

Topic 8

Case Studies

Contents

Case Study No. 1	2
Case Study No. 2	5
Case Study No. 3	7
Case Study No. 4	8
Case Study No. 5	9
Case Study No. 6	10

Case Study No. 1

The Howell Construction Company has won the Elverston Town By-Pass contract which involves the construction of 15 km of dual carriageway and associated works. Elverston is an area subjected to heavy seasonal rains, so the timing of the drainage work is critical to the project.

Dave Smith is the pipe-crew foreman, but is well-known for ‘flying by the seat of his pants’ and tends to give forward planning a low priority. Unfortunately, the results have included materials not ordered on time, work being hurried, and non-conformances to specification, with resultant rework and repairs.

In the past four months, the pipe crew have fallen 3 weeks behind schedule, and were over budget as a result of the amount of rework from non-conforming work. The Project Manager, Len Jackson, called Dave to the site office at 10.00 a.m. on Monday for a meeting to discuss the situation.

At the meeting Dave pointed out that delays and rework had occurred because:

- One member of the crew was inexperienced and couldn't always follow instructions, requiring Dave to closely supervise this person or, in some cases, do the work himself to get the job done. This also meant that other crew members weren't performing as well as they might, because he had less time to check their work.
- Incorrect materials were being delivered to the job because the pipe supplier kept mixing up the orders and sending pipes and pre-cast units of the wrong sizes.

The project manager told Dave these explanations were unsatisfactory and that he had to do more planning and make fewer excuses, pointing out that the delays were now affecting the rest of the project.

In the next two hours the project manager and Dave worked through the issues of the crew and developed a revised works program for the next two weeks. It was agreed that:

- the project manager would follow up with the supplier, and
- Dave would talk to the crew about the revised program, and the need to improve output and reduce delays.

A further meeting was scheduled for the following Monday at 10.00 a.m.

On arriving back at the worksite, Dave called the crew together and told them the project manager was supporting him and unless they worked harder in the next two weeks they would be sacked as they were responsible for holding the project up. He specifically pointed out that Geoff was one of the main reasons the crew was behind and ridiculed his work and performance. The crew was told to get back to work and ‘do something about keeping their jobs’.

The following Monday Dave reported to the project manager and on entering the office was confronted by the project manager and the company HR manager. The project manager pointed out to Dave his performance was less than satisfactory and he was being let go.

The reasons given for the poor performance were:

- The client's representative had issued two additional non-conformances for pipe work during the week, requiring removal and replacement of 60 metres of pipe in an area where the earthworks were to commence tomorrow. Negotiations between the project manager and the client's representative had concluded at 9.00 a.m. that morning. As a result, 40 metres of pipe would still have to be removed and replaced.
- Geoff had made a written complaint to the project manager relating to his public ridicule and on-going treatment by Dave. On Friday afternoon, the project manager spoke with several of the pipe crew who were in the compound returning some equipment; all confirmed that the contents of the letter were correct.
- The pipe supplier advised the project manager that they had supplied the materials as ordered. In fact, only last Wednesday Dave had sent back a load of pipes because he had ordered the wrong size. The supplier was able to point out three similar instances involving Dave.
- None of the targets in the revised program had been achieved.

Dave immediately left the site after receiving his severance cheque and signing the necessary documentation supplied by the HR manager.

At 11.00 a.m. Bruce, the pipe-crew's leading hand, was called to the project manager's office and told Dave was no longer working with the project and that he had been selected to replace Dave, effective immediately.

The reasons given for the decision were the respect management had for his work, his good work ethic and the high standards he set.

For these reasons it was thought that he could bring some discipline back into the crew and get the work back on track with the revised program.

Back on site, Bruce called a meeting of the crew and in a low-key manner explained his appointment and the standards he would set for future work.

At the end of the meeting, Bruce spoke with Geoff at length about the problems he was having due to his inexperience, and the outcome of his complaint regarding Dave.

Since taking over, Bruce has implemented a number of changes:

- before starting work each day, the crew hold a short meeting with Bruce to discuss the day's work and any problems that may occur
- each Friday afternoon, the past week's program is discussed with the crew, with each member having input on what has occurred. The coming weeks' work is also discussed; particularly, what is required and how it can be achieved.

Geoff is now on pipe-laying traineeship and is receiving on-the-job training with the assistance of Bruce as mentor.

The crew are still getting used to Bruce's style of management. However, in the three months since Bruce has taken over the crew, no non-conformances have been issued against their work, rework has stopped and every target for the revised program has been achieved.

Case Study No. 2

A union organiser periodically visited a large construction site near the town of Glenora, travelling from Stonehaven, a coastal city 250 km away. The union leadership had told him to do everything possible to get more workers in the Glenora district to sign up, as membership numbers in that area had fallen off sharply in recent years following retirements of older workers.

The organiser's tactics were to:

- stand over younger and new workers who were not members
- threaten the contractor's representative with withdrawal of union labour unless site issues were addressed.

The issues included:

- lack of air-conditioning in the demountables used as lunch rooms
- lack of newspapers for staff
- chilled water not available to workers during working hours.

The project manager kept the principal contractor advised of these actions. However, he was advised to take a low-key approach to avoid inflaming the situation, and to smooth things over with the workers as much as possible. However, several workers lodged complaints with the principal contractor.

A young worker on the job had recently become engaged and was in the process of building a house on his weekends and RDOs, using help from mates, where possible, and a mixture of new and salvaged materials. He was aiming to get the house to lock-up stage before the start of winter.

In late February, several months after the project began, the worker suffered a broken leg in an accident on site. He was hospitalised in Stonehaven and, undergoing recovery and physiotherapy, was unable to continue working on either his house or the job for 12 weeks. People in Glenora rallied to his aid, pooling personal resources such as generators, ladders and scaffolding. They approached the project manager, who took the following steps:

- with approval, donated a weekend's use of the company crane to assist with positioning the roof trusses
- gave some of his personal time to the project
- challenged the union representative to help out with the house construction, to show that he really was concerned about the workers.

At the second weekend working bee, the union rep. turned up, dressed in the white, long-sleeved shirt he normally wore on the job. Several disparaging comments were made by volunteers about people being 'good at giving orders but not actually doing much' and 'never raising a sweat on the job'.

These remarks shamed the union rep. into action. He put on an old t-shirt and really raised a sweat, giving a good day's work. This was noted by the volunteers and townspeople.

Site relations improved dramatically from that time, and the union rep. stopped the tactics and demands. A few workers signed up for union membership.

The project manager talked to a number of locals while doing the voluntary work on the house, and found two used air-conditioners available for a reasonable price, and that someone had an unwanted water-cooler sitting around in a shed. The water-cooler was cleaned, repaired and set up in one of a lunch rooms, both of which now had air-conditioners fitted. He also decided to bring his personal copies of newspapers along to work.

On release from hospital, the worker found not only a changed workplace, but the frames up, roof on and walls clad.

Case Study No. 3

A contractor was beginning work on a new section of road that linked a recently completed bridge with the existing highway near Mooraberrie. The construction site was to pass through an area of bushland next to a new residential estate and was very close to several property boundaries. Local children and residents often used this area for recreation.

Main Roads had issued a letter drop to residents. It contained a paragraph advising that the principal contractor would give them separate advice of the anticipated commencement date of work. However, the contractor did not notify residents that construction was about to begin.

Soon after the works began, there were a number of incidents. These involved:

- The destruction of private property hidden in the area by residents, such as stacks of second-hand timber and small piles of paving stones.
- Near-misses between children and machinery.

Specifically, a few children came out to watch compactors, road-rollers and excavators in operation and approached these machines on a number of occasions, obviously unaware of the dangers. The drivers did not see the children until they were several metres from the machinery. On seeing the children, they immediately stopped the machinery and reported the incidents to their supervisors as a near miss.



Residents were very angry that they had not been told when work was to begin and that there were no warning signs or barricades. Several residents also approached their local Member of Parliament and complained bitterly about the problems the contractor's approach to the work had caused. Some residents also demanded compensation from the principal contractor for the materials that had been destroyed.

As a result, a conference was called between the residents and the contractor's representative to discuss how the problems could be resolved. As a result of the conference, work was stopped for some time while barricades and signs were erected to prevent residents and children from accessing the site.

Although work continued safely afterwards, the contractor never established good relations with the residents.

Case Study No. 4

Alliancing is a type of contractual relationship between the client of a particular job and several partners, who work closely together and share profits and losses with the intention of increasing and sharing overall benefits. There must be good relations and communication between all parties for this partnership to run smoothly, otherwise it becomes difficult for each to do their part of the job properly and cost savings or other financial benefits may be lost.

There was poor communication in an alliance between a commercial contractor and a government department that acted as contractor for part of the work and as client. In particular, the commercial contractor did not discuss the way they would approach the works with the government. At times, neither partner knew what the other was doing, and several sections of the project had to be re-worked. Worker morale and motivation very quickly suffered and work slowed for both contractors.

These occurrences soon forced the commercial contractor to work more closely with the department. Both began to co-ordinate their efforts, increasing worker morale and output. By the time the project was finished, an excellent working relationship was established between the two partners and worker efficiency was outstanding.

On the next project where the two partners were in alliance, people in the two groups started to work together from the start of the project.

Case Study No. 5

A private contractor was widening a public road through undulating country. A reasonably level area was required for the site office, but no suitable area that was large enough was available on the road widening.

The contractor negotiated with an adjoining landholder who had a suitable piece of ground. The landholder readily agreed to the location of the office on his land, because he operated a nearby kiosk selling light refreshments. He saw temporary loss of the land as a small price to pay for additional business generated by proximity of the site workers, who became regular customers.

On the same road job, an area was required for secure parking overnight and at weekends of a grader, an excavator and other plant. This required levelling of a suitable area and set-up of security fences.

A suitable site was found on private land. The agreement with the owner included temporary use of the land in exchange for bitumen sealing of the land holder's front driveway.

Case Study No. 6

On a road construction job through a heavily forested area, the bulldozer operator pushed over a large tree. When he dismounted from the dozer and had a closer look, he saw that there was a large nest of bees well-established in a hollow in the trunk and reported the matter to the supervisor.

Remembering that there were several resident bee-keepers in the area, the construction supervisor put a temporary hold on further clearing. On making enquiries, he found that a local tourist park based on a honey and bee-keeping theme might be interested in taking the bees. After a call from the supervisor, the theme park operators arrived on the scene.

One of the contractor's employees cut out the relevant section of the tree and loaded it onto a truck using a crane. Subsequently, the theme park operators often made favourable mention of the road construction company when making presentations to park visitors.