

# Be like Richie!

Thinking like the All Blacks is the secret behind a scaffolding business's award-winning approach to health and safety.

**INSPIRED BY** its health and safety rep Aaron Billing, Christchurch-based Upright Scaffolding has overhauled its company vision to create an open-door, no-blame culture around reporting injuries and accidents.

## Using sport to inspire

No stranger to injuries himself as a former New Zealand triathlete, Billing knows first-hand the impact injuries can have after a spate of unrelated accidents left him struggling. These included a near-death bike crash, a car crash and broken ribs sustained during the Christchurch earthquakes.

Billing - who is also a personal trainer - says sports always helped him to cope with challenges in his life, so it seemed a no-brainer to apply sports philosophy to his new role at Upright.

'Getting into sports when I was younger helped me turn my life around. For me, if you focus on doing things well and taking pride in what you do in every aspect of the business, then that flows into health and safety as well.'

This attitude won him national recognition as he and the Upright Scaffolding team took out the Contribution Award at last year's Site Safe Construction Health and Safety Awards.

A huge rugby fan, Billing says it wasn't long before he was applying his sporting ideas to his work as a scaffolder - a trade often known for its rough around the edges reputation.

## Learning to speak up

'When I first started, I was really shocked - some of what was going on was like what you'd expect to see in the 1980s.'

'Then I started to understand why there was that attitude of complaining and not doing anything about it. I realised it was because



Aaron Billing speaking at the Site Safe awards in 2017.

there was no open-door policy and the guys were simply afraid to speak up.'

Believing it all went back to company culture, Billing worked with the company's directors to introduce the idea of the All Black Standard - a work ethic where the team aims to be the gold standard of the scaffolding industry in everything that it does.

'I think about it like how we had that turnaround after losing several World Cups. It became about the culture and the brand and the team knowing that you don't own the jersey, you have to earn it.'

And in an environment where a mistake can be fatal, it's vital everyone does their job well and feels comfortable talking about problems on site.

Since Billing has been at Upright, he has worked to close the gap between the directors and workers and helped implement a no-blame policy where workers feel safe talking to management and take a solution-based approach to problems.

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### **Change started with the bosses**

A big Richie McCaw fan, Billing says changing the approach of the bosses was key.

‘You’ve got to start from the top and make the directors believe we can be better. That’s what the All Blacks had with Richie - he always led by example.’

Kicking off the idea of company pride was a big first step. ‘I started talking about one guy to the directors - just planting the seed - by saying, ‘You know, I can’t put my finger on it, but he’s got the ‘Upright way’.

‘From there, I worked with the directors to show the guys that we had a vision as a company.

‘Now the guys are scoping the jobs properly, and we are turning up with the right personal protective gear. We’re also having prestart meetings to talk about the risks and showing up with the right equipment and just doing a better job overall.’

### **More worker satisfaction**

More authority has been delegated to some workers who act as supervisors on site, and the team has regular debriefs to discuss what went well and what could be improved so they learn from each job.

Rather than rotating crews between various jobs so they never get to see their work completed, the crews now usually work solidly on one job. This means they get the satisfaction of seeing their part of the project through to completion.

Billing has even helped one of the directors to compete in a half-Ironman competition in Wanaka. He says it’s all about creating a culture where everyone on the team aspires to be the best they can be.

‘My approach is that we should not be a led team but a team of leaders, and slowly but surely, we are building that culture. It’s about putting health and safety first and scaffolding next.’ ◀

**For more** ▶ If you want information on Site Safe’s awards, visit [www.sitesafe.org.nz](http://www.sitesafe.org.nz). Nominations open 1 July.