

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of May 8, 2017 – And the Winner Is!

I am sure that most of us tuned into the Academy Award ceremony a few months ago and remember the melee at the very end, when Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway announced the wrong film, *La La Land*, as the winner for the category of Best Film. After the brief celebration on stage, in front of the entire star-studded audience and millions of television viewers around the world, the producer of *La La Land*, Jordan Horowitz, stepped up to the microphone and said, “I’m sorry, there’s been a mistake. *Moonlight*, you guys won Best Picture.”

Besides this moment being forever cast as one of the greatest faux pas in Hollywood History, James B. Meigs, former editor-in-chief of Popular Mechanics, wrote an article in Slate.com, explaining how this mix-up can be used to understand how world disasters can occur. Sounds a little out there? Under the main title of his article, “How Disaster Science Explains the Oscars Mix-Up,” was the statement, “Major errors don’t cause disasters – Banal mistakes and human error do.”

Mr.Meigs began his article:

“In every disaster, there’s an instant when the awful truth first presents itself to the stunned participants—a lookout spots an iceberg dead ahead, or methane gas starts jetting from the top of a drilling rig. At the 89th Academy Awards, this happened on live television, so we all got to see the precise moment Warren Beatty realized something had gone terribly wrong...”

PricewaterhouseCoopers, the accounting firm, has been the keeper of the award winners for the past 83 years. Not only do they tally the votes, they are in charge of managing the envelope process. Nobody, other than a few select PricewaterhouseCoopers executives know who the happy Oscar recipients will be. PricewaterhouseCoopers partners Martha Ruiz and Brian Cullinan tote their black briefcases containing the winning envelopes down the red carpet. But, as Meigs points out, having senior executives taking such a front-line role can be a recipe for trouble as they’re more likely to assume they’re going to do it right. History has shown that many accidents have been triggered by very experienced workers who grew overconfident and complacent. Wilderness firefighters, for example, are most likely to be killed or injured in their 10th year on the job. “That’s just about the time they start to think they’ve seen it all,” says Karl Weick, a University of Michigan psychologist who studies disasters.

Cullinan felt relaxed in the role. He even found time to tweet a picture of Best Actress winner Emma Stone clutching her award backstage. The Best Actress award was the last one to be presented before Best Picture, which meant Cullinan was busy tweeting just seconds before handing out the final envelope. Staying focused while doing simple, repetitive tasks is a challenge for most people, but there is evidence to suggest that less senior workers are sometimes more attentive as the anxiety that comes from being somewhat new to a job appears to help keep people alert. U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, for example, routinely include well-trained but surprisingly inexperienced sailors on the crews that perform the dicey work of launching and recovering aircraft.

There is no master list of winners in the broadcast booth, and even Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president Cheryl Boone Isaacs didn’t know who won. The only people who knew the winners in advance were the two PwC partners carrying the black briefcases. That system dates back to



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the 1940 Academy Awards ceremony when the *Los Angeles Times* broke an embargo and published the winners hours before the event.

Restricting knowledge of the winners to the two PwC representatives has kept Oscars' secrets from leaking ever since. But the practice also made it impossible for the show's director or anyone else to know immediately that a mistake had been made. That's an example of a precaution aimed to solve one problem inadvertently causing another; something that's common in many disasters.

Another process that went awry was the manner in which the envelopes are handed out: Ruiz and Cullinan each had a full set of envelopes in their respective briefcases. Ruiz stood in the wings at stage left; Cullinan handled stage right. Each time a presenter took the stage, either Ruiz or Cullinan would hand him or her the proper envelope. That meant that when the presenter entered from, say, stage left, Cullinan, at stage right, would be left with an unneeded, duplicate envelope. Why bother with all those duplicates? To be ready just in case a presenter unexpectedly entered from the wrong side. But it also creates more opportunities for the envelopes to get confused: When Leonardo DiCaprio took the appropriate envelope from Ruiz as he entered to present the Best Actress award that left Cullinan with the unneeded Best Actress envelope. That was a planned precaution. But when Beatty swept by a few moments later, Cullinan somehow handed the actor that envelope—and not the one labeled Best Picture. Thus a precaution that was intended to solve one problem, ended up creating another.

As we all know, the mishap that was about to happen, occurred on the biggest, and final, award of the night. Evidence has shown that a disproportionate number of accidents happen near the end of projects or missions. The Deepwater Horizon explosion occurred after the drillers had completed the well and were preparing to remove their drilling equipment. As another example, in mountaineering, the majority of accidents happen on the descent. This is an understandable human tendency: After working hard to achieve a certain goal, it is only natural to relax a bit when you think you are over the hump.

When Beatty pulled the card from the envelope and saw the words *Emma Stone, La La Land*, he knew he'd been holding the wrong envelope. But he didn't stop the show and say so. Beatty's reaction was very much in keeping with human nature. All of us have strong mental models of what to expect in given situations. Disaster expert Weick calls this process "sensemaking." Processing information that doesn't fit our sensemaking models is surprisingly difficult, even for experts. Beatty, no neophyte when it comes to award shows, expected the card to include the name of a single movie, not the name of an actress and a movie. He knew there was a problem. On the other hand, he'd taken the envelope directly from the hand of a partner in PwC, a firm renowned for its bulletproof reliability. And the card did mention *La La Land*, the film everyone expected to win Best Picture.

Beatty stalled for time. Then, with a look of mute supplication on his face, he showed the card to Dunaway. He seemed to be looking for a second opinion, hoping she would confirm his sense that a mistake had been made. But Dunaway, already annoyed by what she perceived as his showboating, didn't hesitate. When she glanced at the card, her mind zeroed in on the words she expected to see, *La La Land*, and simply tuned out the words *Emma Stone*. Such selective attention is common in high-stress situations. This was the case when the pilots on the doomed Air France Flight 447 tuned out the loud stall warning—which indicated that their plane's nose was too high for the wings to provide lift—and instead focused on keeping their wings level even as the craft was plunging toward the ocean.

Denial and disbelief are hardwired into human consciousness. When events deviate enough from our mental models, it can be almost impossible to comprehend what's going on. Similarly, it took the crew of Deepwater Horizon more than a minute to sound the general alarm after explosive gas started enveloping the platform and even longer to disconnect the rig from the well.

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While the mishap of this year's Academy Awards, in no way matches the magnitude of catastrophe of those disasters where life was lost, we can take the lessons learned of this event where a simple envelope handling and misreading went invisible and unchecked to all the participants beforehand but, nevertheless, quite easy to see in retrospect. It is important to note that no matter how many corrections may be instituted, the potential for future mistakes will remain. Disasters teach us a humbling lesson: No matter how careful we think we are—and often in spite of the care we take—there's always another string of unseen dominoes waiting to topple.

Never push a loyal person to the point where they no longer give a damn

(Curiano.com)

