



Safety and HR Lessons from Movies – First Man.

Insights

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Recent Sundance Film Festival releases, *The American Factory* and *Untouchable*, the first Weinstein #METOO documentary, illustrate workplace lessons presented by well made films.

Similarly, Damien Chazelle, the director of *La Land* and *Whiplash*, has another Oscar nominee this year, the superb movie “First Man”—the story of Neil Armstrong, the first man to step on the moon. A stunning *Apollo 11* documentary was also released at Sundance, which distilled 300 hours of 70 mm cinema-quality film into an outstanding 1 ½ hour doc. Seen together, these movies teach a great deal about how employers should work with their employees in the aftermath of tragedy.

Consider that Neil Armstrong lost 10 or 12 colleagues at Edward’s airbase as a test pilot and at NASA, culminating with his best friend astronaut Ed White in the tragic Apollo 1 fire.

Even In a Data-driven Economy, Employers Must Consider the Human-side of the Workplace.

Neil Armstrong was a larger than life hero who possessed an engineer-driven ability to overcome fear and act during crisis. He is portrayed as a typical post WW II man who guarded his emotions and was austere and aloof in many interactions.

However, as is often the case in the workplace, personal problems contributed to his increasingly obvious inner pain and problems with his children and his stalwart wife (Claire Foy). Those personal problems affected his work and his relationships with coworkers.

Armstrong’s pain first stemmed from the loss of a young daughter to cancer. The movie opens with many shots of doting dad, Neil Armstrong with his family and much adored daughter. She develops cancer and despite Armstrong’s herculean efforts, she dies young. One poignant scene shows an emotionless Armstrong sneak away from the visitation to his office, lock his door, and sob uncontrollably. He never shows emotion or even talks about her for the remainder of the movie, although it is obvious that she is seldom far from his mind. Coworkers and family are concerned, but do not know what to do.

Armstrong can’t talk about fear and barely tolerates questions from a press who worships astronauts. Meanwhile, he is resolutely loyal to friends, still loves his wife even though he hurts her, and makes the mission succeed. Ryan Gosling makes Armstrong as real and imperfect as the person working beside you. You never lose respect for the man.

Workplace Deaths and Catastrophes.

It is standard operating procedure for employers to bring in grief counselors after a workplace fatality, and increasingly our “manly” culture acknowledges that it’s human to be devastated to lose a coworker, or even worse, someone for whom you were responsible. Seeking counselling is no more a sign of weakness than wearing a splint.

Survivor guilt is applicable to workplace fatalities. Over the course of working with over 570 workplace fatalities, I’ve observed that coworkers feel unmerited guilt after the first 24 hours wears off, and, in response, look for anyone and anything to blame. This is one reason why coworkers often inaccurately make comments like “we knew it was coming,” or “everyone knew it was unsafe.” While such comments are attention-getting, they are rarely true.

As to the supervisors, we’ve seen men and woman ruined by the loss of a subordinate. It’s common for supervisors who lost an employee to never come back to work, even though they did nothing wrong. [See my earlier Post on responding to employees who lose someone.](#)

Broader Application to the Workplace.

While you shouldn’t unnecessarily pry into your employees’ personal lives, psychological and biochemical studies show that not only personal tragedies, but depression, family troubles, and other stressors can result in physical fatigue, diminished judgment, and weakened reflexes. Studies now show, in fact, that fatigued executives are more likely to commit ethical and judgment violations.

In the scene where NASA interviews Armstrong for the space program, they ask him whether the recent death of his daughter would affect his performance and matter-of-factly states only that “I cannot imagine that it would not.”

Employers need to consider when and how they should approach employees about personal issues affecting their work. Employers also underuse Wellness Programs and fail to train frontline supervisors to be sensitive to when off duty problems can affect effectiveness and even safety. Wellness efforts are also woefully underused to equip employees’ families to respond to opiate issues and conditions leading to workplace violence.

Howard

[Amazon – First Man.](#)

[Rotten Tomatoes - First Man \(87%\).](#)

[Apollo 11 Trailer: The Moon Landing Documentary Critics Call ‘Astonishing’ \(IndieWire\)](#)

Other Movie observations are found under the [Film Notes Heading at www.howardmavity.com, including about editing, sound, and background on the movie.](#)

Service Focus

Workplace Safety and Catastrophe Management