

How Westray Changed Canadian Safety Culture



The Westray Mine disaster of May 9, 1992 forever changed Canada's safety culture, according to safety training consultant Wilson Bateman.

Twenty-six coal miners died 20 years ago this month in an underground methane and coal dust explosion at the Westray Mine in Plymouth, NS. The disaster directly led to the enactment of federal Bill C-45 legislation late in 2003.

C-45 allows for the criminal prosecution of anyone who undertakes or has the authority to direct how a person does work or performs a task, who fails to take reasonable steps to prevent bodily harm to that person or any other person, arising from that work or task.

"Westray is not just about mining safety—it was the catalyst, not just in mining, but in every industry in Canada," says Bateman, who heads Global Training Edge Inc. in Welland, ON. "It impacted our families, the government, both federal and provincial, and employers and employees."

He says it is amazing how the safety culture in Canada has changed since Westray.

"Take a look at the number of organizations providing safety services—the community organizations, the universities and community college systems. Take a look at the legislation, the increased level of enforcement, higher fines, the increased role of the worker compensation boards and the union activities."

Bateman says Westray has had an impact on safety in Canada for all citizens, adding, "I believe that the Westray disaster and the loss of the 26 miners have made all of our lives so much safer. We now conduct safety training in school."

Politicians, public servants, employers, workers and Westray families can all learn powerful lessons from the Westray tragedy, according to Bateman.

He urges politicians to "never become so single-minded in your pursuit for jobs and political profit that your responsibility and common sense become blurred."

"Never forget about your responsibility to look after the big picture. Never forget that you were elected to look out for the best interests of your province or country and its people," he says. "Remember your spoken and unspoken influence on staff. Never let the rule be 'jobs at any cost' and never be blinded by your politics."

Westray's lessons for public servants include, first and foremost: "Ensure compliance with the laws you administer."

"Ask the awkward questions. Never become complacent. Tell people when you are in over your head and never go along with a system that is not working."

Bateman says employers must realize that safety is "part and parcel of running a business" and it needs to be built into their plans.

"Put it on your balance sheet. Never make people choose between a paycheque and their lives."

He urges employers to not cut corners and to not bend the rules.

"Don't wait to react to problems—deal with them up front. Focus on prevention, understand your responsibilities, care about your workforce and always remember that every incident can be prevented."

Workers, too, have a responsibility to look out for themselves and their co-workers. Bateman says they need to learn their rights and become informed and involved in safety.

Workers must raise red flags when they encounter dangerous situations and never cut corners to get a job finished faster.

And families who lost loved ones in the Westray disaster need to know that what occurred will always be an active living presence in workplaces across Nova Scotia (and far beyond). "Your husbands, your fathers, your sons, your brothers and your friends will never be forgotten. Their legacy lives on."