

## STRESS AND STRAIN: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE HARVESTING SUPERVISOR

If the coastal forest industry had a high school annual, the role of supervisor would be voted ‘most changed.’ According to many in the industry, this presents both challenges and opportunities. The challenge is the added stress and strain the new role creates for supervisors, the opportunity is the chance to improve training and productivity.

With 90 per cent of timber harvesting being done by independent contractors, the responsibility for safety management has increased for this segment of the industry, and the supervisor’s role has morphed radically in response.

“If you turn back the clock 20 years,” suggests Rob Moonen, CEO of the BC Forest Safety Council, “we moved away from the fully integrated forest companies like MacMillan Bloedel, where employees were getting support and train-

ing internally, to the situation today where they’re now independent owner operators. It’s been an evolution for the industry as far as how the system is adapting and how training has evolved.”

This evolution has caused the role of supervisor to become far more complex and onerous than it ever was. TLA President Jacqui Beban explains, “Historically, we always used to look at who your hardest worker was, who your best operator was, who had the best attitude and those were the people who normally got promoted to a supervisory role. Now you have to look at the whole supervision position, which is a lot more detail-oriented as far as paperwork and reporting goes.”

Today’s supervisor must be more focused on regulations, while maintaining that day-to-day positive relationship

with the crew and, ultimately, still protecting themselves, the employees and the company. They must show they’re doing everything they can at the workplace to prevent incidents from happening. This seems like a challenge to even the most dexterous octopus.

Meet Bill Nelson. He’s been in the industry for 33 years—he started out setting chokers right out of high school. Nelson is one of two project managers at Holbrook Dyson’s Vernon Lake camp, located between Woss and Gold Lake.

He describes his job as a balancing act with high stakes where people’s lives are at risk. “My number one priority is to make sure everybody goes out and comes back safe every day. My next priority is to get everything done, to be efficient and productive. Those two things are inseparable. People say ‘safety first’

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but the reality is a good operation is run with a healthy measure of safety and productivity daily.”

Nelson says the last priority is due diligence: keeping himself, his employees, his partners, their company and their customer—in this case the licence holder—safe legally so there are no environmental or WorkSafeBC concerns. “Production, safety, and liability: any one of those things falls through the cracks, and it will come back and get you,” Nelson cautions.

The biggest challenge? “Getting enough sleep,” he quips.

We laugh. But the TLA is concerned and is questioning whether the job has changed so much it’s putting too much pressure on the supervisor. “I’m hearing from many contractors that they struggle to find employees willing to be supervisors. A supervisor used to be able to split their time between supervising and actually getting into a machine and producing. That is increasingly not the case,” explains David Elstone, TLA Executive Director. So the traditional training pathway Jacqui Beban described doesn’t work anymore

and the legal accountability that supervisors face today takes the role to a whole new level.

And how has training kept up? “Our industry has great people working in it, but we need to continue to provide tools that can make us even better,” stresses Beban. A few years ago, the industry came together to revise and streamline supervisor training, provided by the BC Forest Safety Council. Since 2014, 165 participants have attended at least one of three supervisor training sessions in Nanaimo or Campbell River. Contractors made up 138 of those participants, coming from 73 different companies to learn more about due diligence, communication and leadership.

“I think one of the things the industry is very focused on, from both the contractor and licensee perspective, is that if you’re going to pull people away from their jobs, the training has to be valuable and delivered in the most efficient manner,” explained Moonen. “And, in part, that’s why this training was developed in modules.”

As industry continues to focus on improving its safety record, it’s critical

it continues to improve training and works to streamline the reporting process so supervisors have the tools they need to perform their jobs and ensure the safety of their crews. However, supervisor training courses aren’t going to address all the challenges.

Elstone concludes, “As the transfer (or some call downloading) of responsibilities from licensees onto contractors and their supervisors continues, that cost needs to be understood and recognized. We need to make sure supervisors have the support they need as they work to keep our workers safe and productive and to meet the due diligence requirements of the business owner and licensees as well. More and more, my members are telling me their supervisors are asking to return to a regular worker role because the stress and strain of supervisor responsibilities are too much. I think this is an emerging issue that we need to address—as an industry—before the cracks grow any wider.”▲



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