

Charles Kennedy and why commitment is vital

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Mon, 2015-06-22 09:12



I was always told that if you go into a tackle with the likes of Stuart Pearce — feel free to substitute your preferred sport and teak tough sportsman — then you need to go in full on or a) you won't get the ball and b) you'll probably get hurt. I've often thought this a good metaphor for many things — safety process and initiatives included. This advice came back to mind when I read a recent newspaper article.

It was by Tony Blair's former spin doctor Alistair Campbell about the death of his old friend Charles Kennedy, the former Liberal Democrat party leader, from alcohol related health problems. Campbell, a recovering alcoholic himself, but decades sober now, recounted a walk one night where Charles asked him "tell me how you did it". Campbell reports knowing from many a counselling session just how to respond to this question. He simply said nothing and Kennedy, understanding, nodded and agreed ... "yes... it's not about you ... it's down to *me*, isn't it".

This resonated as, over the years, my heart has sunk when asked by a potential behavioural safety client "can we visit a successful site and see how it's done". In the vast majority of cases this request is followed by a half-hearted or even stalled launch. "We're waiting for the

right time...” is the common excuse. The trouble is we all know that the timing is *never* ‘just right!’

The correlation isn’t perfect and some clients do of course make site visits as part of a holistic approach including benchmarking and learning from others. For some that’s simply a learning preference. But in about 80% of cases this request should come with the background sound of a funeral bell tolling. This is because we know that genuine commitment is hugely important to achieving meaningful change and this request often signifies a client trying to talk themselves into it.

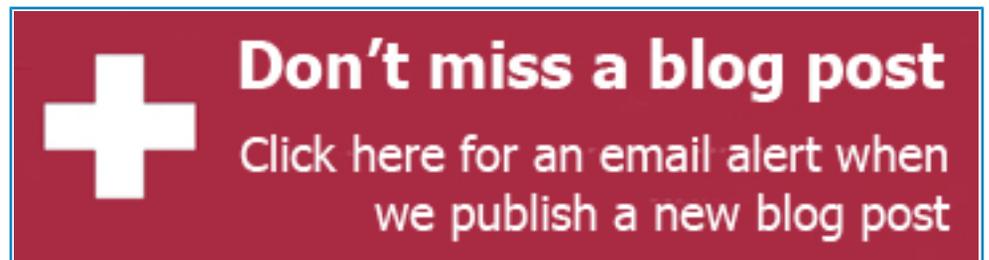
In contrast, one of my first ever clients was a national manufacturing company who had killed someone in the west country of the UK. The two most senior managers attended the funeral and came away with a genuine commitment to change the culture. They ran a holistic approach including the rule: “no promotion without a NEBOSH certificate” and introduced a comprehensive behavioural safety process that was actively resisted by many of in frontline management, but not for long.

They implemented a very ambitious approach and one that (in retrospect, 20 years of experience later) I’d caution against. However, they simply did what they needed to do to make it work and became a lauded case study in many safety publications, having cut accident rates to 15% of historic levels.

In short, they took on the tackle with the tough opponent and won the ball cleanly. They knew it was all about *them* and their unblinking commitment was everything.

Challenge

If you think your senior managers are lukewarm in their commitment to safety get them to promise to attend the funeral of any employee killed or visit the hospital of any employee maimed while working for their company.



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