

A large decorative graphic on the left side of the page, consisting of a light blue circle partially overlapping a red cross shape. A small red horizontal line is positioned above the main title text.

Managing health and safety at the principal contractor- subcontractor interface

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1. Purpose of this guide

This guide explores factors that influence health and safety in construction projects at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface. It focuses on the relationships and interactions between principal contractor personnel (e.g. foremen, health and safety advisors) and subcontractor personnel (e.g. supervisors and workers).

The guide identifies important relationships at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface and establishes a framework that can be used to develop a social ecosystem that effectively drives desired health and safety behaviour in construction projects.

2. The research

Researchers from RMIT University spent over 100 hours engaged in on-site observation of site-based interactions and operations at four commercial construction projects. Members of the research team were provided access to the sites and, during their site visits, engaged in short informal conversations with health and safety advisors, foremen, subcontractors, supervisors and workers. Field notes were analysed to identify characteristics of relationships and interactions that were identified as producing positive health and safety outcomes.

3. The principal contractor-subcontractor interface

The research findings show that relationships at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface are important for ensuring good health and safety in construction projects.

These are shown in Figure 1.

Health and safety influences and impacts were identified in the following areas:

- A. the relationship between principal contractors' foremen and subcontractors' supervisors
- B. leadership behaviours of foremen and supervisors
- C. the relationship between principal contractors' foremen and subcontracted workers
- D. communication and coordination between subcontracted supervisors
- E. communication about health and safety within subcontracted workgroups, and
- F. relationships with health and safety advisors.

The site-based observation revealed that the relationship between principal contractors' foremen and subcontractor supervisors can sometimes become strained by what is seen as 'heavy-handedness' in foremen issuing instructions and enforcing rule compliance.

Table 1 describes characteristics of relationships and interactions identified as being important along a continuum. This continuum ranges from characteristics identified as producing poor health and safety outcomes (on the left hand side) to those producing positive health and safety outcomes (on the right hand side).

This continuum could potentially be used:

- to inform health and safety leadership capability development
- to develop and encourage self-reflection among participants at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface, or
- as a performance evaluation and learning tool.

4. Conclusions

Each of these areas represents a point of leverage for improving health and safety.

Foremen and supervisors play a pivotal (but difficult) role in translating principal contractor health and safety expectations into local directives for action. Good working relationships and effective communication between all parties are important in helping to communicate, achieve and maintain expected high health and safety standards.

In understanding the principal contractor-subcontractor interface as a complicated ecosystem of relationships and interactions, the research highlights the need for leadership development programs that extend beyond a focus on individual behaviours.

As such, a strong focus on improving relationships, communication and interactions between key parties engaged in operating at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface is needed.

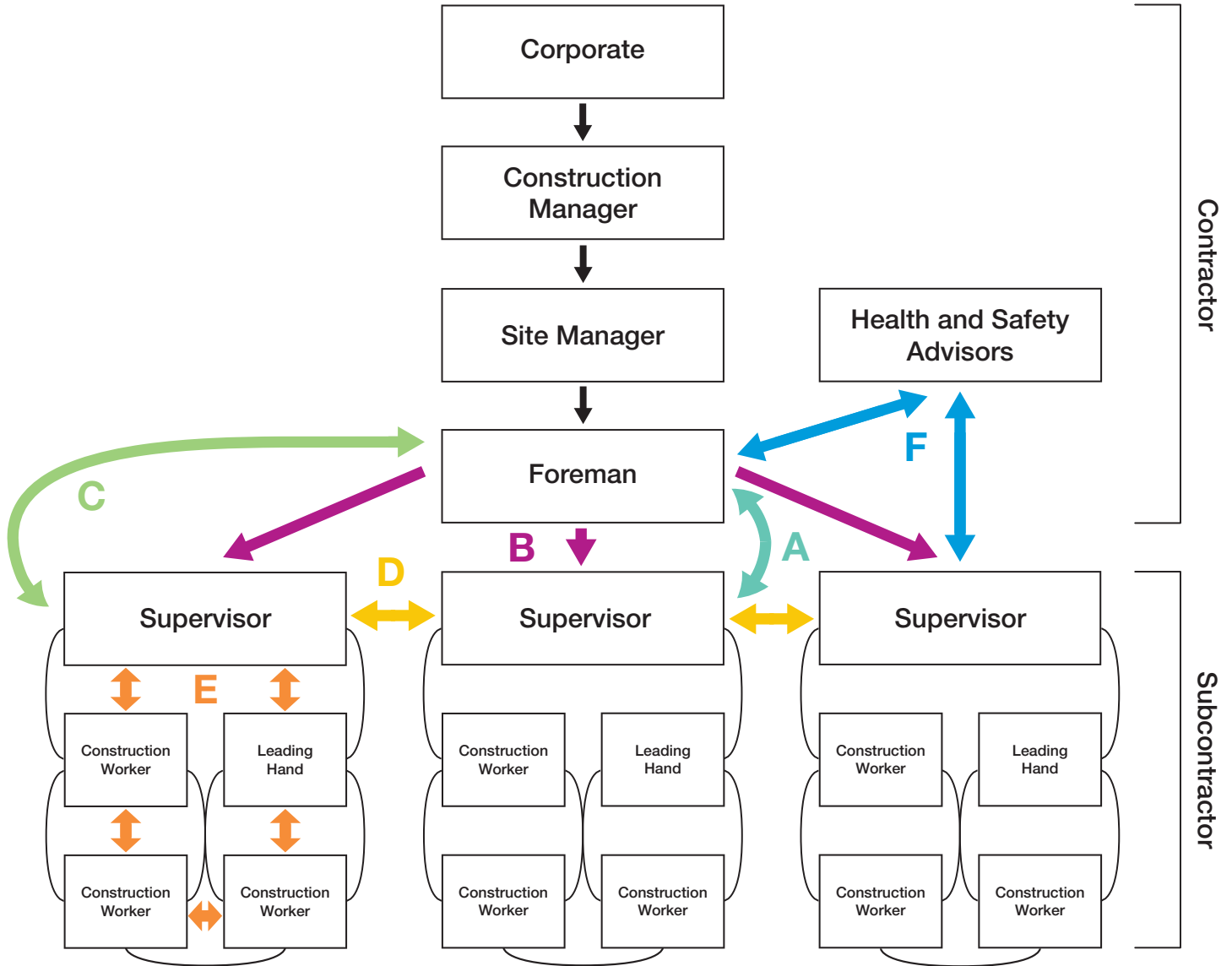
A key component of this will be providing participants with deeper insight into their roles and responsibilities in relation to health and safety, and an understanding of the way in which their interactions with other project participants have the potential to impact health and safety.



Table 1: Important relationships at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface

	Lacking in engagement in health and safety. Resistant to achieving required health and safety standards.	Adopts a cooperative approach. Tries to meet required health and safety standards.	Actively engaged in health and safety. Strives to achieve health and safety outcomes that are above minimum requirements.
A: Foreman and supervisor relationship	There is tension between the foreman and supervisor. They are in regular conflict. The foreman uses enforcement and threats (e.g., of re-induction) to achieve health and safety compliance. There is a lack of confidence that work will be done to required health and safety standards.	The foreman and supervisor have a cooperative working relationship in relation to health and safety. Health and safety requirements are met most of the time. Sometimes the supervisor needs to be reminded about, and asked to comply with, health and safety rules. When asked, the supervisor is willing to change work practices to improve health and safety.	The foreman and supervisor work collaboratively to ensure health and safety are well managed. Both understand health and safety are priorities. Communication is founded on mutual respect. The foreman trusts the supervisor to do the right thing in relation to health and safety.
	Health and safety communication between the foreman and supervisor is one-way and directive (and sometimes hostile). The foreman tells the supervisor what to do in relation to health and safety, and the supervisor is sometimes resistant to instructions.	The foreman and supervisor engage in two-way communication about health and safety. The supervisor responds positively to principal contractor health and safety requirements. Differences of opinion are resolved effectively.	The foreman and supervisor actively discuss work processes to identify the safest and healthiest ways of working. Communication is respectful and productive. The foreman actively listens to supervisors' suggestions for health and safety improvement.
	The foreman and supervisor have different and conflicting health and safety expectations. The supervisor believes expected standards are unrealistic, impractical and unachievable. Issues are unresolved, creating a poor working relationship.	The foreman and supervisor work together to meet health and safety requirements. There is an agreement that principal contractor's expected standards are appropriate and achievable. Issues are identified and resolved so work can proceed.	The foreman and supervisor have a shared understanding of the need to achieve high health and safety standards. Both agree health and safety standards should be the highest that can possibly be achieved. They work together to identify health and safety improvement opportunities.
B: Leadership behaviours of foremen and supervisors	Foremen/supervisors are not always present on-site. Foremen or supervisors sometimes spend time at other worksites.	Foremen/supervisors are present and visible at the worksite. Their behaviour conveys that health and safety are important. For example, they attend organised health and safety-related activities such as builders' briefs, and conduct daily pre-start meetings.	Foremen/supervisors are present and visible at the worksite. Their behaviour conveys that health and safety are important. They attend formal health and safety activities. They are actively engaged throughout the working day in observing work and talking to people about the way work is done, including in relation to health and safety.
	Foremen/supervisors do not lead by example. They do not set high standards for health and safety or actively plan and monitor the way work is done. They provide little feedback relating to health and safety aspects of work. Identified health and safety issues are often overlooked and unresolved.	Foremen/supervisors communicate health and safety rules that must be complied with. They monitor the way work is being done and provide negative feedback when rule violations occur. Identified health and safety issues are discussed and resolved in an appropriate timeframe.	Foremen/supervisors are proactive in planning work, and ensuring high health and safety standards are maintained. They lead by example and demonstrate a strong commitment to achieving the highest health and safety standards. Health and safety rule violations are identified and corrected. When appropriate, they offer positive feedback about good health and safety performance. They use consultative processes proactively to identify areas for health and safety improvement.
	Foremen/supervisors are inconsistent in their response to health and safety. They sometimes turn a blind eye to corner cutting in relation to health and safety. It is clear from their actions that health and safety are less important than other project objectives, such as cost, time and quality. Foremen/supervisors do not 'walk the talk' in relation to health and safety.	Foremen/supervisors demonstrate positive health and safety leadership behaviours in most instances. Health and safety are understood to be non-negotiable aspects of work. However, mixed messages can sometimes be given; for example, if work is behind schedule. Foremen/supervisors personally follow, and ask others to follow, health and safety rules.	Foremen/supervisors consistently demonstrate positive safety leadership behaviours in all situations. Health and safety are treated as the highest priority in all circumstances. Strong messages are provided that health and safety must never be compromised, no matter what else is happening in a project. Foremen/supervisors consistently reinforce their commitment to health and safety through their behaviours and interactions with workers.
C: Foreman and workers' relationship	The principal contractor foreman is not 'visible' on-site and rarely interacts with workers. Workers do not know who, from the principal contractor, is in charge of their work area.	Workers are aware of, but have little interaction with, the principal contractor foreman. As a result, workers do not know what the foreman's health and safety expectations are.	Workers know who the principal contractor foreman in charge of their work area is. The foreman regularly visits the site and has got to know workers by name. Workers have an understanding of the foreman's health and safety expectations.
	The foreman is seen as heavy-handed and sometimes instructs workers to work in certain ways without consulting the supervisor. Workers are resentful and suspicious of the foreman, who is regarded as interfering.	The foreman is respectful of supervisors when engaging with workers. Unless an immediate health and safety issue or rule violation is observed, instructions are discussed with supervisors. Workers accept that the foreman has a legitimate role to play in ensuring health and safety standards are maintained.	The foreman is respectful of supervisors when engaging with workers. The foreman works well with the supervisor, and has got to know the workers. Workers understand the foreman is concerned about, and committed to protecting, their health and safety.

Figure 1: Important relationships at the principal contractor-subcontractor interface



D: Communication and coordination between subcontracted supervisors	<p>The supervisor makes little attempt to understand the work being undertaken by others in their work areas (e.g., how the work of the supervisor's group could affect health and safety of adjacent trades, or how the work of the supervisor's group could affect health and safety of other work groups). The supervisor is only concerned with getting the job done and getting paid.</p>	<p>The supervisor maintains awareness of potential conflicts with the work of other trades that could impact their workers' health and safety. As a result, the supervisor works to manage health and safety risks arising. The supervisor is concerned about the health and safety of their workers.</p>	<p>The supervisor proactively finds out about planned work processes and where their work fits in the bigger picture of site activities. The supervisor effectively identifies and manages health and safety risks. The supervisor is concerned about their workers' health and safety, and the health and safety of others who could be affected by their work (e.g., members of the public, principal contractor personnel and other trades workers).</p>
	<p>The supervisor does not communicate with supervisors of other trades. Conflicts and health and safety issues occur.</p>	<p>The supervisor communicates with supervisors from other trades about identified conflicts or issues. Identified conflicts or health and safety issues are resolved.</p>	<p>The supervisor communicates frequently with other workgroup supervisors about their planned work activities and potential conflicts or health and safety impacts. When plans change, these changes are communicated. Health and safety issues are avoided through effective planning and consultation.</p>
	<p>The supervisor behaves in a self-interested way, demonstrating little consideration for other trades or people who could be affected by their work.</p>	<p>The supervisor shows concern for others. The supervisor is willing to compromise when their group's work could impact on the health and safety of others.</p>	<p>The supervisor actively consults with other supervisors and engages in collaborative behaviour that has a positive health and safety impact. For example, important health and safety knowledge is exchanged or equipment is shared to improve outcomes.</p>

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E: Communication about health and safety within workgroups	Within the workgroup, health and safety is rarely talked about. The emphasis of communication is on other aspects of work.	Group members frequently talk to one another about things related to health and safety. Information is exchanged on an ad hoc basis.	Group members frequently talk to one another about things related to health and safety. The supervisor facilitates discussion about things that could impact health and safety, and/or safe and healthy ways of working.
	The supervisor rarely talks about health and safety to group members. The supervisor sometimes fails to attend organised health and safety activities, such as pre-start meetings. The quality of information exchange is poor.	The supervisor participates in formal health and safety activities, such as pre-start meetings. At formal meetings, the supervisor provides information about health and safety-related aspects of a job or work activity. Important information is conveyed. However, personalised messages are not always used.	The supervisor frequently communicates with individual workers about things that could impact their health and safety, or ways of working healthily and safely. Communication is frequent. Informal conversations throughout the working day supplement and reinforce information provided at pre-start meetings. Messages are targeted to individuals, and often personalised to explain why safe and healthy working is important.
	The supervisor has an authoritative leadership style and issues instructions to workers without consultation. Workers are resistant to health and safety instructions, or unclear about why certain rules need to be followed. Workers frequently complain to the supervisor about work conditions, or what they perceive to be the inflexible application of unreasonable rules.	The supervisor gives clear health and safety instructions to workers. The supervisor explains the need to follow required health and safety-related rules when performing particular tasks. Workers understand why they need to work as instructed to maintain health and safety standards. Workers raise questions when they need more information or do not understand something.	The supervisor engages workers in two-way conversations about how work should be done and why. Workers are properly consulted. Their views about how to work healthily and safely are listened to and taken into account in work planning. Once settled, workers generally do not need to talk to their supervisors about the health and safety aspects of their work, unless an unexpected issue arises.
F: Relationships with health and safety advisors	The foreman/supervisor sees health and safety advisors as a nuisance. Health and safety advisors are regarded as 'policemen' whose activities can disrupt production and progress.	The foreman/supervisor sees health and safety advisors as having a legitimate role to play. When issues are identified and raised by health and safety advisors the foreman/supervisor will work to resolve the issue in a positive way.	The foreman/supervisor sees health and safety advisors as being a valuable resource that can help improve health and safety. The foreman/supervisor actively consults and seeks advice from health and safety advisors in planning work. Their suggestions and input is highly valued.
	The foreman/supervisor deliberately tries to hide health and safety incidents or issues from health and safety advisors. Health and safety advisors tell supervisors and workers what to do without consultation. Health and safety advisors do not value knowledge gained through practical experience.	The foreman/supervisor informs health and safety advisors about health and safety incidents or issues and seeks their input regarding improvement and/or issue resolution. Health and safety advisors listen to supervisors and workers when they raise concerns about the practicality or effectiveness of health and safety instructions.	The foreman/supervisor anticipates health and safety problems before they arise and seeks the input of health and safety advisors in relation to the best ways to protect workers' health and safety and prevent incidents from occurring. Health and safety advisors actively seek input from supervisors and workers when decisions are being made about healthy and safe ways of working. Practical experience is valued by health and safety advisors.
	The foreman/supervisor is slow to resolve health and safety issues raised by specialist health and safety advisors. Identified health and safety issues are frequently not 'closed out' in a satisfactory manner.	The foreman/supervisor is responsive and cooperative in resolving health and safety issues raised by specialist health and safety advisors. Identified health and safety issues are usually 'closed out' in a timely manner.	The foreman/supervisor actively asks for assistance specialist health and safety advisors in the identification of areas for health and safety improvement. Suggestions for health and safety improvement are responded to positively.

"I don't know the ins and outs of what the specialist subcontractors do and it is important to respect these guys have got a lot of knowledge in their fields. Don't pretend to know more than you do, and if you're not sure about something, get their input as well. You're going to get a better result all round."

– principal contractor health and safety advisor

“The basis of that is if you understand the guys and the guys understand you, and you have a bit of respect both ways, that’s the inspiration and the motivation. If you get on with each other and you’re a half-decent human being, the guys will want to do safety.”

– principal contractor foreman

“The foremen here are good, they understand unplanned events can happen. For example, we were delayed ‘cause we needed a piece of equipment that we couldn’t get anywhere in Australia! But they didn’t beat us up like other builders would – they try and help.”

– subcontractor supervisor

“We have good representation from the subbies at committee meetings. They wouldn’t turn up if we were constantly beating them up. It’s a team discussion about the issues.”

– principal contractor health and safety advisor

“We’ll sit around a couple of tables and we’ll talk about, we’ll chat about. It doesn’t have to be a formal toolbox...someone says, ‘I’ve got this hassle here, how do I do that?’ We all sit down and take an extra minute and we sort it out on the go.”

– subcontractor supervisor