

SAFETY AND THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Humour and Satire
by **Larry Wilson**

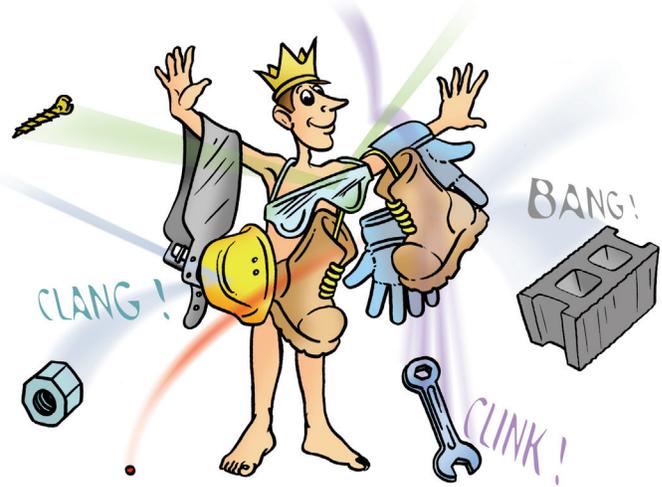
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I'm sure you know the story: safety management, loss control, risk assessments, and job safety analysis... Not to mention machine guarding, engineering, ergonomics, testing devices and personal protective equipment... It's all *far too complicated* for the ordinary man to comprehend. Only the wise and learned, only those well schooled in the art could possibly begin to understand such a complex subject. Or, to speak metaphorically, only the wise and learned could see the king's new robe.

So, all of the townspeople were educated, so they too could see the beautiful loss control robe, with its gleaming guards and multi-colored PPE. Before long, everyone in the land, including the lawyers could see the robe. The lawyers were especially fond of the silver lining (or is it more like gold?) that the robe had. It seemed that everyone liked the robe, especially the king.

He really liked the robe and he liked to show off his robe—to all of his other CEO buddies. Soon, he became so complacent about the beauty of the robe that quite often, he wore nothing underneath.

Then, one day while on parade, the king was injured. Everyone was shocked. How could the robe have let them down? Then, as they looked more closely at the robe, they realized that there were indeed places with



no coverage or protection and underneath, the king was stark naked. Once you got past the guards and the PPE, there was only a thread or two left of procedures and a tag from what once used to be the inner protection garment. All it said was, "Be careful".

It seems the inner layer of defence wasn't needed any more, so the king just walked around in his robe, oblivious to the fact every time he *moved*, he created openings in the robe.

So, they told the king not to move anymore and he wouldn't get hurt. But the king said that he didn't want to be an operator for a major oil company—so he told his wise men (who all wore rings on their little fingers) to go back to the drawing board and come up with a new design.

Well, the wise men, who designed the robe, they couldn't believe that they'd missed that one.

"Guess we should've thought about that—the people moving", they admitted, "But how can we design a robe so that people can't get hurt if they're moving?" However, they knew the consequences if they failed. The king had a reputation for being *most intolerant* when it came to injuries and the safety record. So they went to work.

They worked long and hard. At last, they were ready to make the presentation on the new robe/room they created. The key was the new jacket. It was white and had really long sleeves that fastened at the back. They told the king that unfortunately the jacket alone wasn't enough. But, if he did want to move around, that was OK as long as he did it in the special room they made. It had rubber walls and a rubber floor.

Well, as you can imagine, the king didn't like the white jacket and the rubber room very much. So he said, "Thanks, but no thanks" to the wise men with rings on their fingers and went off in search of another solution. As he travelled, he heard about a psychologist who could make injuries go away.

The psychologist didn't mind the robe, but he told the king that, "If you really want injuries to go away, you need more than the robe, you also need to use pic's and nic's¹—special consequences that make injuries disappear".

"How much do the pic's and nic's cost?" the king asked.

"They're free", replied the psychologist, "But the instructions on how to use them are very expensive."

"How expensive?" the king asked. The psychologist told him. "Indeed", the king thought, "That *is* expensive training." But the king didn't want to put a price on safety, so he got the training for everyone in the land. And, over the next few months, things got better. It seems the pic's and nic's, along with the robe did help. But only so much, and when the people were moving, even less so.

"Perhaps", the king thought, "maybe all injuries really *aren't* preventable. Maybe we all have to quit moving if we want to stop the injuries." And he *did* want to stop the

injuries. Because, now every time someone got hurt, the lawyers were saying that it was because of the deficiencies in the robe and they were suing for millions...

So, even though he was weary, the king continued his search—looking for the answer, trying to find the key to unlock the door and solve the mystery of "why everybody gets hurt, even though nobody ever wants to".

He travelled to many lands and conferences. After many years, he was about to give up when, one day, out of the blue "*it hit him*". Right square on the head or, to put it literally, *he hit it*. He was sitting under a tree and when he stood up, he hit a branch. Why? Because he wasn't looking at what he was doing and he wasn't thinking about what he was doing. "Eureka!" he exclaimed, "When people are moving, they need to be watching what they are doing and thinking about what they are doing."

"Well, no kidding", said his friend Archimedes who just happened to be strolling by. "But I wouldn't say it's worthy of a "Eureka".

"Maybe not", said the king, "But *how* do we get people to watch what they're doing and think about what they're doing—*whenever* they're moving?"

"Don't ask me," he said. "My speciality is bathtubs. You might just as well ask that old man over there."

The king wanted to ask the old man but he didn't know how to get his attention. So, he took a shot in the dark and yelled, "Hey Denis," in the direction of the old man. The old man turned, quite surprised and said, "How did you know my name was Denis?"

"Lucky guess", said the king. "I watched a lot of Monty Python in college. Anyway, I was wondering if you have learned how to

¹ Positive/Negative, Immediate, Certain

keep your eyes and mind on what you're doing whenever you are moving—so you don't get hurt?"

"Don't rush", said the old man.

"That's it?" exclaimed the king, "Don't rush—that's all you need to know?"

"No, but that's all I know. If you want to learn more, you must find other people my age who have never been seriously injured and ask them. Perhaps they can guide you further."

So off the king went. As the weeks passed and the number of conversations with old timers (more than 20 years seniority) grew, the king had found very few with as much insight. Most just told him to, "Try to be careful and wear your robe at all times." But there were some...

There were some people who had never experienced a serious workplace injury in 25 years. This was quite something, considering the places they worked at had total injury frequencies over 100%.

Here is what they said: "Don't work when you're (too) tired, don't work when you're mad or frustrated and don't get too complacent about the hazards." When he added it up, this is what he had:

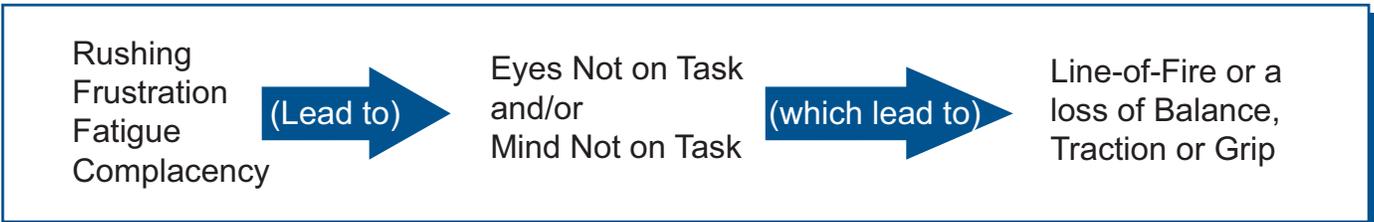
So, although he was closer to the answer than he had ever been, he was still a long way from preventing all of the injuries.

Days and weeks passed, then months—until one day, he woke up late. As he rushed around trying to get ready to go to work, he hurt himself again. "Rushing", he said to himself. "I was rushing. Just what Denis told me not to do". And then (finally) it dawned on him that he knew he was rushing *before* he actually got hurt.

"What if", he said to himself, "What if I thought about eyes on task, mind on task, line-of-fire and balance, traction or grip when I'm rushing instead of thinking about *being late*? I would be much less likely to make one of those errors. I could still rush (if I had to) and not get hurt."

Before long, the king realized he could also do this for frustration and fatigue, so he had the first three states covered. "But what about complacency?" said the king. "Oh well, I'm not going to let a little complacency scare me".

And, for a while, things got much better. Injuries were decreasing rapidly. The people liked the "self-triggering" techniques the king had come up with to deal with the problems that used to be created by rushing, frustration and fatigue. Not only



"But alas," cried the king, "I need to know *how* to prevent the injuries, not just *why* they happen. I need to be able to teach the people how to avoid all this. I can't just say, 'Don't rush. Don't ever be tired. Don't get mad or frustrated and don't become complacent.' It's just not reality."

were their injuries decreasing—but so were their quality defects.

Everyone was much happier. Until, one day the king got hit by a horse and carriage while out for a walk. This time, it was serious. He needed a doctor.

“Obviously”, he thought, “It isn’t good to become complacent about complacency. But what to do? How do you fight complacency? If everything’s normal, why would anyone be scared or thinking about getting hurt...?” So, he thought and thought, and eventually it came to him that if everything was normal, then the people would need to make sure that what they did normally, or automatically, or *habitually* was safe.

“People could work on improving their habits with eyes on task, body position (out of the line-of-fire) and balance, traction or grip.” They could also look for these state to error patterns in other people—that would help them to refocus their attention on what they were doing at that moment.

“Finally”, the king thought, “If they still do get hurt or have a close call, then they could analyse the accident and ask themselves if it was a state like rushing that they didn’t self-trigger on—or, if it was complacency, then they could work on their habits. This would enable the people to continually improve.”

Armed with these new techniques, the king returned home to educate and train the townspeople.

However, much to the king’s surprise, not everyone was interested in these techniques to fight complacency. Apparently, they thought they were safe enough already. So, once again, the king was frustrated.

“If they don’t care enough about their own safety to put a little effort into these four simple techniques, then they won’t get any better at them—which means they’re still going to have injuries and we’re still going to have lawsuits.” He thought about beheading all of the lawyers, and he bounced the idea off of a couple of his friends. But unfortunately, he decided

against it. Instead, he thought about what the people did care about.

“Well”, he said to himself, “They do care about their families, especially their children. I wonder if I could get them to teach these techniques to their children. If they did that, they’ll learn these techniques much better—and, they’ll have to put some effort into it. Otherwise, their children won’t take them seriously.”

Just then, his friend Archimedes stopped by. The king told his friend all about his new plan. Archimedes thought it was brilliant and said, “Now that *is worthy* of a ‘*eureka!*’ That’s the second best idea you’ve ever had.”

The king was puzzled. “Thanks,” he said, “But what did you like better?”

Archimedes looked at him, smiled and said, “The one about the lawyers.” ☑

About the Author

Larry Wilson has been a behavior based safety consultant for over 25 years. He has worked with over 2,500 companies in Canada, the United States, Mexico, South America, the Pacific Rim and Europe. He is also the author of SafeStart, an advanced safety awareness program currently being used by over 2,000,000 people in 50 countries worldwide and 30 languages.

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