

In my upcoming book, Quantum Safety, I advance a new approach for how we manage risk in the modern complex workplace. Central to this is the principle that safety is considered to be an integrated aspect of high performance.

This advances the ideas Erik Hollnagel developed in Safety I & Safety II, where safety ceases to be defined by “as few things as possible go wrong” and is replaced by the definition of “as many things as possible go right”. I had not considered this definition of safety to be overly contentious. It appears I may have considered this incorrectly.

At a recent conference I attended, one of the speakers on a panel advanced the high performance argument. To my naïve surprise, this was challenged by another member of the panel. The objector was an incredibly impressive and distinguished person that had achieved infinitely more in their career than myself. It would have been churlish to dismiss the challenge.

If we opine about a compassionate, curious and respectful approach in order to gain more understanding we have to live by it too. Instead, I heeded another sage piece of advice from the panellist who suggested that when presented with a new idea one ought to “think, reflect and then select”. Was it right to consider safety to be an integrated aspect of high performance?

The objection to an approach that had high performance as its foundation was the observation that not everyone wanted to “get gold medals or win the FA Cup”. Indeed, by placing everyone in a working environment where every day was akin to walking out at Wembley was unfair and unreasonable. People would consequently become demotivated, disengage and ultimately burn out. The truth was that there were many people for whom the idea of “just being good enough” was the optimal expectation to be placed upon them. Clearly, I had much to think and reflect upon. In due course, I selected my truth. I maintain that safety ought to be considered as an integrated aspect of high performance. Allow me to explain why.

There are two perspectives from which I considered this dilemma. Firstly, there was the consideration of the person. The second was the wider organisation. Both came to the same conclusion.

It had raised pertinent points. One of the sources of the conflict is the fact that high performance itself is ill-defined. To suggest that if people were to be placed in an environment where performance expectations were akin to playing in the FA Cup Final every day they would disengage and burn out is entirely fair.

It is, however, a misrepresentation of a high performance environment. Even in elite sports, where high performance is most frequently used as a term, organisations and individuals peak at certain times. They do not play the FA Cup Final every week. High performance environments are not necessarily habitual high pressure situations. In fact, environments conducive to high performance more effectively manage the conflict between expectations of challenging situations and the support that people require to thrive within such situations.

Within Quantum Safety I don't consider a high performance environment to be one where everyone is expected to win gold medals or win the FA Cup every shift. Instead, it outlines a vision of a culture that enables both individuals and the organisation to learn, grow, heal and excel. This vision is one that would foster a high performance environment. There is a significant difference between expecting most people to reach the pinnacle (which is mathematically nonsensical) and enabling people to reach their pinnacle.

The observation that for most people "just being good enough" was all they could hope for was cause for much reflection. It is certainly true that within any organisation there will be people that are highly motivated by their personal growth and professional performance. There will be others for whom work is a commercial function that requires execution and no more. These are people that subscribe to the "pin me, pay me" mentality.

During the 1970s and 1980s, before becoming a globalised cable TV product, wrestling was a travelling circus with competing territories. Each competing organisation needed to develop new champions and spectacles to sell tickets. This required people for champions to beat. These travelling cannon fodder were called Jobbers. Their job was to help make someone else a star. They didn't need to win. They got paid, but only once someone had pinned them. They just needed to be good enough.

This mentality within a section of the workforce did not preclude either individuals or organisations necessarily from having the opportunity to learn, grow, heal and excel. It merely recognises that an individual's idea of growth and excellence, for example, can differ radically from another's.

The organisations eventually grew into the multi-billion global conglomerate it is today. A high performance environment can be reconciled with people that just wish to be good enough, provided they understand that this is their pinnacle and they are helping the organisation with their goals at the same time. Once we recognise that a high performance environment is not necessarily one in which everyone is expected to perform at Olympian levels every day, we can consider the broader organisational perspective; in particular consideration to its approach to risk management.

Whilst it is not difficult to accept that there will be people in all organisations that only desire to be good enough, this does not necessarily translate to accepting this organisationally. If the organisational philosophy to managing risk shunned the principle of high performance and instead placed "being good enough" as its foundation stone where would that leave us? How comfortable would anyone feel if their car was manufactured by someone whose organisation simply expected them to be good enough rather than risk burdening them with too much expectation? What if the same mentality was fostered within the surgical team that was about to take care of your loved one?

The clear consequence of such a shift in mindset is that it leaves very little room for error. The performance delta between normal and failure is unacceptably small. We know humans will fail. We know mistakes will occur. There is a significant performance spectrum between an environment where just being good enough is good enough and an environment in which every day is the FA Cup Final.

An approach that focuses resources and emotions on creating the conditions for success means that the distance between fallibility and catastrophe is much wider. We should consider safety to be an integrated aspect of high performance, not because it wishes to create armies of work Olympians, but because it enables us to utilise the capacity of humans to a deeper, greater and more enriching extent.

High performance is not about winning. It is about success.

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