

Sex, drugs, rock and roll – and a relish for risk

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Wed, 2016-05-11 15:31

I presented a paper at Wellbeing 16 on “*Sex ‘n’ drugs ‘n’ rock and roll – the positive side of bad behaviour*”. This involved an at times graphic description of several badly behaved people behaving badly. Thankfully, no one complained, despite the inclusion of a story combining all three elements of the title, featuring a famous rock star which might be described - with some accuracy - as a good old fashioned, taboo-breaking ‘k**b joke’.



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Given the leeway afforded by the title, you could say the material was user- friendly. For example, there are two main benefits to swearing. The first is pain reduction, and the second is that it can add appropriate emphasis to language in certain circumstances. So cue a joke with a rather rude punchline – it's not difficult having fun with examples of over indulging in the imbibing of mood altering substances. (As for the rock star - google 'Bowie and Turner' and lip read the YouTube video at 2 mins 5 secs. The story behind it is yours for a pint and its credentials are impeccable - a colleague of mine was playing guitar in the backing band that night!)

Luckily there was laughter, as hoped for, which was important as the main point of the talk from a safety perspective – there was one, honestly – is that the typical employee is not just more risk tolerant than many a SHE department would like, but can actually show a relish for risk at times. That's why even a description of bad behaviour gets laughs.

Indeed risk often proves highly interesting, as well as amusing. For example, the massively self-destructive and self-indulgent bad boy of snooker, Alex Higgins (1949–2010), is said to have quipped to Steve Davis once that: "Your house would be half the size it is if you hadn't followed me into the game and when I go they'll give me a hero's funeral". Both assertions are correct, as despite attracting much disapproval, Higgins also attracted a lot of affection and attention.

A clip from the well-known Network Rail film 'Safety 365' also illustrates the point. Not the dramatic and hard-hitting end scene where the worker is killed but the earlier scene where, to illustrate the principle of near misses, he leaps to safety at the last second. It's the reaction of his colleagues that's key and which strikes me as highly realistic. Some of them look mortified, but others laugh, jeer and abuse him. The near-missed worker himself giggles and shrugs ... then continues with the phone call that was distracting him.

In this safety awareness film it's of course the set-up to the tragic ending but it's also, I'd argue, a realistic depiction of working life. Genuine risk is often tolerated far more than we'd like, and humour is frequent, robust and black. (Can I recommend an autobiography by Australian oil worker Paul Carter, "Don't Tell Mum I Work on the Rigs: She Thinks I'm a Piano Player in a Whore House". Very amusing as you can imagine but hugely educational in a hair-raising way! No fresh-faced young SHE professional should be allowed on an oil rig until they're read it!)

In a scene that could have come from this book, I once watched a famous inspirational speaker talk about learning to skydive after he was blinded in an industrial accident. It's a really intense and powerful talk, but at the back I heard one worker in blue overalls quip to another "I don't know about this bloke – personally it's the guide dog I feel sorry for!"

Ken (Woodward, of course) didn't hear it, but he'd probably have laughed if he had, as he's got an excellent sense of humour. It's one of the things that makes him so good and certainly those who've studied the technicalities of interpersonal skills know that we are at our most influential when we can empathise with the mind-set of the people we're working with.

Challenge. *Do we sometimes forget that the typical worker has a risk tolerance and even risk relish which they're unlikely to articulate to an eager SHE professional? Do we, as an industry, sometimes weaken our message by pointing at the potential serious consequence with a solemn, even pompous, air and forget that, at the back, the people in the room we most need to reach are, quite possibly, making jokes about sky-diving guide dogs?*

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