

Safety at the Royal Opera House

For the first time I went to a H&S workshop to find it being delivered by a fellow climber and someone with a similar attitude to risk as me.

I am the Health and Safety Manager at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. I've been an occupational safety professional for over fifteen years. I'd signed up for a session to learn about safety culture and behaviours – something I thought we needed to work on at the Opera House. During the initial introductions, up popped a photo of our tutor clinging on to a Lakeland rock face, way above his last protection. Nick made the point: “safety shouldn't stop you doing things ... in fact it allows you to push at the boundaries and not get hurt; to stand right at the edge but not fall over”. This was exactly what I needed to hear.

My experience as a climber has had a significant impact on the way I approach my work as a health and safety manager in the live entertainment sector. As a climber it was easy to demonstrate that I'm not risk averse. In the live entertainment sector I believe that to produce great shows we need to push boundaries, and work at the edge of what is considered to be dangerous. I recall a Wagner opera rehearsal in which I had to set part of the stage alight just above the heads of the performers. Or, in the ballet, *Frankenstein*, when I had to hang a ballerina from a tree in order to simulate her execution. The directors wanted to express their artistic visions by bringing those scenes onto a live stage and it was not the role of the H & S Manager to limit their creative process. Rather to help them realise those visions in the safest way. If I'd had a risk-averse mindset my life would have been a misery, I would have lost countless nights of sleep worrying about one scene or another. I would not have survived in that environment. Climbing has taught me to take risks but to fail-safe! It would be mad to plan for scenes and only imagine things going perfectly well. The planning of potential failure will keep the performers safe even if the scene 'fails'. A fail-safe is what our rope does when we take a fall. Knowing that I have a fail-safe system allows me to climb better and to push boundaries.

The other major correlation between climbing effectively and successfully putting on a live show on our Covent Garden stage is the ability to make a dynamic risk assessment. To understand what it takes to make that safe decision in the heat of the moment. A traditional risk assessment requires planning the potential risks in advance and putting in place control measures but, the reality of many live scenes is that you can't plan for everything that could go wrong. So, the question is, how can I equip the team to make that judgment about safety quickly in the moment? One answer is to empower every single member to feel they can stop the scene at any point without blame - that failure is okay. In rehearsals I have often used the climbing acronym for FAIL - First Attempt In Learning - to ensure there is an acceptance of failure and that the team moves away from a culture of acrimony and finger-pointing. It's also about assessing an individual's capacity to focus and concentrate whilst experiencing the adrenaline rush of live performance. These are all elements that need to be integrated in order to make safe decisions and they are not so different to those made whilst climbing.

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