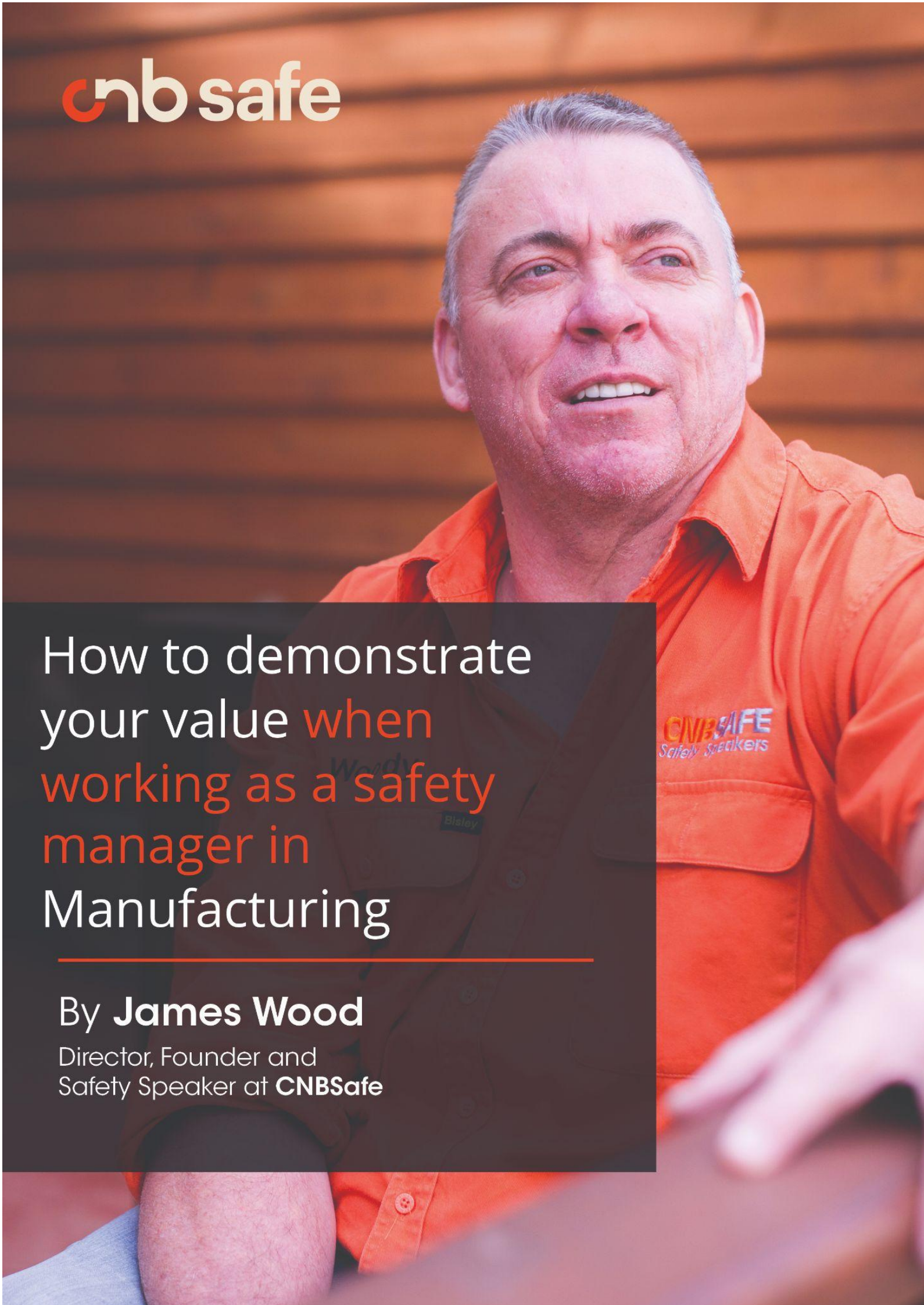

How to demonstrate your value when working as a safety manager in Manufacturing

By **James Wood**
Director, Founder and
Safety Speaker at **CNBSafe**

Are you a safety manager working in Manufacturing? Responsible for the safety of people across your entire organisation - from operators to technicians or engineers and plant managers... basically anyone in your operation.

It's a tough gig because when you're doing a good job, nobody notices. But when you're not, it often ends with someone getting hurt. And that's not only a bad outcome for someone in your organisation, it's not something you want on your conscience.

Some would say it's a thankless job and yet, without a passionate and driven safety manager, accidents can happen that will irrevocably change the life of a workmate and the people around them. Unfortunately, I know this only too well. I'm in a wheelchair due to a workplace accident and as a result I created CNBSafe Safety Speakers to challenge the way workers think about safety.

Let's walk through five ways you can demonstrate your value in your organisation (and inspire change for the health and safety of your workmates).

1. Keep it Real
2. Get Buy-In
3. Announce your Agenda
4. Show and Tell
5. Reward Runs on the Board

1. KEEP IT REAL

As a safety manager, it's your job to instil a safe work mindset throughout your organisation. Easier said than done, right? It's difficult to gain traction about a concept that most people don't find very exciting.

Yet you've got a message to get across and if you want to connect with the people in your team, you've got to speak their language. A language they not only understand, but one that makes them sit up and take notice.

Firstly, it's critical that you shed the jargon and acronyms that are part of your middle management lingo. LTIFR (Lost Time Injury Frequency Rate) might be a no-brainer for you, but say it to your team and their eyes will glaze over.

The same goes for a lengthy report with charts and statistics. Don't get me wrong, the staff at your workplace are great at their jobs. Whether they're in charge of a workforce, from operators to technicians or engineers and plant managers... they're skilled members of your team. But a report isn't the way to connect with them.

So this is my advice: Tell a story. People relate to stories and most importantly, they remember them.

I worked with an organisation that had a high incidence of injuries from falls in the workplace. One day a lady in the office got on a chair with wheels to reach an item on top of a cabinet. It's not hard to imagine what happened next. The chair slipped out from under her, she hit her head on the desk on the way down and she sustained a serious injury.

I bet you can picture that. Like a movie playing in your mind, you can see the chair roll, hear the impact of her fall and imagine the chaos that ensued. It's a story that you're likely to remember if faced with the same choice.

ACTION

Use vivid story-telling to make an impact on your audience. Whether it's spoken or written, a story is a far more powerful way of sharing your message than statistics or charts in a lengthy report.

2. GET BUY-IN

We might not like the reality when we tally up the hours, but most of us spend more time with our workmates than we do with our family at home. So it makes sense to spend time cultivating healthy work relationships.

Of course, that's a delicate balance for managers. An organisation's hierarchy can create an invisible barrier between managers and their staff. And this is often exacerbated for safety managers, who can be seen as the overprotective helicopter parent always hovering nearby.

So how do you bridge the gap and get buy-in to create a safer workplace?

One way is to share your own vulnerability. Showing them that you don't have all the answers puts you on an even playing field. For example, there might be a problem you're currently tackling, like a high incidence of workplace falls, as in my story above. Rather than dictate the rules, help your team be part of the solution by asking for their input and to share their experiences.

ACTION

Reach out to your team for their encounters with workplace safety. You have a powerful resource at your fingertips, you just need to tap into it. Keep the process as casual as possible. Make the time to chat with your colleagues and invite them to share their stories. They're likely to have tales of near misses, times when it almost went bad or even when it did. This process will not only strengthen your working relationships, but you'll have more stories to add to your repertoire.

3. ANNOUNCE YOUR AGENDA

Most people want to make a difference in their everyday lives. Even in a small way. It's one of the cornerstones of wellbeing. If you have a sense of purpose, it brings meaning and direction to your everyday life.

But making your mark as a safety manager is not as simple as it sounds. Because you can't do it alone. To create a safe working environment, you need the majority of your team on board. Everyone needs to take ownership of workplace safety to make it a reality.

So, it's up to you to rally the troops and you can do this by providing a focus.

One, two or even three initiatives that you and everyone in your organisation can concentrate on. They might be relevant due to near misses or initiatives that you're passionate about.

And announcing them to your team brings them into the spotlight. It shows that you're serious about them and passionate to bring about change. And when you're passionate about something, the people around you will be more likely to support you, especially if it's for the greater good.

ACTION

First up, write up to three initiatives on a post-it note or white board. Make it something you're determined to change in your organisation and stick it in a place you'll see every day. And then take it one step further. Announce your agenda to your team. Writing down a goal is a great first step, but by announcing it, you're radically improving the chance of making it happen.

4. SHOW AND TELL

Sometimes it takes cold, hard reality for a message to sink in. For people in your organisation to truly grasp why you work hard to put safety rules and procedures in place.

Like my reality.

Thirty years ago, I stuffed up at work and I've been in a wheelchair ever since. A series of wrong choices led to a spinal cord injury that drastically changed my future.

I've built a business around telling people my story, because I want to be a wake-up call for others. I recognise that some people need to see and hear firsthand the consequences of carelessness.

ACTION

Remember Show and Tell at school? There's no reason you can't replicate this concept in your workplace. No doubt your organisation already has meetings, like Toolbox Talks or Work In Progress meetings. Introduce a Safety Show and Tell where you, members of your team or people from outside your organisation share their experience of getting hurt at work.

5. REWARD RUNS ON THE BOARD

This is an interesting concept to wrap your head around, because a 'win' in workplace safety is when nothing happens. Put simply, no one gets hurt. I know that sounds strange because normally when we win, we get something. A medal, a ribbon or at least recognition.

Without a meaningful event, it's difficult for safety managers to demonstrate the impact they've had. And it's also tricky to reinforce safe behaviour without a reward.

So I suggest that you implement a reward system. Just as there are road signs that indicate the number of fatality-free days on some highways, you could create a tally board in your workplace that illustrates the duration of injury-free days.

And then reward safe behaviour after a certain length of time. For example, each month without a workplace injury could be recognised by handing out a small gift, like a stubby holder, or even a sticker that employees can stick on their hard hats, lunch boxes or lockers. I've seen one organisation give out Freddo Frog chocolates to all their staff to acknowledge successful safe work practices.

ACTION

Sit down with team members and brainstorm ideas for rewarding safe workplace behaviour. Find ways to recognise people's efforts in maintaining a safe working environment for everyone.

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

KEEP YOUR PASSION ALIVE

Health and safety practices are often seen as an onerous chore within organisations, yet there are ways to make them more engaging and fun for everyone. Your workmates might not thank you for keeping them safe, but they will appreciate you making a boring topic more interesting. Keep your passion about safety alive, as that passion will filter throughout your organisation.

WHO IS JAMES WOOD?

James Wood established CNBSafe Safety Speakers in 1999 to share the real effects of workplace injury and challenge audience members to consider their safety responsibilities. In a wheelchair for 30 years due to a workplace accident, James shares his personal story to expose the impact a wrong choice can have on your life and on the lives of people around you. CNBSafe's team of safety speakers is available to deliver thought-provoking and informative safety presentations that inspire change in organisations across Australia. Their message is simple: Safety is all about going home to our families and friends after work!