, the leaders discussed with the trainer challenges and successes that happened during the session, including content and ideas for programme additions,” says Nettles.

In particular, the programme improved staff knowledge of the organisation. Some had been working at Westco for many years but did not really understand the bigger picture.

Participants reviewed and discussed the financial documents presented at the company’s quarterly meetings, gaining a greater understanding of how returns, debt or errors at the mill can affect profitability. “The team realised that they could have an impact on the profitability and safety of the organisation by speaking up, asking questions, and reporting near misses or incidents,” says Nettles. “The training supported them in this change by running communication, writing and health-and-safety sessions.”

Nettles says Westco leaders noticed a huge increase in engagement at quarterly meetings, and a greater sense of pride.

“Management reported that participants who previously had hung their heads saying they 'only work in a mill' started holding their heads up and being proud of the role they play in the success of Westco.”

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THE CHALLENGE

Recognising that staff would benefit from opportunities for professional development, Westco wanted to reignite the culture of learning in its workforce

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

- Brought in a professional training organisation to talk to staff and help develop learning sessions
- Content was tailored to fit learners' needs while meeting Westco's upskilling requirements
- Staff were able to learn more about their own organisation



RESULTS AND BENEFITS

- A reported increase in confidence, commitment and enthusiasm among staff
- A demonstrated increase in literacy and numeracy
- Supervisors report higher levels of engagement and productivity
- Increased ability to read charts and graphs, particularly those related to company financials
- Greater understanding of processes and procedures

KEY LEARNING

Done well, workplace training isn't just about upskilling. It also lifts engagement between workers and the business, creating opportunities for wider benefits.

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