

CASE STUDY

Rio Tinto

Respectful Culture Award Winner



A programme promoting respect in the workplace has led to measurable shifts in reporting and discussing unacceptable behaviour at a large industrial site near Invercargill.

Rio Tinto owns New Zealand Aluminium Smelters (NZAS), which operates the Tiwai Point aluminium smelter.

HR Business Partner Angela Schrider says the organisation discovered long-standing workplace respect issues that needed to be addressed by reviewing employee feedback, carrying out site-wide assessments and having difficult discussions with people who were willing to speak up around the workplace culture.

To respond to the challenges highlighted in the Everyday Respect report, NZAS introduced several initiatives designed to remove barriers, improve behaviour and embed practical, consistent change across the site.

Leaders took part in workshops focused on psychological safety and inclusive behaviour. After one manager began running discussion sessions with his crew, other leaders followed his example. Everyday Respect discussions were built into daily shift start meetings. Crews talked about what worked well the previous day and what challenges were observed from a behavioural perspective.

The DEI and Tiwai Wellbeing employee teams selected issues from the report to focus on. Men's mental health emerged as an important theme, and both groups worked to educate employees so they felt empowered to take action.

A site-wide facility review made female toilets available in all areas of the plant, upgraded lighting and privacy in showers and redesigned uniforms to better fit all genders and body types.

A Cultural Induction Room was created in partnership with Ngāi Tahu, and all visitors and new employees complete a cultural and safety induction that explains the history of the land, early settlement and the concept of kaitiakitanga. Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori events and workshops further strengthened cultural understanding and helped create a workplace where everyone feels a stronger sense of belonging.

Angela Schrider says the Everyday Respect programme has led to measurable shifts, including a clear rise in reporting through My Voice, the confidential system used across Rio Tinto. “This increase shows employees now have more confidence that concerns will be taken seriously.”

The company’s Purple Banner initiative supports this by anonymously sharing outcomes of investigations and the learnings each month.

Progress is also evident in the increased gender diversity of operational teams. Since June 2022, the number of women in operational roles at NZAS has increased by 49.4 per cent. One team that had previously been entirely male is now 23 per cent women.

Leaders have shared what worked to achieve this shift so other areas can replicate it. Angela says one incident that illustrated the initiatives in action was when a team collectively challenged a racist remark made onsite.

“The entire crew addressed the comment together and reinforced expectations. This behaviour has become more common.”

NZAS is sustaining the Everyday Respect programme through clear governance, leadership accountability and continuous employee involvement. Progress is reported to the board and shared with employees, while inclusive leadership remains a core performance expectation. Performance reviews consider not only what employees achieve, but how they achieve it, bringing values and expected behaviours to the forefront.

Te Uru Tāngata Chief Executive Maretha Smit says Rio Tinto represents a high-risk, high-impact transformation — taking on deeply embedded harmful behaviours in a complex, industrial environment and demonstrating credible progress.

“What makes this particularly compelling is the honesty of the starting point and the organisation’s willingness to confront it directly.

“The entire crew addressed the comment together and reinforced expectations. This behaviour has become more common.”



“The integration of behaviour change into daily operational rhythms shows a mature understanding of how culture shifts — through repetition, visibility, and shared accountability. Combined with both leadership commitment and grassroots engagement, this positions the initiative as a serious and credible model for culture transformation in hard-to-shift environments.”

Strategies for success

- Established what issues needed to be addressed through employee feedback and site-wide assessments.
- Launched the Everyday Respect programme with several initiatives to drive change.
- Incorporated Everyday Respect into daily shift meetings to keep expectations visible.
- Strengthened cultural understanding through its partnership with Ngāi Tahu, cultural and safety inductions, and te reo Māori events and workshops.
- Involved employee-led networks in addressing themes raised by the report.
- Ensured female toilets were available in all areas of the site and redesigned uniforms to better fit all genders and body types.
- Used Mobilise workshops to strengthen leaders' ability to facilitate conversations and uphold Everyday Respect.



Results and benefits

- Increased reporting of harmful behaviour through My Voice, alongside employees becoming more comfortable raising difficult topics in town hall meetings.
- The number of women in operational roles increased by 49.4 per cent from June 2022, with one previously all-male team now 23 per cent women.
- Conversations about unacceptable behaviour have become more normalised, with employees increasingly challenging inappropriate behaviour themselves and investigation outcomes shared to demonstrate follow-through.
- Respectful and inclusive behaviour is embedded in performance expectations, with reviews assessing not only what employees achieve but how they achieve it.